

The 'Trio Presidency' of the Council of the European Union: Towards More Continuity?

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Abstract: *This article addresses the Council presidency trio mechanism codified in the Lisbon Treaty with a particular focus on the continuity question in the Council's decision-making framework. The aim of the article is to explore the effect of the formalised trio programme on continuity in the Council's decision-making process. To this end, the article looks at how the trio mechanism has evolved over time and how it functions in practice.*

While some analysts have been sceptical about the usefulness of the trio programme, these findings demonstrate that the launch of this institutional tool has improved the continuity in the Council's decision-making process. The positive effect on continuity results from three main factors—the trio programme as a formal tool in the Council's institutional tool-kit; the existence of political will among the presidencies to cooperate; and, lastly, the guiding role of the Council Secretariat. The article presents evidence gathered by tracing the preparations of joint trio programmes from 2007 to 2012.

Keywords: *continuity, Council of the EU, decision-making process, rotating presidency, trio mechanism, trio programme*

1. Introduction

The Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers has existed in one form or another since the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (1951). Initially, members held the presidency of the Council for periods of three months (ECSC, 1951). The Treaty of Rome (1957) fixed the presidency for a six-month term (TEEC, 1957, Art. 146) held in turn by each member of the Council, in alphabetical order. While the six-month rotation placed the Council members on an equal footing for this particular function, it carried the cost of weakening the continuity in the Council's work. Furthermore, this cost grew over time, for reasons that will be elaborated, creating a need for a mechanism to maintain continuity in the decision-making processes.

The Presidency transforms a national actor to a supranational European role that is characterised more by its implied responsibilities than by its legal powers that are almost entirely of procedural nature. The passage of decades has brought increases in the field of European Community (later Union) activity, successive enlargements, greater workload, increased complexity of decision-making and greater needs for leadership in the Council. One simple illustration can be taken from the Council's role in the legislative process. In the early days of the Communities, it was conceivable, and it often happened, that a Commission proposal could be negotiated and concluded during one Presidency of the Council. However, as the membership of the Council increased, and as the European Parliament progressively acquired co-legislative powers with the Council, it became increasingly unusual for one, or even two, presidencies to conclude a proposal. Today, the average time required for a first-reading agreement between the Council and European Parliament in the Ordinary Legislative Procedure is about 15 months—in other words, three Council presidencies. It has also been observed that where a change of Presidency brings about changes of priorities, this can hinder the progress of negotiations (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006), hence the need to find a mechanism to compensate for the “discontinuity effect”.

The concern for continuity—a consistent identification and pursuit of priorities in the Council's legislative processes—started already in the 1970s, when ideas of longer-term presidency were first raised (Mangenot, 2011). However, it was not until the Lisbon Treaty that the EU had a legally based mechanism to reinforce cooperation between Council presidencies. The Treaties refer to it as “pre-established groups of three Member States for a period of 18 months” (EC, 2009a), more commonly known as “the trio”, even if this term is not used in the legal texts. This mechanism provides the framework for three successive

presidencies to cooperate with each other more closely and in an organised manner. In practice, this cooperation is almost entirely limited to drawing up an 18-month programme of the Council, known popularly as the “trio programme”¹.

Attention to the presidency trio in academic literature has been growing. There are studies analysing the trio presidency by concrete case studies (Mazzucelli & Dragomaca, 2009; Udovič & Svetličič, 2012; Batory & Puetter, 2011; 2013). Other works have concentrated on the institutional governance issues, assessing the trio from the leadership perspective (Mazzucelli, 2008) or investigating its co-ordination methods (Viera & Lange, 2012; Jensen & Nedergaard, 2014). In addition, some authors have analysed the changed role of the rotating presidency after the Lisbon Treaty (Drieskens, 2011; Warntjen, 2013a,b; Dinan, 2013).

The aim of this article is to analyse the effect of the formalised trio programme on the continuity in the decision-making process of the Council, as organised by the Presidency. To examine this in depth, the paper looked at how the trio evolved and also at how it functions in practice. It is argued that the launch of a trio programme has increased the continuity in the decision-making process in the post-Lisbon Council framework, provided there exists political will among the presidencies to cooperate. By providing insights into how the trio mechanism functions in practice, this article aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on the EU Council, as well as offering practical information to future presidencies on how trio joint programmes have been prepared in the past.

