

The Predictably Unexpected Event: EU Presidencies in a Period of Institutional Shifts

The institution of the Presidency in the history of integration

European integration has always known the concept and practice of a rotating presidency. In contrast to the three-month presidency term of the European Coal and Steel Community, today's established six-month term of office was created by the Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community, and Belgium was the first country to assume this responsibility from 1 January to 30 June 1958. Next, it was taken over by the then Federal Republic of Germany in the middle of the summer, which passed it on to France at the end of the year, creating the institution of a six-month rotating presidency.

Notwithstanding the many changes that affected European integration over the subsequent half century, the institution of the presidency remained fundamentally unchanged. Although the successive waves of enlargement multiplied the number of Member States between 1973 and 2006, and the deepening of integration also multiplied the number of policies at Community and then EU level, the rules governing the presidency remained the same until 1 December 2009, the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

However, while the legal framework remained unchanged, the passage of time obviously brought many changes in the way the Presidency's tasks were performed. Above all, decades of experience accumulated and Member States were able to pass on this experience to each other for their own and for the other Member States' benefit. According to literature, each Member State has, from the very beginning, shaped the Presidency a little in its own image, depending on its administrative traditions, national character and available resources.¹

It became clear that other things can be expected from the Presidency term of a resource-poor Member State with a small territory and population than from a large, rich Member State. An informal hierarchy of Member States evolved that also determined the efficiency and effectiveness of the presidency term. The founding Member States with a large territory and population and a strong economy were at the top of the hierarchy, and the smaller the territory or population and the later the date of accession of a country, the lower its rank of importance became.

As a result, the presidencies of Member States with different characteristics and different priorities, which succeeded each other every six months, gave a particular dynamic to European integration. Stagnation or stalemates were followed, seemingly unexpectedly, by rapid progress under the influence of a strong and effective Presidency.

¹ LEWIS 2007: 160.

At other times, dynamic and fast-moving processes may have stalled as a consequence of a new, less experienced or ineffective presidency term.

In addition to policy changes, the increasing importance of institutional change has also resulted in innovations in the presidencies' programmes. In the initial phase, institutional change was not a major challenge for the Member State holding the presidency. Under the Treaty of Rome, the Commission, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council were all made up of delegates from the Member States, and it was entirely an internal decision of each Member State to appoint delegates to fill the quota available to it.

The first change was the transformation of the European Parliament into a directly elected body in 1979. Although the election itself, the level of participation, the interest shown in it and its significance was disappointing, the very fact of establishing the first Community institution with direct democratic legitimacy set a new direction for political development in European internal politics.

Using direct legitimacy very cleverly as a legal basis, the European Parliament has displayed itself as the depository of European democracy. By exploiting the legislative possibilities available to it, the Parliament has strengthened its position among the other Community institutions, with the result that the European elections and the five-year mandate of the European Parliament slowly became the turntable for the institutional renewal of European internal affairs.

The Maastricht Treaty aligned the term of office of the European Commission with the mandate of the European Parliament, in theory establishing a temporal relationship between the two institutions. From then on, the European Parliament sought to gain as much political influence as possible in determining the composition of the Commission, even in an unchanged legislative framework. The right of the European Parliament to hear Commissioner-designates, which has always been its right enshrined in law, has become an increasingly prominent event over the years, and in 2004 opposition from the European Parliament led to the withdrawal of a Commissioner-designate and a change in their original portfolio.

This change meant that the institutional renewal, taking place every five years, became a politically increasingly significant and conflictual process, rather than just a routine reshuffle. This also implied that the Member State holding the Presidency during the period of institutional change also had to take part in the tasks to be performed. Even in the absence of concrete legal obligations to this end, from the perspective of the prestige of a Member State, the way in which it manages the political conflicts that arise during its presidency, whether between Member States or between the EU institutions and the Member States, is far from irrelevant. The smooth conduct of the institutional renewal process is considered to be one of the most important issues of European integration.

The presidency after the Lisbon Treaty

The regulation of the rotating presidency changed significantly on 1 December 2009, upon the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. One could say that the role of presidencies

is well illustrated by the path followed by Member States and the EU institutions before the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.

