

The Evolution of the European Council.

Periods of Generations of Leaders

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The Evolution of the European Council. Periods of Generations of Leaders

Following the creation of the European Council in 1974, all generations of European leaders used this institution to deal with concrete problems they were facing, and to help search for opportunities to keep and – where possible – to extend their influence and power over all aspects of the multilevel game. However, the political and economic contexts of their work have changed dramatically, in particular following the historic watershed moment in 1989, and the subsequent entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

Like all attempts to understand historical developments, this paper faces the methodological challenge of dealing with the issues of continuity and trends as well as of significant changes in the activities, agreements and acts of the European Council: Considering that a detailed study of each of the more than 130 summit sessions is not feasible, one solution to this problem is to identify periods in the integration process (see Loth 2014; Marhold 2011; Marhold 2009; Elvert 2006). As contribution to study the history of this key institution I propose to define five periods within the forty years of existence of the European Council. Each of them focuses on generations of leading members in their respective historical contexts.

As a second contribution this paper sets out to describe the institutional career of this institutionalised summitry. It shows an incremental evolution from the first summit in Paris in 1974 until the Lisbon TEU in 2009 in which the institution finally received a full status in the treaty.

Five Generations of Leadership

As a point of departure for identifying periods in the history of the European Council, I present a narrative that stresses the role and influence of generations of leading members of this institution. This approach is based on the assumption that, more than in other EU institutions, personalities and their political weight have had a significant impact on the performance and output of this body.

To stimulate a more intensive debate, I propose to give a ‘label’ to each of the five generations (see Table 1) and a short characterization which highlights features of their potentially history-making role.

Table 1 *Generations of European Leaders*

Years/Phases	‘Generation’	French President	German Chancellor	British Prime Minister	Commission President	President of the European Council (since 2009)
Creation of European Council 1974	Founding Generation	Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974 – 1981)	Helmut Schmidt (1974-1982)	Harold Wilson (1974-1976) James Callaghan (1976-1979)	François-Xavier Ortoli (1973-1977) Roy Jenkins (1977-1981)	
Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989	‘1989’ Generation	François Mitterrand (1981 - 1995)	Helmut Kohl (1982-1998)	Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) John Major (1990-1997)	Gaston Thorn (1981-1985) Jacques Delors (1985-1995)	
„Constitutional Decade“ ¹	New Europe Generation	Jacques Chirac (1995-2007)	Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005)	Tony Blair (1997-2007)	Jacques Santer (1995-1999) Romano Prodi (1999-2004)	
Economic and financial crisis 2008	Double-Crisis Generation	Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012)	Angela Merkel (2005-)	Gordon Brown (2007-2010) David Cameron (2010-)	José Manuel Barroso (2004-2009)	Herman Van Rompuy (2009-2012)
	Post-Crisis Generation	François Hollande (2012-2017(?))	Angela Merkel (2005-2017(?))	David Cameron (2010-2015(?))	José Manuel Barroso (2009-2014) Jean Claude Juncker (2014-2019(?))	Herman Van Rompuy (2012-2014) Donald Tusk (2014-2016/2019(?))

¹ Constitutional Decade: end of 1990s – entry into force of Treaty of Lisbon, (see Chapter Deepening)

Source: Compiled by the author.

The Marks of the Founding Generation: Setting Examples

The first generation of Heads of State or Government was to a large extent identical to the group that had created this institution at the Paris summit of 1974. This group of founding fathers, in particular French President Giscard d’Estaing and German Chancellor Schmidt, shaped programmatic guidelines particularly regarding economic and social issues and opened their agenda to other points of shared interest, such as the fight against terrorism. With the creation of the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1979 this generation also launched a first step in the field of system-making (see Ludlow 1982). The EMS agreement was regarded as the first evidence of the ‘efficacy of the European Council’ (Ludlow 1982:

290). As it was the case also before 1974 with the informal summits, the Franco-German tandem proved to be dominating. Moreover Chancellor Schmidt demonstrated 'arguably the first major act of German leadership in the history of the European Community' (Ludlow 1982: 290).

Pessimistic voices, characterised as a time of 'Eurosclerosis', overshadowed the final years of this generation. It was the result of a gloomy economic prognosis following the second oil price increase in 1979 and in particular of the slow to non-existent reactions to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. At the end of 1970s, this group of leaders also faced increasing tensions in East–West relations due to a military re-armament of the Warsaw Pact.

