

## **POLICY BRIEF**

### ***The Standing President of the European Council: Intergovernmental or Supranational Leadership?***

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The Lisbon Treaty has established a new leadership position in the EU, a standing president of the European Council. With this position, heads of state or government sought to improve their capacity to act through this body and, more in general, to streamline decision-making in the EU. In practice however, the incumbent could also push for decisions which exceed national preferences, by acting in line with the proposals of the Commission or the claims of the Parliament. In the first case, he would strengthen the intergovernmental dimension of the EU and perform as a transactional leader; in the second case, he would promote the supranational dimension of the Union and act as a transforming leader.

The analysis of the leadership of the first standing president of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, shows that he pursued the two central functions of his office, agenda management and brokering, yet with different degrees of success. In fact, he mainly concentrated his efforts on brokering compromises, while setting or structuring the agenda was of minor importance. This became particularly visible in the negotiations on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-20. During these negotiations, van Rompuy did hardly exploit his powers to set or structure the agenda, for example, by launching own proposals or clearly defining the issues for discussion. Instead, he departed from the proposals elaborated earlier by the Council and, in face of disagreement among national leaders, successively lowered the level of the common denominator by adapting these proposals to the wishes of the powerful member states. Thus, he clearly subordinated agenda-management to the function of brokering and he brokered not in the interest of all member states alike. In terms of political leadership, van Rompuy's performance was rather weak. Instead of pursuing common objectives of the Union, by aligning his proposals with those of the Commission or the EP, he ascertained national preferences and thus allowed heads of state or government to dominate the negotiations. He performed as a successful broker in their interest, but not as a president who puts his footprint on the final outcome.

In conclusion, we can state that the first standing president of the European Council hardly acted as an agent promoting the supranational dynamics of integration. He did not attempt to forge an alliance with the Commission, let alone with the EP. Instead, he served to improve intergovernmental decision-making and to conclude an agreement in the interest of the most powerful member states at the expense of others. Thus at best, his leadership can be qualified as transactional; in the longer run, it might even contribute to exacerbating the divisions among the member states. However, we have to bear in mind that the situational context of van Rompuy's presidency was extremely unfavourable to shift the balance in EU decision-making towards a more supranational dynamic.

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