Around the turn of the millennium, the key Member States and institutions of the European Union increasingly accepted a so-called ‘fleet approach’ to enlargement. This meant that, as opposed to the original scenario, which would have allowed a successive admission of Central and Eastern European candidate countries as a function of their preparedness, the strategy of waiting for all, or, as it turned out later, almost all candidate countries to join for political reasons and admitting them in one large-scale enlargement towards the East, prevailed instead.

This idea, apart from causing great disappointment to the more developed Visegrád countries, also meant that, after the enlargement, the doubling of the number of Member States had to be reckoned with. The main concern about the increase in the number of Member States was that the decision-making processes, which were originally tailored to six Member States, would become unmanageably complex and grind to a halt with the new number of Member States. Likewise, as a result of enlargement, the EU institutions would also grow in size and their operation would become increasingly difficult.

It was in response to this concern, and in preparation for the largest ever enlargement, that in 2001 the Member States adopted the Laeken Declaration, which announced a constitutional process. The objective was that a European Convention, made up of the Member States, the EU institutions and other political players, chaired by former French President Valéry Giscard D’Éstaing, drew up a draft Constitution that would be accepted by the Member States and could serve as the Constitution of the European Union in the upcoming period.

The Convention fulfilled its task in 2004, but the following year, during the ratification process, referendums in France and the Netherlands rejected the text of the draft Constitution. European integration appeared to delve into a deep crisis, since voters in two of the founding and influential Member States said no to moving forward.

The subsequent period of disheartenment ended in 2007 with the rotating presidency. Germany, holding the presidency at that time, announced the end of the period of reverie and, on the fiftieth anniversary of signing the Treaty of Rome, Member States adopted the so-called Berlin Declaration, which foresaw the adoption of a new treaty and set the goal of holding the 2009 European Parliament elections under that new treaty.

This case alone demonstrates how a strong and influential presidency can inject new dynamism into a stalled integration process. Thanks to the restarted work, the text of the draft treaty was signed in Lisbon on 13 December 2007 during the Portuguese Presidency. Everything was therefore given to achieve the original objective, to ensure that the new treaty entered into force on 1 January 2009 and applied to the European Parliament elections that year.

However, the ratification process yet again brought about difficulties. Although France and the Netherlands, which said no to the draft European Constitution, have now, for the sake of certainty, bypassed direct involvement of the people in the decision-making process, and ratified the treaty text via their respective legislatures, in Ireland the no-voters won the first referendum and yes-voters only won in early October, in

a repeated referendum. The Czech Republic and Poland also delayed their ratifications, with reference to the difficulties in Ireland.

The complications, which by now can be considered routine, have led to delays with regard to entry into force of the treaty. As such, the Lisbon Treaty could not enter into force on 1 January 2009, as originally planned, but only at the end of the year, on 1 December 2009, well after the European Parliament elections.

The new Treaty added two important innovations to the existing rules governing the rotating presidency. Both innovations can be linked to the fact that upon the Treaty's entry into force, there were already twenty-seven, and from 2013 on twenty-eight Member States of the European Union, meaning that, while retaining the six-month presidency cycle, a Member State must wait thirteen to fourteen years for its turn. As the number of Member States increased, so did the diversity of the European Union, and this was also true of the diversity of its policies. Consequently, the new Treaty introduced innovations that sought to reduce the relevance of the different presidencies held by the Member States.

The institution of trio presidency was introduced in this spirit, which entailed cooperation between three Member States holding the successive presidencies. In addition to their respective presidency programmes, the countries in the trio also adopt a common presidency programme for the eighteen months and cooperate closely with each other to achieve policy goals during their presidencies. The intention behind the introduction of the new institution is clear: establishing close policy cooperation between the members of the trio and creating an opportunity for cooperation between the different trios, strengthens the policy profile of the presidencies and at the same time ensures continuity in the development of EU policies.

Another novelty of the Treaty had a negative effect on the political profile of the presidencies by diminishing their role in the operation of the EU institutions. The Lisbon Treaty created two new posts, previously held by politicians from the Member State holding the rotating presidency.

