

spotlight europe

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More Political Leadership is Worth the Risk

Dominik Hierlemann

Bertelsmann Stiftung, dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann.de

Armando García Schmidt

Bertelsmann Stiftung, armando.garciaschmidt@bertelsmann.de

Europeans want more political leadership from leading personalities and groups of countries. If the [new treaty](#) enters into force, there will be more leaders on the European level. This politicization will be beneficial as far as the European Union is concerned. However, in addition to such leading politicians, the EU needs new and constructive coalitions. In an EU 27 with its diverse interests there is only one realistic constellation of countries capable of providing leadership: the big three.

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Shortly before the EU [constitutional summit](#) in June 2007, the Bertelsmann Foundation conducted a representative survey in selected EU member states, the subject of which was political leadership, leading personalities, and leadership groups in the EU. The interviewees were citizens of 16 EU countries: Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Sweden, Slovenia, Spain, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The population of the chosen states amounts to 88% of the total population of the EU. The interviews took place between 14 May and 18 June 2007. This “spotlight europe” presents the results of the survey and describes the challenges facing political

leadership in the EU.

Leading personalities and suitable candidates

The elucidation and implementation of coherent draft policies and fundamental changes in direction, and the way conflicts are dealt with in the democratic arena is very closely bound up with the people who have the task of providing leadership.

When asked which individual should assume a strong political leadership role in the EU, 26%, a relative majority, were in

favour of Angela Merkel. José Manuel Barroso came second, with 19%, followed by Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy, each with 14%

The head of the German government obtained the highest ratings in Germany (58%), Slovenia (48%), and France (36%). In Denmark, Spain, Italy, Austria and Estonia Merkel's ratings were also above the European average. On the other hand, in Hungary and Bulgaria only 8% and 9% of the interviewees

respectively were in favour of strong leadership provided by the German Chancellor. Similarly, in the United Kingdom only 11% of the interviewees were of this opinion.

In contrast to Merkel, Barroso's ratings are the result of a consistently high level of approval in the countries included in the survey. Only the Germans and the Bulgarians deviate more than 9 percentage points from the median. The German interviewees are more positive—40% expect more leadership from Barroso—and the Bulgarians are more negative. Only 5% of the interviewees believe that Barroso is capable of becoming a leading personality.

The ratings for Brown and Sarkozy differ considerably in the various member states. Thus 41% of the French as well as 30% of the Germans hope that Sarkozy will provide more leadership. However, only 6% of

the Swedes and the Bulgarians are in favour of assigning a stronger leadership role to the French president. Opinions are also divided when it comes to the head of the British government. Whereas in Bul-

POLITICAL LEADERS

Which of the following people would you wish to play a strong political leadership role in the European Union? (Multiple answers possible)



garia, Estonia, Italy, Austria, Spain and Hungary no more than 7% believe that new European policy initiatives will come from Downing Street, 50% of the British, as well as 31% of the Germans and the Irish place their faith in the new prime minister.

Only 15% of the interviewees were of the opinion that no single person should assume a strong leadership role on the European level. Here the new member states and Austria are more sceptical than the core countries of the old EU.



Leadership groups and how to find them

Europeans are in favour of more leading political figures and more leadership from specific groups of countries. Only 13% of the interviewees are against small leader-

ship groups made up of a number of countries chosen for this purpose. A relative majority of the interviewees (one in three) was of the opinion that in future the Eurogroup will assume a greater leadership role. The ratings of the Eurogroup are to a large extent the result of a high level of support in the countries which are among its members. Medium-sized states such as the Netherlands and Spain, which otherwise do not see themselves as part of a leadership group, believe that greater importance should be attached to the Eurozone.

The views expressed by the British are especially interesting.