In order to explain the continuity in the Council decision-making, the presidency is considered as the primary actor in steering the deliberative process regarding legislative proposals from the Council's side (Warntjen, 2013a). The main explanatory factors, which need to be present to generate positive effects on continuity are: 1) a structural factor such as a formalised trio programme surrounded by formal and informal framework of institutional rules. The continuity-improving elements of the formal programme are intensive interaction among the actors involved and constraint on the presidencies to pursue short-term national interests; 2) political will among presidencies to cooperate with each other, keeping in mind the behavioural aspects of the conventional presidency role as service provider for the Council, process facilitator and a consensus-builder. The office of the Presidency is considered to be political as it affects the relationship between the individual member state, the collectivity of the member states in the Council and the EU institutions (Christiansen, 2006).

¹ This term is open to misinterpretation because the programme is the *Council's* programme, rather than the programmed ambitions of the three presidency authors.

Additionally, presuming that institutions operate as intervening variables between the interaction of actors and corresponding outcomes (Knill, 2001, p. 23), the role of the Council General Secretariat is perceived as a process facilitator in the Council's machinery. The Council Secretariat has a high reputation as an objective institutional player and therefore it can be a successful mediator helping to work out the compromises between delegations (Raik, 2011). The Council Secretariat's support and advice for presidencies, in different degrees, is needed in order to strike a balance between institutional and political factors.

The analysis has been carried out by process tracing method and it covers the preparatory processes of the trio programme during the years 2007–2012.

In the next section, the article reviews the evolution of the Council presidency, highlighting the milestones on the route to setting up the current trio mechanism. The subsequent section presents a detailed tracing of the preparations of the trio programme followed by a qualitative analysis and an interpretation of the observations. The final part sums up the main findings of the research and looks at possible future developments regarding the continuity aspect of the trio framework.

2. Situation before the Lisbon Treaty

In the early decades, the presidency of the Council was viewed as a simple technical function, primarily of logistical nature, shared by rotation among national administrations. The new developments in the 1970s—the creation of European political cooperation (EPC)² and the institutionalisation of the European Council in 1975 increased the burden on the presidency and put it in a more visible and important position. During the seventies, the issue of discontinuity in the Council was acknowledged, particularly in the foreign policy area, which was in those times handled strictly in an intergovernmental format parallel to the European Community. The first attempts to improve continuity in the Council were made in 1980s. In the foreign policy field (EPC), the format of “troika” consisting of the current, preceding and following presidencies was put in use in 1981 (Mangenot, 2011). Under Council Secretary General Niels Ersbøll, the need for more continuity between successive presidencies was recognised by the Council Secretariat being directed to assist the Council and particularly the presidency in accomplishing its tasks (Westlake & Galloway, 2004).

² European Political Cooperation was informally launched in 1970 and formally enshrined only in the Single European Act in 1987.

Prior to the Single European Act (SEA, 1986), the European Parliament's (EP) input and influence in policy- and law-making was limited. In legislative matters, the Council could generally adopt a Commission proposal following a simple, non-binding consultation of the EP. The SEA introduced a legislative cooperation procedure between the Council and the EP that increased the parliamentary leverage in the negotiations, made the legislative procedures more complex and, in reality, prolonged the length of the legislative negotiations. As Sherrington (2000, p. 21) has well explained, EU policy-making practices underwent a "cultural shift" whereby the Council had to pay increased attention to the EP and, in the process, the rotating Presidency became the Council's principal contact point for the EP.

The next treaties, Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1997), made further elaborations and added complexity to the legislative procedures. Maastricht revised the cooperation procedure to create a co-decision procedure that tipped the negotiating balance further towards the EP as an equal partner to the Council. This had many far-reaching implications including, for the purpose of this analysis, a prolongation of legislative negotiations compared with the simple consultation procedure. As far as the rotating Council Presidency is concerned, this required greater coordination and continuity between presidencies since negotiations increasingly extended over a longer time.