The European Council, in operation since 1974, had traditionally been chaired by the head of state or government of the Member State holding the presidency, in line with the constitutional arrangements of that country. However, as of December 2009, the Lisbon Treaty introduced the post of President of the European Council, elected by qualified majority in the European Council for a two-and-a-half year term, with the person holding the position being eligible for re-election once. All three presidents this far, Herman Van Rompuy, Donald Tusk and Charles Michel have served two terms, amounting five years in office, respectively.

The other innovation was the creation of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Before the Lisbon Treaty, it was the foreign affairs minister of the Member State holding the rotating presidency that traditionally steered the European Union's foreign policy. With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, it is the High Representative, elected by qualified majority by the European Council and appointed for five years with the consent of the President of the European Commission, who carries out these tasks.

The Lisbon Treaty therefore somewhat redefined the profile of the Presidency. It provided the opportunity for more input into policy work compared to its traditional role, but at the same time, it reduced the importance of the tasks included in the institutions' competence and restricted its role in representation. It may seem that the rotating presidency has become pale in comparison, with fewer strictly political roles for Member State politicians. However, the gradual politicisation of interinstitutional relations and the ensuing tasks have compensated this loss on the side of the politicians of the Member States holding the presidency.

Policy or large-scale politics? The 2009 Swedish Presidency

While the years of European integration have been eventful, due to its political significance, 2009 was particularly remarkable. As the last member of the French–Czech–Swedish presidency trio, Sweden essentially built its six-month presidency around a six-point programme. The priorities of the Swedish Presidency were: 1. economic and employment policy; 2. climate change; 3. the implementation of the Stockholm Programme in the field of Justice and Home Affairs cooperation; 4. the Baltic Sea Strategy; 5. the European Union's neighbourhood and external policies; and 6. institutional and constitutional issues.²

In a somewhat unusual approach, it is clear that in addition to its policy-related responsibilities, the Swedish Presidency had already taken the tasks arising from the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty into account. A primary challenge in this area was the issue of the second Irish referendum. In June 2008, in the first referendum in Ireland, the majority voted against the ratification of the treaty, so that few thought that it could enter into force under the Swedish Presidency. Accordingly, in the preparation period of the Swedish Presidency, tasks related to the possible failure of the referendum were included rather than tasks related to the new treaty's entry into force.³

The Swedish Presidency had three major responsibilities in the field of institutional change. On the one hand, it had to monitor the process of setting up the new institutions, namely the new European Parliament and the European Commission, and to assist them wherever possible. On the other hand, the Presidency had to make every effort to ensure that the ratification process stalled by the Irish referendum was completed before the end of the year so that the Lisbon Treaty could enter into force. The third task was to help the new positions created by the new Treaty, namely the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, to become established in internal European politics.

Due to its timing, the Swedish Presidency's main focus was the institutional renewal process rather than the achievement of policy objectives, which were otherwise successfully met. The fact that the protracted ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the process of

² LANGDAL – VON SYDOW 2009: 7.

³ DONNELLY et al. 2009: 2.

setting up the new institutions following the European Parliament elections were taking place in parallel opened up a debate surrounding the timing of the new institutions' entry into office.

Although the June 2009 European Council meeting, in line with tradition, made a proposal for the next President of the European Commission following the European Parliament elections, to be the same as the current President, José Manuel Barroso, some Member States felt that the whole institutional renewal should be postponed to the period following the Treaty's entry into force. This approach was echoed by the European Parliament, which postponed its July vote on the old/new Commission President. The primary motivation for the postponement and waiting for the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty was that it gave the European Parliament stronger powers in the nomination process of the President of the European Commission.⁴

However, the Swedish Presidency thought that, in order to ensure institutional continuity, the procedure should be continued at least as regards the person of the President, and at the beginning of the Presidency, i.e. the beginning of July, it started consultations with the European Parliament on the person of the new Commission President.⁵ Although the timing was disputed by some, the Swedish Presidency succeeded as a result of its extensive preparatory work, and the European Parliament's September plenary voted by a large majority for Barroso. The nomination, interview and appointment of the other members of the Commission was postponed until after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, so that the new, i.e. second Barroso Commission could enter into office on 10 February 2010.