Despite the fact that the United Kingdom continues to oppose the introduction of the euro, 29% assign a leadership role to the Eurogroup. 45% of the Slovenes support the Eurogroup, which is hardly surprising in view of the fact that Slovenia is the first of the

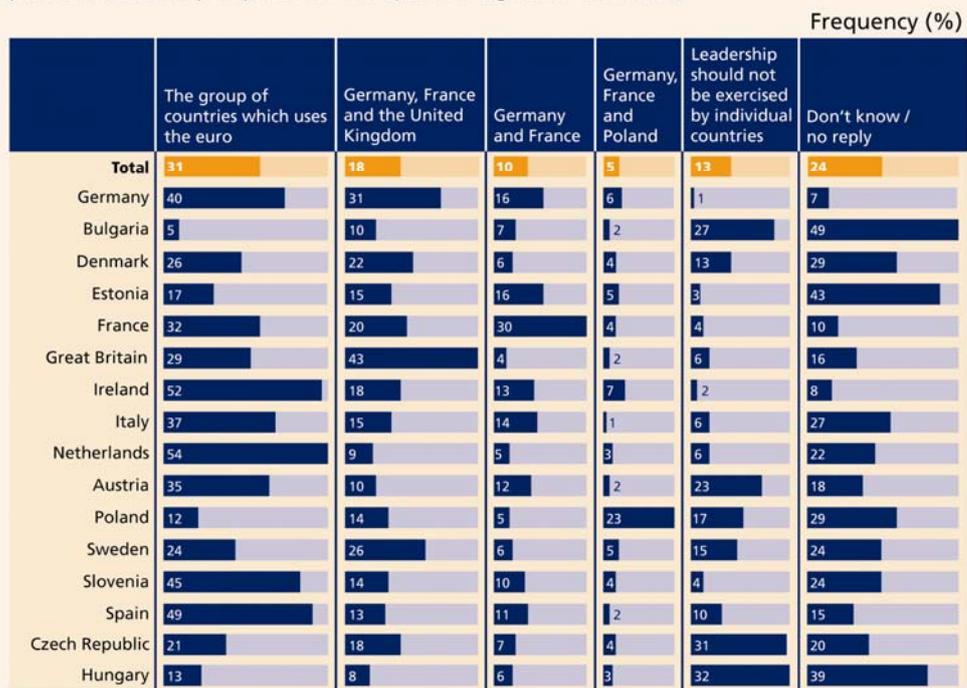
new EU member states to have gained admittance. All the other central and eastern European states are more or less critical of leadership groups of any grouping whatsoever. A third of the Bulgarians, Czechs and Hungarians, in contrast to what the rest of Europe thinks, are totally against leadership by groups of countries.

The most easily conceivable small leadership group consists of the big three, Ger-

many, France, and the United Kingdom. This combination comes in second place. Support for this particular constellation emanates from the three countries themselves, but also from Denmark and Sweden. If the interviewees are to be believed, then the Franco-German motor is defunct. Whereas 30% of the French believe in a Franco-German leadership role, in Germany only 16% are of this opinion, and in Europe as a whole only 10% share this view. Like the British, the Germans are also in favour of more leadership by the big three. 5% are in favour of the Weimar triangle made up of Poland, France and Germany, which lags a long way behind.

LEADERSHIP GROUPS

From which of the following groups of countries should a new political leadership impetus for European integration emanate?



Since there are now 27 member states, Germany and France can no longer, as in the past, be the sole moving forces in the European Union. Nevertheless they will certainly form part of any leadership group. Furthermore, the data demonstrate that, in addition to the United Kingdom, Poland also wishes to be part of a leadership group. The Weimar triangle has obviously failed to achieve this political goal. Whereas 23% of the Poles are in favour of this arrangement, both the Germans and

the French reject the idea of forming a leadership group with Poland. In Germany and France only 6% and 4% of the interviewees respectively are in favour of the Weimar triangle.

The results of the survey draw attention to three developments:

- Europeans are not only interested in the leadership qualities of their own national politicians, but also in those of politicians from other large nations, and indeed of leading European politicians. The leadership qualities and political abilities of the actors now tend to be scrutinized and evaluated by a pan-European public. It is certainly true that membership of a nation plays a role in determining a preference for certain groups of countries. However, since public opinion has become increasingly Europeanized, the call for more leadership is also directed at politicians in other member states.

