

Forget Brussels bureaucrats: national leaders run Europe

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Here's a ritual that has emerged over the past decade. Leaders of 28 countries pull up in limos outside the imaginatively named Europa building in Brussels, where the European Council is meeting. They speak platitudes to the TV cameras, then greet their colleagues, sometimes with a kiss or a fist bump. They are on first-name terms: even the rookie prime minister of a mini-state must find the courage to call the German chancellor "Angela". Then, behind closed doors, over late-night dinner, they work out a compromise: whether Greece gets a bailout, say, or Britain is allowed to delay Brexit. This scene — described by Luuk van Middelaar in his new book on the EU, Alarums & Excursions — is what power in today's Europe looks like.

There's been much overheated talk that next week's elections for the European parliament will decide the EU's future. But, in fact, even if populist parties surge, the union will muddle on. In recent years, we have improvised our way into an EU that works for most Europeans of our generation. We now have what Charles de Gaulle called a "Europe of nations", in which the big decisions are made not by Brussels bureaucrats, or the European parliament, but by national leaders acting in concert.

The Europe of nations has arisen unplanned and largely unannounced. It's often drowned out by the ceaseless noisy European squabble between federalists and leavers. However, both those groups have been marginalised. They still provoke each other daily with their pronouncements — such as the federalist fantasy of a European army — but neither has the clout to get its way.

The federalists lack numbers. Just 14 per cent of European citizens feel "very attached" to the EU, according to the latest Eurobarometer survey; four times as many feel "very attached" to their country. No wonder Emmanuel Macron's efforts to strengthen Brussels' powers vis-à-vis member states found so little support beyond France, says Insead's Douglas Webber, author of a 2018 book called *European Disintegration?*.

Meanwhile, on the leave side, Brexit has become such a mess that "the membership question is off the table", says Brigid Laffan of the European University Institute in Florence. Nigel Farage's Brexit party is the only large leave movement contesting the coming elections. Two-thirds of Europeans now feel their country has benefited from membership, the highest proportion since 1983, says Eurobarometer.

Shut off from the federalist-versus-leave sideshow, the EU has become ever more active. This is driven by the growing role of national leaders. They held only six European summits between 1961 and 1973 and, as late as 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon stipulated just two meetings every six months. But then came the string of crises over the euro, Ukraine, refugees and Brexit. Now the European Council meets six or seven times a year, peaking at 10 in 2015. In addition, the Eurogroup of finance ministers usually meets monthly, and the Foreign Affairs Council of foreign ministers at least that, plus teleconferences. The EU has progressed from making rules to dealing with events, says Van Middelaar.

Though national politicians commute to Brussels to represent their nation states, this isn't old-style nationalism. Probably never before have different countries anywhere worked together on such an everyday basis. It's a genuine concert of nations. The biggest states speak loudest in the European Council — at crucial moments, the whole room literally looks at Merkel — but Ireland and Malta get heard too. "The Union is not a state but a union of states," concludes Van Middelaar.

Brexiters who rail against "unelected Brussels bureaucrats" and the "meddling European superstate" haven't absorbed this reality. In fact, most Europeans who "meddle" in British affairs are elected national leaders. This became obvious over Brexit: the European Commission handled negotiations only as long as national leaders agreed, but once the controversial question of extending Brexit came up, the Council had to settle it. Finally, Macron made sure the extension was short. Similarly, during the Greek crisis it was Germany's finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, and not the Commission, who pushed for massive privatisation of Greek assets. The European parliament watched almost powerless.

The only big recent federalist advances have been made to complete the main federalist project of the previous generation: the euro. That has given us a mighty European central bank, the European stability mechanism and something like banking union.

Otherwise, federalists look on in frustration. They worry about the Commission shrinking into a mere bureaucracy charged with executing the Council's decisions. The *Spitzenkandidaten* of Europe's main political movements united during their debate in Florence this month to grumble about the Council. "A common enemy", Liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt called it.

There is indeed a risk that national leaders pushing national interests will kill the EU by a thousand cuts. Yet national leaders making decisions together is much more democratic than a union run by the Commission technocrats. If citizens don't like the decisions, they can vote out the leaders. Here is the mix of nationalism and Europe that works for our generation.

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