The second task within the process of institutional renewal was navigating the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty, which did not appear much easier either. At the beginning of the Swedish Presidency, besides Ireland, three further Member States had not ratified the Treaty, namely the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany. A convincing majority of votes in favour opened the final stage of the ratification process, when only certain Member States' concerns had to be addressed by the Swedish Presidency. In the autumn of 2009, the German Federal Parliament gave its consent to the entry into force of the Treaty by a large majority, and although the Polish Parliament waited for the outcome of the Irish referendum, it ratified the Treaty immediately afterwards.

So the only sensitive diplomatic task was to overcome the Czech President, Václav Klaus's scepticism surrounding ratification. The President feared that the Charter of Fundamental Rights, linked to the Lisbon Treaty, would undermine the implementation of the Beneš decrees and blocked the ratification of the Treaty itself until the appropriate guarantees were put in place. Although the majority for the ratification in the Irish referendum significantly softened his position, analysts say that the Swedish Presidency's discreet diplomatic manoeuvres were also instrumental in breaking Klaus's resistance to make the entry into force a success.⁶

⁴ FOWLER 2009:18.

⁵ *Report on the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union* 2009: 17.

⁶ KRÁL 2009: 33.

The third aspect of institutional renewal was filling the new posts with officials and the establishment of the authority of these posts. Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt also said that one of the tasks of the Presidency would be to organise a debate on how the new institutions and positions would compare with the existing traditional arrangements upon the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. For him, the most pressing issue was to clarify how the position of the President of the newly created European Council would change the responsibilities of the head of government of the country holding the rotating presidency.⁷

Following some initial success in the other two areas, on 19 November 2009 the Swedish Presidency faced its most difficult test in the process of institutional renewal. The Member States decided then on filling two new posts. Given that neither of these positions had had a precedent in the history of European integration, the Member States did not foresee, either in the case of the President of the European Council or the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy what the future held and how much gravitas the first-time holders of these positions could give to their new positions.

This time, the Swedish Presidency, led by Fredrik Reinfeldt, personally managed the extremely difficult process of mediating between often conflicting national interests, finally to the general satisfaction of all. Criticism was only voiced regarding the methods,⁸ namely that the Swedish diplomacy built consensus through confidential discussions and phone calls rather than in open negotiations. It is likely, however, that the method itself was the key to success: open diplomatic negotiations would probably not have allowed Member States to reach a consensus-based solution in such a short time.

Of course, in addition to the tasks set by the process of institutional renewal, the Swedish Presidency also had to perform “traditional” responsibilities, that is, policy tasks of the presidency. The biggest risk here was finding an antidote to the European economic crisis, the effect of which could be strongly felt at that time. During the Swedish Presidency, the crisis that hit European economies in 2008, erupting from the United States, was merely one of the tasks. The solution would only be found in 2011, not least as a result of the Hungarian Presidency, when the legislative and policy framework for economic governance was reformed.⁹

The rescue of the Copenhagen climate summit, threatening to be a total failure, was also a major challenge and resulted in only partial success.¹⁰ The European Union started climate negotiations with ambitious plans in mind, but it became clear from the start of the Swedish Presidency that the meeting would not be able to fulfil its original mission, mainly due to the reluctance of the U.S. and China. The Swedish Presidency on its own cannot be blamed for this missed opportunity, but the failure still overshadowed its performance.

⁷ MAZZUCELLI–DRAGOMACA 2009: 15.

⁸ KACZYNSKI 2009: 21.

⁹ VÉGH 2019: 10.

¹⁰ PALMER 2009: 16.

Meanwhile, the adoption of the Stockholm Programme is considered a major policy success of the Presidency. The Stockholm Programme set out the roadmap for Justice and Home Affairs cooperation in the 2010–2014 period. The programme aimed to infuse European citizenship with actual, tangible substance, and called for concerted action to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and the smuggling of migrants, among other things, as well as for the creation of a coordinated immigration system.