„Brussels is also becoming a political point of reference in the national sphere.“

- The relatively high approval ratings for José Barroso, the President of the Commission, underlines the fact that national politicians are not the only ones who ought to assume a leadership role in Europe. The electorate is beginning increasingly to perceive the European Commission and its president as a European leadership institution. Brussels is also becoming a political point of reference in the national sphere.
- The results are ambiguous when it comes to defining a specific constellation. Europeans see the need for political leadership by groups of countries, though they fear the predominance of the larger states.

III

Strategic leadership is better than crisis management

The survey data demonstrate that Europeans want strong political leadership provided by specific individuals as well as by specific groups of countries. However, enhanced leadership only seems to make sense if it is combined with a strategic perspective for the future of Europe. In practice what currently tends to predominate is crisis management prompted by the day-to-day political agenda and post hoc attempts to adapt to changes which have already taken place. Thus it is certainly true that the constitutional summit, which was held in a crisis-laden atmosphere, was a partial success and a step leading to institutional reform. What the Treaty of Amsterdam sought to do, which was to turn the EU as soon as possible into a viable entity with more than 30 member states, has tended to be overlooked in the course of the whole constitutional process. 2009 may witness the implementation of provisions which should actually have entered into force long before 2004.

A new type of political leadership ought to supplant day-to-day crisis management and the politics of never-ending amendments. European policymakers are in any case confronted with a plethora of challenges. Thus they will have to create the political and institutional framework for strategic leadership in order to provide European leaders with attractive possibilities for decision-making. Whilst it is certainly right to encourage competition between leading politicians, it is important to prevent short-term posturing at the expense of European integration. It is the task of strategic leadership to provide a structure for the democratic process within and between states on the basis of competing and coherent draft policies. It is important that politicians should be held accountable for what they do. Four specific

factors may well characterize the forthcoming leadership debate:

- Leaders must cooperate. If the treaty of amendment enters into force there will be new leaders in Brussels. The President of the European Commission will have additional powers, as will the EU High Representative for the Foreign and Security Policy. And as a result of the appointment of the President of the European Council, whose term of office lasts for two-and-a-half years, Brussels will acquire a third leading figure who is bound to make an impression on the electorate. In addition to this, the reduction in the size of the European Commission will make it easier for Europeans to link EU policymaking with specific individuals, and thus to make them publicly accountable.

There will be no dearth of leadership figures, at least in an institutional sense. Competition within the tripartite European leadership and the rivalry with the national heads of government will raise the electorate's awareness of the European Union. However, there is a danger that the leaders will neutralize each other, or, worse still, that they will unleash centrifugal forces which, in the final analysis, will lead to even more stalemate. In addition to a capacity to define political guidelines and to defend personal principles in complex situations, the new European leaders must possess an aptitude for teamwork and the ability to promote integration.

- The [tripartite presidency](#) should function in a more coherent manner. In addition to the appointment of the common President of the European Council, the European governments must ensure that priorities do not change every six months. In the past every presidency has declared its own pet subject to be a strategic project for the whole of the EU. Here the tripartite presidency must strive for a more coherent approach. Hitherto the emergence of a common agenda has depended on the member states and their willing-

ness to cooperate. There has never been any kind of compulsory institutional requirement to participate. In contrast to this, a genuine common tripartite presidency would also take into account the wishes of the smaller states. By pooling their resources and concentrating in a sensible way on specific priorities, they in particular could increase their influence on how the EU develops. If they were to form a constructive coalition, all three would benefit from the opportunity to enhance their reputations, which would inevitably be the result of a successful presidency.

„There will be no dearth of leadership figures“

- The European political parties should be strengthened. Political parties, like individual politicians, also have a duty to provide leadership. They in particular can encourage greater politicization in the EU, and thus initiate a public debate about different draft policies relating to the future of the European integration process. By the time of the European elections in 2009, each family of European political parties should have created its own supranational profile. Each political grouping should present a set of political messages to the electorate in a uniform manner throughout Europe, and each should field its own candidate for the office of the President of the Commission. This will demonstrate quite clearly its will to govern and to provide accountable leadership.