The 'Generation of 1989': History-Making Agreements

The following generation could be characterised as the generation of '1989' as this group played a central role in dealing with the events in that year. For this generation three phases could be distinguished: activities before '1989', the immediate reactions to the fall of the Berlin Wall leading to the agreement on the Maastricht Treaty and, thirdly, activities in the follow-up to these events and decisions leading to a 'new Europe'.

In this context a special focus has to be put again on the Franco-German tandem. In contrast to their predecessors they did not claim any special expertise in economic matters, but were more interested in overall strategies for their own countries. Like their predecessors, both perceived the European Council as the arena through which to govern their part of Europe (see for Kohl Schwarz 2012: 619-855; for Mitterand Attali 2005: 289-342).

Concerning the EU polity and policies both leaders had different objectives, which finally converged to a considerable degree. Chancellor Kohl always explained his engagement for Europe through his wartime experiences as an adolescent. Referring to 'European' statements of the first German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, he claimed that it is in the vital interest of the Federal Republic to be firmly anchored in the West and especially in the European construction. Chancellor Kohl propagated the federal *finalité* of EU polity, and in line with such objectives, he engaged with the prospect of a 'Political Union' besides and

beyond the EMU. Kohl and Mitterrand each liked to pursue matters of symbolic political significance in order to foster the Franco-German *amitié*, as a famous photograph of 1984 demonstrates showing the two leaders hand-in-hand at a commemoration of the World War I battle of Verdun.

Kohl's counterpart President Mitterrand initially followed a set of distinctly socialist policies. In a fundamental turn, Mitterrand aimed at economic integration via the EC as a way to strengthen the French economy. This strategy like those of his predecessors was also motivated by the wish to keep the French economy competitive with respect to the economic strengths of Germany (see for example Lequesne 2013). In line with this objective, one of Mitterrand's major interests was to reduce the influence of the Deutsche Mark. Such a motivation was then highly instrumental for the French President's ultimate attitudes towards German unification and his strategies towards the creation of the monetary union in the Maastricht Treaty.

In this generation, the President of the Commission Delors (1985-1995) played a major role as norm entrepreneur for successful initiatives and facilitator of consensus formation. His influence in the European Council was however dependent on the historical context: he, in particular, used the opportunity to help Mitterrand and Kohl to shape French-German compromises and to push them through the European Council.

Besides issues related to security threads, this generation put high priority on Community issues. In contrast to their predecessors and against the resistance of some members, particularly against the UK, the majority of members took the courage to convene the first IGC in order to revise the Rome Treaties (Milan 1985) and then concluded the first amendments to them. With the Single European Act they launched a process, which would set a precedent for consecutive treaty-making until the Lisbon Treaties. With this agreement the European Council started its career as the constitutional architect.

Reacting to the '1989' Crisis: the Making of the Maastricht Treaty

For this generation the history-making part of their performance is largely due to their reaction to the events of 1989 and the way they used this challenge to accelerate the European construction. The fundamental change of Europe's political landscape is

symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. It was the key event of a longer process, which then led to the end of the German and European division, to the fading away of the bipolar confrontation between the superpowers and to the collapse of both the Soviet Union and the Yugoslavian Republic.

In the first days the crisis management of the European Council is widely regarded as having been poor. The fall of the wall on 9 November 1989 and with it the 'threat' of German reunification caused deep shock throughout Europe. This fundamental event deeply affected the context and the driving forces behind (West) European integration. The long historical shadow of German aggression worried all European leaders including most members of the European Council, even those who Kohl considered as 'old friends' (Kohl 2005: 1015). For some weeks the process towards German unification turned out to be the deepest crisis of European integration so far. In a provocative (geo-)political assessment, a leading US academic predicted the end of 'a long peace' (since 1945) and a return to a confrontational 'multipolar system' in Europe with the no longer divided Germany assuming once more a 'major power status' (Mearsheimer 1990: 7). As a consequence the reunited Germany would even acquire 'a secure nuclear deterrent' to balance other powers (ibid. 1990: 8).