In parallel with these developments in its legislative processes during the 1990s, the tempo of enlargements of the EU was also increasing. The four previous enlargements since 1958 had been a gradual inclusion of states having a profile relatively similar to the original membership—Denmark, Ireland and UK (1973), Greece (1981), Portugal and Spain (1986), Austria, Finland and Sweden (1995). However, following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, EU (and NATO) membership became the immediate goal of many newly-independent Central and Eastern European states. Eight former "Eastern bloc" countries, together with Malta and Cyprus, brought a "Big Bang" enlargement onto the horizon, in which the number of Member States would almost double. The EU, in fact, expanded to 25 members in 2004, to 27 members in 2007 and, later, to 28 members in 2013. For the purposes of the specific discussion in this paper, this introduced questions about the rotating Council Presidency. In the debate, questions were raised about the stability and continuity of the Council's work in a situation where, under the existing system, a Member State would exercise the presidency function at an interval of up to 14 years. Fundamental alternatives were explored, such as extending the duration of the presidency beyond six months or, indeed, examining the merits of permanent presidencies.

These issues were addressed in two fora. Firstly, there were conclusions agreed by the European Council in Helsinki (EC, 1999) and Seville (EC, 2002). Secondly, the issues featured in the Convention to prepare the Constitutional Treaty (2002–2003) and the subsequent Intergovernmental Conference, leading eventually to the Lisbon Treaty (2007). As a result, an institutional balance was finally found in arrangements that were a combination of permanent presidencies (European Council and Foreign Affairs Council) plus a continuation of the rotating six-monthly presidency of the Council with a reinforcement of continuity through arrangements that we now know as the “trio”.

2.1 European Council conclusions and their implementation

In Helsinki (1999), the European Council placed emphasis on increased cooperation between successive presidencies. In Seville (2002), it initiated a three-year strategic multiannual programme and an annual operational programme. Seville added the notion of distinguishing medium-term policy strategy from the short-term work-programme, whereas the notion of continuity was common to both decisions.

Three-year strategic programme was produced only once, covering the period from January 2004 to December 2006 (the presidencies of Ireland, Netherlands, Luxembourg, UK, Austria, and Finland). The annual operational programme was executed four times: Greece and Italy (2003), Ireland and Netherlands (2004), Luxembourg and United Kingdom (2005), Austria and Finland (2006).

2.2 The Constitutional Convention led to the Treaty of Lisbon

By 2005, the debate in the Convention culminated in a draft Constitutional Treaty. When the Constitutional Treaty was rejected in referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, the Union entered a period of great uncertainty. As a way forward, a substantial part of the Treaty was re-packaged as the Lisbon Treaty (signed in December 2007). However, in the midst of the reflection period following the referenda in France and Netherlands, Germany proposed during its 2006 Council presidency to move ahead on certain ideas in the Seville conclusions that were developed uncontroversially in the Constitutional Treaty (Culley *et al.*, 2012). This was the idea to have a three-presidency common programme containing a strategic overview and an operational work programme. Later, these provisions were taken consequently over in the Lisbon Treaty.

According to the legislative basis of the “trio presidency” in the Lisbon Treaty, the Council presidency, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs configuration,

“shall be held by pre-established groups of three Member States for a period of 18 months. The groups shall be made up on a basis of equal rotation among the Member States, taking into account their diversity and geographical balance within the Union” (EC, 2012).

Comparing the provisions in Lisbon Treaty with the Constitutional Treaty, the changes were minor. Lisbon added a stipulation that other members of the group “shall assist the chair in all its responsibilities on the basis of a common programme” (EC, 2012). Moreover, an opening was added whereby, additionally, “members of the team may decide alternative arrangements among themselves” (EC, 2012).

This opening provides a basis for the trio to operate the “team presidency” system earlier explored in the Convention. This system envisaged the possibility that the trio would agree to assign tasks to each of its members for the full 18-month period.

3. Applying the Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty set down concrete legal provisions following the policy formulated by the European Council after more than a decade of reflections on the role of the presidency. However, the Council needed to adopt more detailed rules on how the arrangements would be applied in practice. The Council did this by amendments to its Rules of Procedure (Art. 2 (6)). In doing so, it limited itself to setting down the process for drawing up the joint programme for 18 months. The Rules of Procedure (Art. 2(6)) state that “every 18 months, the pre-established group of three Member States holding the presidency prepare a draft programme of Council activities for that period. The programme is prepared with the President of the Foreign Affairs Council and in close cooperation with the Commission and the President of the European Council”.