Overall, we may conclude that while the Swedish Presidency faced a large number of policy tasks, it was exceptional in that it had to cope under very specific circumstances. The ratification process of the new treaty, which took place in parallel with the institutional renewal, and the introduction of new positions resulted in unprecedented tasks. That is why the Swedish Presidency not only had to apply its traditional policy-making skills, but also its very strong diplomatic and mediation abilities during the semester. In this role, the high level of trust Sweden traditionally enjoys among its negotiating partners was of great importance. As a result, its role as an honest broker was never questioned, which greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the Presidency.

Like a hot knife through butter: The 2014 Italian Presidency

Five years after the Swedish Presidency, Italy took over the presidency at the time of the next institutional change. The stars were aligned in favour of the South: there were still some concerning factors pervading European politics, but the overall effect on European integration and the EU institutions was nothing compared to what the Lisbon Treaty ratification process and the institutional renewal back then had posed for the Swedish Presidency.

However, the European polity did not remain without innovation in 2014 either. The big novelty was the so-called ‘Spitzenkandidat’ system, whereby the leaders of the Member States accept the outcome of the European Parliament elections as binding upon themselves and nominate the leader of the winning party alliance as the next president of the European Commission.

The special feature of this system was that it was not based on Treaty provisions, but rather formulated in opposition to those. Under the Treaty, the president of the European Commission is nominated by the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, and voted on by the European Parliament. If the European Council’s candidate enjoys the confidence of the European Parliament, the process of setting up the Commission as a whole can begin, with the nomination of Commissioners, followed by their hearing in the European Parliament. Once again, it is the European Parliament that completes the process by holding a vote of confidence on the new Commission, which, if supported by the majority, can take office.

The system of lead candidates was allowed by a so-called interinstitutional agreement, under which the European Council voluntarily renounced its right of nomination or, to be more precise, has made it a mere formality. By making it compulsory for itself to take into account the results of the European elections, it has in fact rendered its role

in the nomination process to be fully symbolic, allowing the European Parliament to be the main actor in the process of establishing the new Commission.

The European People's Party (EPP) won the 2014 European Parliament elections, and its leader, Jean-Claude Juncker, long known in European domestic politics as prime minister and finance minister, and more recently as head of the Eurogroup of euro area countries, was nominated by the European Council as the new president of the European Commission. Not everyone agreed with the lead candidate system. However, despite the protests of the prime ministers of the U.K. and Hungary, who voted against the procedure, a qualified majority made Juncker the presidential candidate. The nominee was supported by the majority of the European Parliament and the process of setting up the new Commission could begin.

Compared with the Swedish and, as we shall see below, the Finnish Presidency, the system of lead candidates made the work of the Italian Presidency much easier in the initial phase, even if the solution itself did not comply with Treaty requirements. Perhaps this is why the issue of institutional renewal was not raised with nearly the same intensity throughout the Italian Presidency, as during the Swedish Presidency, which dealt with the ratification and entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and institutional renewal at the same time.

This happened despite the fact that the document presenting the priorities and programme of the Italian Presidency first of all addressed the problematic areas of the process of institutional renewal and the resulting tasks of the Presidency, ahead of the policy objectives.¹¹ In fact, the Italian Presidency could focus more on achieving its policy goals than its predecessor, thanks to the smooth institutional renewal achieved.

The European Parliament accepted the next candidate for the European Commission, without major political opposition, who was at the same time the lead candidate. In line with the original plans, the European Commission was the only one of the post-Lisbon Treaty Commissions that started working on 1 November 2014. And towards the end of the Presidency, the new President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, was elected by the leaders of the Member States as scheduled.

However, this did not mean that the Italian Presidency was a calmer period than the earlier presidencies. The policy priorities of the Italian Presidency were essentially organised around three turning points: 1. drawing the lessons of the European economic and sovereign debt crisis in Southern Europe and renewing economic governance; 2. reforming the common foreign and security policy; and 3. developing a new common immigration policy.¹² However, historical events brought about an unexpected turn of events in virtually all three policy areas.