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall the French President Mitterrand as chairperson of the European Council in the second half of 1989, called a special informal meeting in Paris on 18 November 1989, and a regular meeting of the Heads of State or Government took place in Strasbourg on 8/9 December 1989. The exchange of views on 'the German question' was highly confrontational with a high degree of hostility shown towards their German colleague (Van Middelaar 2013: 182-186; Attali 2005: 313-341; Kohl 2005: 1010-1015). After considerable dispute, the national leaders declared to 'seek the strengthening of peace in Europe in which the German people will regain its unity through free self-determination' (Strasbourg, December 1989) and for which they formulated respective pre-conditions such as outlining that '[t]his process should take place peacefully and democratically' and that it 'has to be placed in the perspective of European integration' (Strasbourg, December 1989).

In sessions during the Irish Presidency in the first half of 1990 (especially Dublin, April 1990) the Heads of State or Government then officially accepted the unification process and laid down guidelines for a speedy integration of the new *Länder* into the Economic Community

(see also Kohl 2007: 95). The Community institutions were then able to rapidly achieve this first 'Eastern' enlargement.

Following some initial hesitations regarding the consequences of German unification, the European Council initiated proceedings for an IGC to take place on EMU (Strasbourg, December 1989) and convened – on insistence of Chancellor Kohl – a further IGC to discuss Political Union (Dublin, June 1990).

The Dutch Presidency in the second half of 1991 guided a process leading to an agreement in Maastricht on 9/10 December 1991. In one of their 'nights of the long knives' the 'generation of 1989' concluded a broad and highly complex package deal. The key agreement of the Maastricht Treaty was the fundamental decision to transfer a significant part of monetary sovereignty to EU institutions, including to a yet to be created European Central Bank (ECB).

To understand this history-making decision of the 'generation of 1989' in the Maastricht Treaty several explanations are offered that are not mutually exclusive (see for example Loth 2013b; (P.) Ludlow 2013). One principal line of argument refers to the role of the European Council as the arena for 'integrative balancing' among Member States. Following such an analysis, the German government under Chancellor Kohl agreed to 'surrender' the Deutsche Mark as the price to be paid to its partners accepting German unification (see for example Van Middelaar 2013: 185; Werts 2008: 197). Particularly the French President Mitterrand linked German reunification to a deepening of Europe. He reportedly threatened Chancellor Kohl that he would only approve the reunification plans if Kohl agreed to an IGC on monetary union (and to two other preconditions), saying that '[o]u l'unité allemande se fait après l'unité européenne, ou vous trouverez contre vous la triple alliance [France, Grande-Bretagne, Russie], et cela terminera par une guerre' (as quoted by Attali 1995: 354; see also Genscher 1995: 677-680). So Mitterrand argued that if German unification was realised before further European integration was achieved, France, Great Britain and the USSR would take up a position against Germany which would culminate in a war (Attali 1995: 354). Following such a line of argument, the Maastricht provisions on the EMU then 'served the recovery of France's power, albeit on a shared basis, in the sphere of monetary policy' (Sutton 2011: 270). Thus, German unification and the birth of the single currency are seen

as 'intimately intertwined' (Marsh 2009: 133). Even though the French and the other members of the eurozone had to accept traditional German concepts for constructing the EMU, they were able to effectively neutralise what Mitterrand described as the 'nuclear weapon' of Germany (Mitterrand as quoted by Attali 1995: 95): '[B]y bringing the D-mark and the Bundesbank under international control, the new European monetary order would hold in check Germany's emerging muscle' (Marsh 2009: 132).

Less common is the view that the monetary union also entailed large (geo-)political benefits for the Federal Republic itself. Beyond an intensive internal debate about economic costs and benefits for Germany, this argument stresses that such a deep-rooted integration helped the reunited Germany to prevent a fall-back into an isolated position in the centre of Europe, the unfavourable '*Mittellage*' encircled by a hostile alliance, as Mitterrand had predicted. In this view, besides and beyond economic objectives, the creation of the EMU was again a project motivated by major national interests of European states.

This analysis of a causal relationship between the process towards German unification and the creation of the monetary union is disputed. An alternative explanation stresses that significant steps towards EMU had already been taken before 1989, especially through setting this objective already in The Hague 1969, and a strong German driven initiative in Hanover in 1988. The creation of EMU would thus also be seen as the product of functional 'policy spill-over' (Ludlow 2013: 17), that means as a logical follow-up to the internal market as agreed upon in the SEA.

In a third view the European Council's agreement on EMU is considered as a further step towards a federal *finalité* of the EU polity. The way the European Council concluded the Maastricht Treaty could thus also be classified as another example of the Monnet method, namely to achieve political integration via economic strategies. In this line of argument, the European Council once more played a role as a reluctant step by step federator.

