

The government Europe deserves?

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17 September 2014

With the final allocation of portfolios within its executive branch, the European Commission, the European Union has completed its change of guard. The process took almost four months from the European Parliament election in late May, and the end result was inevitably based on a series of compromises – par for the course in an EU of 28 prickly nation-states.

Indeed, the proper functioning of EU institutions requires that no important constituency (left or right, East or West, and so forth) feels left out. And the new European Commission looks rather strong, given that over 20 of its overall 28 members had previously been prime ministers, deputy prime ministers or ministers. People who have held high political office at home find it worthwhile to come to Brussels.

But most attention has focused on the EU's top three positions: the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council, and the High Representative for external affairs.

The Commission's new President, Jean-Claude Juncker, was the first ever to be selected based on his faction's strong showing in the European Parliament elections in May. As a seasoned Brussels insider, he was not one to move the crowds, but sometimes this can be an advantage. An insider knows best how to reconcile contrasting interests and to get the institutional machinery moving again, as Juncker showed with his deft handling of the distribution of tasks among the individual Commissioners.

Selecting the President of the European Council required considerable time and horse-trading, with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk emerging as the final choice. Although Tusk now has an important-sounding position, in reality the European Council President decides nothing. The president mainly presides over the meetings of the EU's national leaders, and his or her influence depends on his ability to set the agenda and facilitate compromises.

The experience of the previous incumbent, former Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy, in dealing with his own country's fractious coalitions proved very useful when he had to persuade the national leaders to take decisions during the euro crisis. Tusk will have to achieve something similar in the face of the new challenges facing Europe today, which include Russian aggression in Ukraine, the rise of terrorism in the Middle East and a stagnant economy at home.

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On the EU's most immediate challenge, the one posed by Russia, Tusk will have to broker decisions with leaders from countries that feel imminently threatened (like his own) and those for which economic ties with Russia outweigh the threat to European security, which they feel to be remote. On the economy, he must reconcile the priorities of full-employment Germany with those of Greece or Italy, which remain in the grip of recession and sky-high unemployment. Being able to converse directly with the Council's members, mostly in English, might be the biggest immediate challenge, as he readily admitted.

The appointment of the Italian Foreign Minister, Federica Mogherini, as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has been widely questioned, owing to her limited executive experience in foreign policy. But, since the *de facto* invasion of Ukraine in late August, her government has changed its position on Russia, and she has sought to convince many critics that she knows the problems facing Europe well (her university thesis, for example, was about political Islam).

But can she lead? Europe's foreign service, the European External Action Service (EEAS), is a huge bureaucracy, which must be managed well if it is to be effective. And, although the head of the EEAS has been dubbed the "EU's foreign-policy chief", Mogherini should be seen as its CEO, with key decisions taken by the member states' leaders when they convene in the European Council. Her lack of managerial experience is thus her key weakness, and she will have to form a strong team to support her.

But there is at least one encouraging, if hidden, signal from Mogherini's appointment: The fact that the European Central Bank President Mario Draghi is also an Italian was not an impediment. This implies that the ECB presidency is not counted among the posts to be distributed according to nationality quotas, and that Draghi's nationality is not regarded as influencing his decisions in any way.

Leaders of the EU's institutions have to be political entrepreneurs if they are to leave a mark on history. Their decision-making power is limited. But they can often frame the choices and broker coalitions to push the existing boundaries of European integration. None of the EU's top three new faces (Juncker, Tusk or Mogherini) has a track record in this sense. Apparently the national bosses like it that way.

The most sobering message from the whole appointment process is thus that the member states' leaders will not suffer anyone who might rock the boat and push integration forward. There will be little movement towards the "ever-closer union" envisioned in the Treaty of Rome. That might come as a relief for those fearing domination by Brussels (like many in the UK), but it can only dismay those who hope that, despite its sluggish economy and declining population, Europe can become a relevant global actor.