The number of questions surrounding the effectiveness of economic governance only increased as the Greek debt crisis escalated, to take a truly radical turn in 2015 with the victory of the far left in the Greek parliamentary elections. The reform of the European Union's foreign and security policy was fundamentally undermined by

¹¹ BONVICINI et al. 2014: 2–3.

¹² BONVICINI et al. 2014.

the Russian–Ukrainian crisis that erupted in the summer of 2014, also causing a diplomatic emergency when Russian paramilitary forces shot down a Malaysian Airlines passenger plane. Finally, a year later, the efforts made to develop a new immigration policy, referred to by Jean-Claude Juncker as a priority in his address to the European Parliament, failed, when an unprecedented number of migrants reached Greece, Italy and Hungary by land routes, opening a new chapter in the history of the European Union’s migration policy.

However, these developments did not overshadow the otherwise successful Italian Presidency. So far, the second half of 2014 could be considered the most successful presidency period, also in terms of institutional renewal. By the end of 2014, all the institutions had been renewed and could start the political term ahead smoothly.

A pragmatic country’s adventure with ideology: The 2019 Finnish Presidency

On 1 July 2019, Finland commenced its third presidency as a member of the European Union. The Finnish Presidencies of 1999 and 2006 are remembered for their rather pragmatic and modest character. As a typical newly-joined small state, during its first two presidencies it placed a strong emphasis on the smooth functioning of the European Union and on ensuring that the already turbulent political environment did not encumber the functioning of the European Union with ideological debates.¹³

It is perhaps a twist of history that Finland held the Presidency in 1999 and 2006, as well as in the second half of 2019, and in addition, it had to steer a process of institutional renewal following the 1999 EU elections, just as it did twenty years later in 2019, even if in a fundamentally different legislative context, due to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. By 2019, therefore, the country could be considered as being experienced, both in terms of the tasks of the EU Presidency in general and in particular as regards the role of the EU institutions during a renewal period.

Perhaps this self-confidence also explains why the Finnish Presidency programme, unlike its Swedish and Italian predecessors, did not even mention monitoring the process of the EU institutions’ renewal as a task. The Presidency only laid down policy priorities in its action programme, with the protection of EU values and the rule of law at the top of the list. This was followed by a competitive and socially inclusive European Union, which focused essentially on economic policy goals. The third priority was to strengthen the European Union’s position in global leadership, and the final objective was to improve citizens’ security. The Presidency programme also stressed the resolution of the 2021–2027 multi-annual financial framework and migration-related issues as specific tasks, not as a priority but rather as a separate goal.¹⁴

It was clear, not only from the structure of the document but also from the politicians’ statements, that the Finnish Presidency placed the greatest emphasis on rule of law issues

¹³ TUOMINEN 2023: 27.

¹⁴ *Sustainable Europe – Sustainable Future. Finland’s Presidency Programme 2019.*

and wished to play an active, initiative-taking role in this area, which was somewhat unusual. As opposed to its previous presidencies, the Finnish Government played a distinctly ideological role, and its role as a mediator in the period of institutional renewal was relegated to the background.

Finnish domestic political developments may explain this novel perception of the role. On the one hand, the Finnish Parliament has a decisive role in defining Finnish European policy, in line with the Nordic model. This also means that party political considerations may be more decisive in setting priorities than government policy priorities. This in itself points to a more ideological presidency.

This structural factor was further reinforced by current domestic political developments. The big novelty of the parliamentary elections held in April, a few months before the start of the Presidency, was the rise of the Finns Party. Although a centre-left coalition government could be formed, the new government saw the rise of populism and Euroscepticism as the biggest threat to Finland and the European Union. Moreover, as a newly-inaugurated, ambitious government that took office less than a month before the start of the Presidency, it believed that there was a pressure for action in this field at European level.¹⁵

Although the 2019 renewal process seemed similar to the 2014 institutional change, at the time of the Finnish Presidency the internal political developments in Europe following the elections to the European Parliament had created a more complicated context than five years prior. The lead candidate system, controversial from the very beginning, finally tanked after the elections when it emerged that following the rules from five years earlier would result in the European Council awarding the status of Commission president-designate to Manfred Weber, lead candidate of the European People's Party, who had no governmental experience.