In view of this controversy, there seems to be a shared view that the fundamental (geo-)political changes in Europe at least pushed this generation of leaders to agree more swiftly to this history-making act. German unification offered an opportunity to move forward

towards objectives for the EU polity which had been a long time on the agenda of the European Council.

The New Europe Generation

In the middle of the nineties, a new group of members entered the European Council. This group of leaders had to deal with the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty and the consequences of the (geo-)political changes in Europe – particularly in Central Europe and in the former Yugoslavia. They adopted several decisions regarding the conditions and the procedures for accessions and then concluded also the final agreement on the ‘big bang’ enlargement in Copenhagen (2002). This history-making session led to the accession of ten countries in 2004. In this period, the European Council also awarded candidate status to a further group of countries, including Turkey (Helsinki, December 1999) and the Balkan countries (Thessaloniki, June 2003).

Widening pushed the European Council to take further steps to deepen the EU system at the same time. These efforts to improve the ‘absorption (or integration) capacity’ (Copenhagen criteria 1993) led to what I call the ‘constitutional decade’. As one step, the European Council concluded the Nice Treaty (Nice 2000) and declared that the way was open for the ‘Big Bang Enlargement’ to take place (Declaration 23 of the Nice summit).

Apparently unsatisfied with the work completed by the European Council in Nice, this group of leaders convened the ‘Convention on the Future of Europe’ and after some small revisions and amendments signed the ‘Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe’ in Rome in 2004. As the national referenda on this treaty received negative responses in France and the Netherlands, the following generation then had to deal with further steps for institutional reforms from 2005 onwards.

Apart from the range of issues related to the EU itself, this generation of members also had to react to demanding challenges from outside of the EU. The wars in the disintegrating Federation of Yugoslavia were of major concern for Europe. . Politicians as well as the public were disappointed about the collective failure to guarantee a process towards peace and democracy in their geographic neighbourhood. As a consequence of their frustration, this generation launched an initiative calling for the pursuit of more common activities in security matters. The lead was taken by French President Chirac and UK Prime Minister Blair.

In their St. Malo declaration they agreed to aim at 'the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces[...] in order to respond to international crises' (as cited in: Chaillot Papers 2001: 8). Based on their agreement and with an increasing, though still limited, engagement of Germany, the European Council sessions in Cologne and Helsinki in 1999 launched the 'European security and defence policy' (ESDP). With this initiative the European Council paved the way for a differentiated set of military and/or civilian EU missions in several regions of the world. The Lisbon TEU formulated respective provisions in the articles for a 'common security and defence policy' (CSDP).

Whereas Blair, Chirac and Schröder paved the way for limited EU military intervention and activity in particular in reaction to the Kosovo war, they failed to achieve an EU-wide consensus on the US-led intervention in Iraq. The US government's plan to occupy Iraq led in 'an immensely divisive period' (Blair 2010: 532) to a deep cleavage inside the EU. As a way to reduce the risk of similar splits in the future, the European Council adopted the 'European Security Strategy' in 2003.

As a follow-up to the history-making decision of the Maastricht Treaty in 1999, the European Council initiated the era of the Euro. Leading members of this generation apparently followed a (geo-)political strategy for establishing a core group of members. This group interpreted the economic yardstick for the membership in the eurozone - the so-called Maastricht criteria, with high degree of flexibility. They accepted countries to be part of the monetary union, which did not fulfil all necessary conditions.

Overall, the 'New Europe' generation of the European Council reacted to major challenges from the post-1989 developments in Europe, and from implementing the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty. In incremental steps they took significant decisions regarding widening and deepening of the EU system. They were responsible for undertaking significant steps in the constitutional decade but they failed to get their main concepts and overall visions ratified.

The Dual Crises Generation

In the middle of the first decade of the third millennium a new generation of Heads of State or Government entered the European Council. With the Big Bang Enlargement of 2004, chief national executives from ten new countries became members of this institution. Besides, the composition of the Franco-German tandem changed. After losing the French referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, President Chirac was seen as a lame duck with respect to European affairs. His successor Sarkozy (2007-2012) pursued an ambitious policy in and through the European Council. He found a partner in German Chancellor Merkel, who came to power in 2005.