- Eliminate veto players. The debate about the fate of the European constitution, which was conducted on the basis of conflicting national interests, and the ensuing compromise reached at the summit in Brussels have made it seem likely that Europe will be based on “the lowest common denominator.” However, if European policymaking takes its bearings from those who are unwilling to move ahead, it will slowly lose the support of all the others. It will be of decisive importance in the years ahead to eliminate veto players at an

early stage. Institutional provisions such as the extension of majority decision-making point in the right direction. However, there is still a need for functioning leadership groups in the European Union. Their task would be to create an atmosphere which would make it very difficult for veto players to stand out against the perceived interests of the majority.

IV

Leadership groups are needed more than ever

There have always been informal leadership groups in the European Union. Sometimes they consisted simply of Germany and France, which were sometimes joined by the Benelux countries. Sometimes all of the founding member states acting in concert provided a strategic impetus for the development of the Union. The waves of enlargement in recent years have rendered the formation of coalitions more difficult. Whereas in EU 15 Germany and France were often the two extremes of the contemporary range of preferences, interest constellations have now become far more varied. Traditional coalitions which often attract less attention are also breaking up. Thus northern European countries complain that they are being ignored by the British, whereas the Netherlands and Belgium have drifted apart with regard to their basic stance towards integration policy. Furthermore, solidarity among the central and eastern European states often no longer exists.

New and stage-managed coalitions such as the Weimar triangle have acquired a ritualistic character devoid of meaning of any kind. In addition to the political aspect of interest diversity, the formation of new coalitions is bedevilled by a problem of a more technical kind. In EU 27 the sheer number of views and attitudes make it difficult and perhaps in fact impossible to know what the other parties actually want in any given instance. For this reason coa-

litions are highly volatile, and unpredictable even for the participants.

„There have always been informal leadership groups in the European Union.“

On account of the diverging interest constellations in EU 27 there is a need for member-state leadership groups. It is true that the Commission and the Council can keep the European Union on the right track in individual policy areas. However, leadership group consisting of several member states will have to assert itself whenever it is a question of fundamental institutional reforms or a political change of course in the integration project. The recent EU summit, which decided the fate of the European constitution, was a good example of the fact that there is sometimes a need for an alliance between certain member states in order to overcome the kind of stalemate which has occasionally held up the European integration process.

V

The Big Three

The Eurogroup is both too large and too diverse to produce real leadership. As is demonstrated by the survey data, Europeans no longer have a high opinion of the Franco-German axis. It is true, of course, that the deepening of the Élysée process led to an intensification of Franco-German relations on a working level, and that a closely-knit web of cooperation arose. Yet significant examples of joint European initiatives are few and far between. In future the only realistic leadership group will be the big three—Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.

In the past a compromise between Germany and France was often acceptable as far as the other member states were concerned. Similarly, a prior compromise

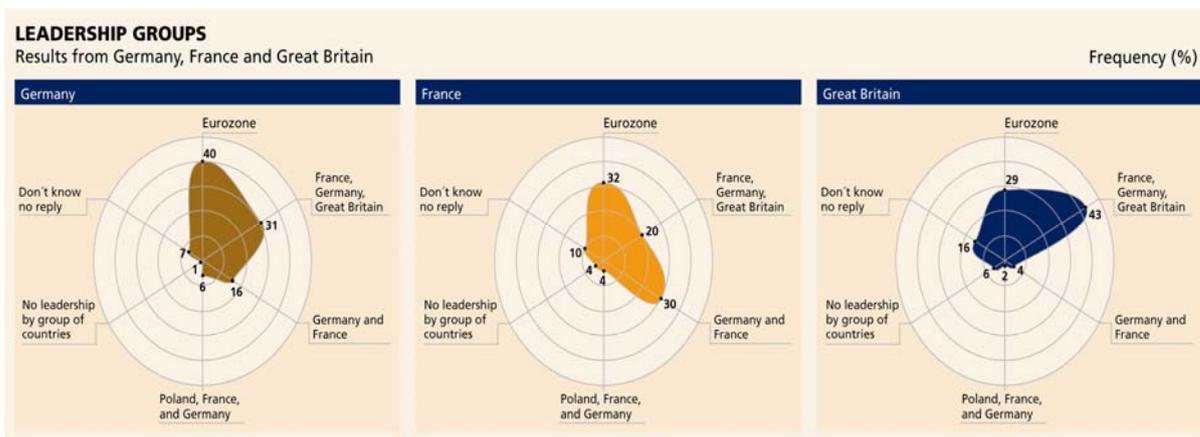
reached by the big three will probably make it easier to reach a compromise in EU 27. These countries usually at variance with regard to all those topics which continue to be controversial in the EU. These include different views of the welfare state, the introduction of the euro, and the Schengen agreement, foreign and security policy traditions, and, last but not least, the fundamental integration policy paradigms. The constitutional summit demonstrated once again that those who want to hold up the proceedings must win over the British, and so must those who are eager to make progress.

