Chapter 2

The Role of the European Parliament President in Parliamentary Diplomacy

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Introduction: Internal and External Functions of the European Parliament’s President

The President of the European Parliament occupies a prominent position in the political leadership and institutional framework of the European Union (EU). The procedure for his/her election grants him/her strong political legitimacy, because it usually implies a bipartisan agreement among the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), or at least between the two largest political groups. In fact, in order to present a nomination, an initiative by a political group or by at least 40 MEPs is required (Rule 15 of the European Parliament’s Rules of Procedure). In order to be elected, an absolute majority of the votes is necessary in the first three ballots, while in the fourth ballot there is a ‘run-off’ between the two candidates who have obtained the highest number of votes in the third ballot (Rule 16).

Beyond the wording of the Rules of Procedure, the election of the European Parliament’s President is the outcome of a political decision that usually involves at least a bipartisan majority of the MEPs and that takes into consideration numerous elements, not least the geopolitical equilibrium among the EU member states. This agreement is eased by the relative brevity of the European Parliament President’s mandate. Namely, since it lasts only half the legislative term – that is, two and a half years (Rule 19), the search for compromises between the two largest European parties on the handover of power becomes easier.¹ Furthermore, this explains why the European Parliament President and the members of the European Parliament’s Bureau may be elected by acclamation ‘if the number of nominations does not exceed the number of seats to be filled’ (Rule 15).

Indeed, the election of Jerzy Buzek, the first European Parliament President after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, was the result of a political settlement at the level of heads of state and government of the EU member states, and was part of negotiations on the appointments of other major institutional posts introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, such as the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP). The choice fell on a politician of prime ministerial rank and, as Jerzy Buzek had been the prime minister of Poland from 1997–2001, this was the first time a European Parliament President originated from the former Eastern Bloc. A similar political settlement was reached when Martin Schulz was re-elected in July 2014. This was the first re-election of a European Parliament President since 1979, and it took place after the European elections of May 2014, in which Martin Schulz was running as the Spitzenkandidat [leading candidate] for the Party of European Socialists. He was re-elected in order to provide a counterweight to new President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and President of the European Council Donald Tusk, both of whom are members of the European People’s Party.

However, in spite of this wide political legitimacy, the European Parliament President enjoys a very limited margin of manoeuvre in internal parliamentary affairs. The political groups strongly condition his/her conduct in the European Parliament and he/she holds almost no power with regard to agenda-setting, except when acting as the Chairperson of the Conference of Presidents. Even as director of all the European Parliament’s activities and administration, the European Parliament President is greatly constrained by the political groups, which usually choose the European Parliament’s Secretary-General, who is elected by the Bureau. As well as electing the Secretary-General, it is the

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3 See the view crediting President Schulz for it, online at http://europeandignitywatch.org/it/day-to-day/detail/article/trading-away-european-democracy-the-european-parliament-and-commission-presidencies.html.