This generation had to deal with different crises during two partly overlapping phases. In their first years, they led the European Council through a lengthy and burdensome process to overcome the EU's internal constitutional crisis after the failed referenda on the Constitutional Treaty. At the end of the constitutional decade they succeeded in adopting the Lisbon Treaties, which entered into force in 2009.

In the history books, this generation will however most probably be considered and evaluated in terms of their activities in reacting to the economic crisis following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and then with the various crises in the eurozone from 2010 onwards. The European Council and later the Euro Summit agreed on acts which in EU language were declared 'unavoidable', although they had been 'unthinkable' before 2008. In an often publicized way the Franco-German tandem took the lead to persuade their generation to agree to a set of drastic measures. This form of collective leadership was apparently acceptable to other members. In the relationship between the two, the German economic weight and resources turned out to become more important leading to a 'Franco-German asymmetry' (Krotz and Schild 2013: 208-209).

In spite of the close cooperation in stabilising the eurozone, this generation failed to agree on common military actions in reaction to crises in the geographic neighbourhood. Confronted with the consequences of the so-called 'Arab spring' – particularly in relation to the military intervention in Libya or the arms embargo for Syria – the group of national

leaders was divided. Chancellor Merkel in particular was reluctant to follow French initiatives. Even with extended procedural opportunities offered by the new CSDP provisions of the Lisbon TEU, this group of national leaders again could not agree on one coherent EU position in matters of high politics.

The Post (?) -Crisis Generation

In 2013 the challenges of immediate crisis management became less demanding for the European Council. Some reform plans for a genuine Economic and Monetary Union were postponed (December 2013). Moreover, the Franco-German tandem changed with the election of French President Hollande. The close personal cooperation in the relation between Paris and Berlin was at first interrupted (see for example Lequesne 2013: 44-48). The new composition of the leading personnel led to '[c]hanging Franco-German [d]ynamics' (Dinan 2013a: 90-94). A French led coalition of southern European countries did not prove to be stable and powerful enough to counterbalance the economic weight of the Northern countries. For the French President the 'margin of manoeuvre for Paris *vis-à-vis* Berlin remains limited in concrete policy terms' (Lequesne 2013: 48). As it was the case with former Franco-German couples it took Merkel and Hollande some time to find a way to work together, which they finally did when dealing with the crisis of the Ukraine.

With the results of the German election in autumn 2013 future historians might characterize the period as the 'long decade of Merkel'. Her role in dealing with the Ukraine crisis reinforces this expectation.

The Institutional Career: Incremental Evolution up to a Full Treaty Status

In spite of dramatic upheavals in the history of Europe, subsequent generations of Heads of State or Government changed the written provisions for their body in a slow and quite limited way. Only with the provisions of the Lisbon TEU they completed an incremental evolution towards full treaty status. The Lisbon TEU led to the 'institutional consecration of

the European Council' (Rittelmeyer 2014). However, also after 2009, the crisis generation adapted new formal modifications by adopting organisational rules for the Euro Summit.

Of major significance for formulating the European Council's role was the 'Solemn Declaration' of Stuttgart of 1983 (see Box 4.1). With this text, the concerned Heads of State or Government reacted to the period of 'eurosclerosis' at the end of the 1970s. For the first time the Heads of State or Government enumerated a differentiated set of important tasks, fixing in writing some of the already practised functions of the European Council. These formulations had long-lasting effects as some of them were taken up in the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty and again in the Lisbon TEU. The formulations signalled an overall leadership role for the European Council.

For putting later treaty revisions into context it is also useful to revisit the 'Draft Treaty Establishing the European Union' passed by the European Parliament in 1984. This document was inspired and largely shaped by Spinelli, the main representative of the federalist school (Dinan 2006: 302; Burgess 1989: 30). In view of this heritage of its initiator, it might be a surprise that the text of the EP does not downgrade the overall role of the European Council (see Box 4.2). The EP's document is close to major elements of the Council model. Some relevant provisions of this Draft Treaty were ahead of their time. The EP's suggestions were not immediately taken up in the following Intergovernmental Conference which led to the Single European Act, but these proposals later served as point of reference for subsequent treaty revisions.

The Insertion into Primary Law: from the Single European Act via the Maastricht Treaty to the Nice Treaty

As one of their initial steps of system-making the 'generation of 1989' concluded the SEA. In this text the High Contracting Parties also codified the European Council for the first time into primary law (Box 4.3). It is worthwhile to note that the legal provisions inserted this body in Title I the 'Common Provisions', separately from the 'Treaty of the European Communities'.