If the big three were able to identify manifestly different interests and potential conflicts at an early stage, the result might well be a new constructive and strategic coalition in the European Union.

It is important to remember that this leadership group will only be tolerated by the other member states if it consists of three countries and no more. As soon as a fourth country insists on joining this conclave, a whole series of medium-sized member states will also want to gain admittance.

once again a veto player. The opt-outs in the case of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and home affairs and justice policy demonstrated that the United Kingdom was, as in the past, the odd man out with regard to fundamental EU policies. In the long run it will hardly be feasible to stand aloof and to lay claim to a leadership role at one and the same time.

That there will be greater European involvement by the new British government is suggested, for example, by the fact that the younger members of the cabinet clearly have a far more pragmatic attitude to Europe. The notion that the Tories, acting in conjunction with the tabloids' Europhobia, are trying to exert pressure on the new prime minister is true only to a certain extent. Brown cannot be suspected of being fervently in favour of integration, and this is the precise reason why he will be able to steer the United Kingdom towards the centre of the European Union. And, last but not least, the United States is concerned to encourage the United Kingdom to play a greater role in Europe. The only kind of European Union that is of any use to the U.S. is one which is in a posi-



Whether or not the big three can function in the EU as a constructive coalition is in the first instance up to them. And then the United Kingdom under Brown will have to become a pro-European actor. At first sight the British attitude at the constitutional summit does not seem to suggest that this will be the case. In fact, instead of providing leadership, the United Kingdom was

tion to play an important role in the global economic and security conflicts. And that is why Europe needs the United Kingdom.

The leadership qualities and credibility of the tripartite presidency depend to an important extent on whether or not it proves possible to define common interests and goals on a bilateral level. The basis for this already exists. Even if the Franco-German

motor is running out of steam, the links continue to be very close. Despite their differences with regard to the war in Iraq, France and the United Kingdom still have a large number of things in common in the context of European security and defence policy. But Germany and the United Kingdom in particular have some catching up to do. In addition to intensifying the political and cultural exchange between the two countries, they should try to define joint political projects. In the light of the review of the EU budget for 2008 this joint position could for example be a fundamental restructuring of the budget so that more is spent on research and education.

However, common interests alone are not by themselves of decisive importance for future constructive coalitions. Just as important is the way in which leading politi-

cians interact on a personal level. The rivalry between Brown, Merkel and Sarkozy will only prove to be fruitful and productive if leadership is construed both as strength and as the ability to compromise. The extent to which other states will be willing to accept a constructive coalition of this kind will depend on how the leaders conduct themselves. An enduringly influential leadership group will first emerge when the other member states understand that, when all is said and done, the coalition is wholly dedicated to the continuance of the common European project.

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Further Reading:

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Responsible

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmannstiftung.de

dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann.de
Phone +49 5241 81 81537

joachim.vannahme@bertelsmann.de
Phone +49 5241 81 81 421

Center for Applied Policy Research
Maria-Theresia-Straße 21
D-81675 Munich
www.cap.lmu.de

janis.emmanouilidis@lrz.uni-muenchen.de
Phone +49 89 2180 1336

sarah.seeger@lrz.uni-muenchen.de
Phone + 49 89 2180 1375

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