The majority of Member State leaders were not ready to take such a risk and, following several days of negotiations, the European Council finally decided to break with the system of lead candidates and, from relative obscurity, nominated Ursula von der Leyen, the German Defence Minister, as the next President of the Commission. The manoeuvre was apparently successful, as the European Parliament swallowed its pride and voted in mid-July to give its confidence to the candidate and so the process of setting up the new Commission could start.

However, the procedure itself created a tension that was felt between the European Parliament and the Commissioners-designate throughout the process of the Commission's formation and the hearings of the Commissioners-designate on the one hand, and which poisoned the relationship of trust between the Commission and the European Parliament, even after the Commission took office, on the other. Acting as a mediator in the triangle between the Member States, the incoming Commission and the European Parliament during these tense months could also be considered the responsibility of the Finnish Presidency.

¹⁵ TUOMINEN 2023: 28.

However, it seemed that the Finnish Presidency had not picked up on any of these storms, or at least had not considered these issues to be serious enough to change its original agenda. Hence, the Presidency did not act as a mediator in internal debates, nor in the party political battles surrounding the hearings of the Commissioners-designate. This failure is particularly striking because the climate of confidence surrounding Finnish diplomacy would have otherwise rendered the Presidency's mediation effective. As a result of the controversy, the institutional changeover, originally scheduled for 1 November 2019, suffered a one-month delay for the Commission, dragging out until 1 December.¹⁶

Moreover, the Finnish Presidency did not do better on the priorities it had considered important. Negotiations on the financial framework for 2021–2027 soon reached an impasse, and so did consultations on the rule of law procedure. The heavily ideological stance also induced some reservation even among those who were otherwise sympathetic to the Presidency's aspirations.

EU Presidencies in a period of institutional change

Summing up what has been discussed so far, first we must note that there is little experience to draw clear conclusions from when it comes to the presidencies that have taken place since the Lisbon Treaty's entry into force. The Lisbon Treaty redefined the role of the Presidency to such an extent that it certainly opened a new chapter in the history of presidencies. However, each of the three rotating presidencies since then has had features that make it difficult to generalise conclusions.

The 2009 Swedish Presidency certainly was a unique case, and only partly fit our definition, since the Lisbon Treaty only entered into force at the end of the Presidency, on 1 December, so the bigger part of the Presidency was still subject to the old rules and role concept. As a result, although there is consensus that the Swedish Presidency performed very well, it could not implement the institutional renewal fully, as the Commission was only set up in February 2010.

The 2014 Italian Presidency worked in a much calmer legislative context and a somewhat more relaxed political framework. By focusing primarily on a pragmatic approach, it contributed greatly to the smooth renewal of the EU institutions. It was undoubtedly helped by the agreement of the vast majority of Member States on the system of lead candidates, but it was also helped by the fact that, as a founding Member State, it could mobilise political capital creating general confidence in order to reach an agreement.

The 2019 Finnish Presidency was clearly the least successful of the three rotating presidencies. Its strong ideology-based attitude did not make it any easier to build the trust necessary for mediation. Moreover, it seems from the Presidency documents that it did not attach any importance to the tasks that the institutional changeover imposed on the Member State holding the rotating presidency. The failure of the Finnish Presidency

¹⁶ DE LA BAUME 2019.

was twofold: it was unable to make a substantive contribution to institutional renewal, but it also failed to make progress on major policy issues during its six-month term. As a result, the Croatian and then the German presidencies had to work hard and with ever-growing delays to perform their tasks.

Summing up the experience thus far, the three noted examples suggest that countries holding the presidency during a period of renewal of the EU institutions are successful when they act in the role of a pragmatic and mediating presidency rather than an ideological and initiating one. This role may be duller at first sight, but in reality it requires at least as much energy, capital and leeway as a seemingly more colourful, proactive one. Moreover, a successful presidency can be a long-term investment that pays off in terms of the energy spent. The mediating role, successful consultations and the impartial mediator's attitude increase the European Union's confidence in the country to such an extent that brings a great return in terms of improving cooperation as a whole.

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