This first insertion into primary law was partly confirmed but mainly extended in the formulations of the Maastricht Treaty. This comprehensive treaty revision redesigned the Union's general constitutional framework and especially its institutional architecture. It baptised this political system as the 'European Union'.

As for the European Council, this treaty and its further amendments up to the Lisbon TEU laid down several provisions for its institutional features. The following generation basically confirmed the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty and partly amended them through the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Nice. The revised Treaties extended the legal basis for the activities of the European Council. The number of references increased from 13 (Maastricht TEU) to 27 (Nice TEU). Following the SEA, the High Contracting Parties kept the European Council in the treaty chapter of 'common provisions'. Within the so-called temple structure of the EU system the European Council was positioned at the roof as part of the 'single institutional framework' (Art.43 TEU (Nice)) dealing with all three pillars of the Union's policy areas and different modes of governance. The European Council, however, was not enumerated in Art.7 of the 'Treaty on the European Community' (TEC), which fixed the list of EC institutions. From this exclusion it followed that the activities, agreements and acts of the European Council could not be subjected to any judicial review by the European Court of Justice (Art.46 TEU (Nice)). This legal provision implied that the European Council was located outside the checks and balances of the institutional architecture.

Via the Constitutional Convention to the Treaty of Lisbon

In the constitutional decade from the end of the 1990s to the entry into force of the Lisbon TEU and TFEU in 2009, the provisions of the European Council were partly confirmed, partly reformulated and partly extended. With the Laeken agreement, the European Council had installed a 'Convention on the Future of Europe' (Laeken, December 2001). This unusual treaty-framing body formulated proposals for the political functions and institutional features of the European Council. Particularly Giscard d'Estaing, President of the Convention, and the mastermind behind the creation of the European Council in 1974, submitted a far-reaching proposal. Of specific importance was the controversial debate about the installation and the functions of a permanent President of the European Council. Following a draft by Giscard d'Estaing and after an intense dispute in the Convention

between larger and smaller states, the Convention agreed on a text based on a Franco-German proposal. The relevant formulations were confirmed in the subsequent IGC leading to the official signing of the 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe'.

The provisions on the European Council then survived the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referenda, as the following IGC leading to the Lisbon TEU and TFEU left the articles on the European Council untouched.

After three decades of existence, the articles of the Lisbon Treaties mark considerable changes to basic institutional features compared to the pre-existing legal provisions of the Nice Treaty. The High Contracting Parties conveyed a full treaty status to the European Council (Art.13 TEU) and extended its legal empowerments. For decisions with a legal impact on third parties the acts of the European Council are subject to rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union (Art.263 TFEU). However, by keeping the treaty provisions related to functions vague, the Heads of State or Government kept a large range of flexibility to govern the EU system as a principal from the top.

Adapting to the Crisis: The Euro Summit

Concluding the Lisbon Treaties at the end of the constitutional decade, the Heads of State or Government of this generation displayed treaty-making fatigue. They stated '[t]he Lisbon Treaty provides the Union with a stable and lasting institutional framework. We expect no change in the foreseeable future' (December 2007).

However, already in the first years of implementing the Lisbon TEU, members of the crisis generation created a new institutionalised form. Pursuing the collective management of the economic and sovereign debt crisis and following intense pressures from French President Sarkozy, the Heads of State or Government of the eurozone created the 'Euro Summit' and agreed on a respective political and administrative infrastructure for this set-up.

Conclusion: Patterns of Continuity

The historical overview, as presented here, leads to some preliminary conclusions. One observation points at the ongoing engagement of national leaders. Although the Union's political leaders were faced with quite different challenges in political and economic contexts over the past four decades, all generations of Heads of State or Government have allocated major significance to their institution.

Although the number of members of the European Council has tripled between 1974 and 2013 and the scope of interests grew considerably, the Heads of State or Government have continued to deal with problems on their agenda via and through the European Council. The opportunity structure offered by this institution apparently proved adequate. Despite the often difficult and labour-intensive process, they did not grow tired of their institution. The limited changes made to the institutional features of the European Council point at a certain satisfaction with the set-up.

For the members such a hybrid set of political functions and institutional features has opened and to a large degree maintained a flexible range of activities, actions and agreements. For the multilevel players, the European Council has remained the key institution.

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