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, there have been in total three trio programmes drawn up. Poland, Denmark, Cyprus (2011–2012); Ireland, Lithuania, Greece (2013–2014); and Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg (2014–2015). Concerning earlier programmes, the trio programme of Spain, Belgium and Hungary (2010–2011) was drawn up before the entry into force of Lisbon Treaty, but executed after—that is, it was applied from 1 January 2010. However, resulting from the German initiative in 2006 to implement the essence of the Seville Conclusions and the Constitutional Treaty, one can include in the

analysis two so-called “trio-style” programmes prior to January 2010: Germany, Portugal, Slovenia (2007–2008) and France, Czech Republic, Sweden (2008–2009).

Thus there have been a total of six joint “trio” programmes since 2007, even though they were drawn up in different contexts. It is worth remarking that the working method to draw up the first programme (Germany–Portugal–Slovenia) has been largely followed by its successors. This demonstrates that the relevant provisions of the Lisbon Treaty and the Council’s Rules of Procedure were in fact a codification of existing practice.

3.1 Working method to prepare the joint trio programme

This part of the article describes the preparation process of the trio programme from the first informal meetings to the endorsement of the programme by the Council.

First informal contacts between three future presidencies are normally established at political or senior official level up to 4–5 years before the 18-month period. These contacts do not have any great substance except for the partners to recognise that they have a joint task that they agree to perform together in a spirit of cooperation.

With some guidance from the Council Secretariat, the first official meeting of the trio usually takes place about 18 months before the 18-month period. There is no rule about who should convene this. Quite often, it is the first member of the trio that, understandably, is a little more focused on its presidency responsibilities. However, it has also happened that one of the trio members holding the presidency for the very first time has convened the meeting, keen to get to work. This meeting usually takes place in Brussels, in the Permanent Representation of one of the members. The first meeting is attended by the three Permanent Representatives, their Deputies, the Anticis, the Mertens, the Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as senior officials from the capitals and officials from the Council Secretariat. In this first meeting the Council Secretariat is usually invited to brief the participants on previous practices and to suggest a structure for the joint programme, a time schedule for the task and a division of labour. The time schedule is calculated backwards from the deadline for presenting the programme to the Council for approval—this is usually the last session of the General Affairs Council before the start of the 18-month period. The Council Secretariat’s suggestion takes account of the need for consultations with other related actors, namely the Commission, the

President of the European Council and the following trio, as well as for technical steps such as translations of the programme into 24 languages.

3.2 Division of labour

The division of labour concerns the division between members of the trio as well as the division between the trio and the Council Secretariat. So far, the practice has been that each member of the trio produces a list of items to be included in the first draft of the operational programme. This is done in relatively telegraphic form and, since the Council is primarily a joint legislator and joint authority for the EU budget, it focuses mainly on the legislative proposals on the Council's table or announced as forthcoming by the Commission. To facilitate this, the Council Secretariat provides a chart of all the legislative proposals on the Council's table (usually between 300 and 400 files). It is neither necessary nor desirable to list every single proposal in the operational part of the programme; individual proposals are usually grouped in sectoral clusters for this stock-taking exercise. In addition to legislative work, this mapping exercise also includes major events and negotiations on the international stage for which the Council must prepare positions.

The members agree a deadline for circulating to each other, and to the Council Secretariat, their first drafts of the operational programme. These drafts are consolidated by the Secretariat into a single draft. This first single draft is then circulated to the trio members, the EEAS and to the Commission for a first examination. Following reactions, consultations and re-drafting, it is normally possible to agree a draft programme at the level of Anticis and Mertens. However, it has happened that this was not possible because members of the trio had different aims on one or two important political questions. In such a case, a meeting at political level, such as the three Ministers for European Affairs, is required in order to converge the positions.

The role of European External Action Service (EEAS) is very important. Since the joint programme includes the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), it is the responsibility of its permanent president to draft the operational programme³ for the policies falling within the remit of that Council configuration. For this reason, the EEAS is invited to all trio meetings and it contributes to every draft of the programme. In fact, the term "trio programme" is a misnomer because

³ The trio programme consists of two parts: Part I is a strategic framework; Part II is the operational programme. The operational programme is structured along the lines of the ten configurations of the Council.

there are, in practice, four co-authors. This ensures coherence between all of the Council's work whether it falls under the leadership of the permanent or rotating presidency.

When the operational programme has reached a sufficiently advanced stage to give an overview of the issues to be covered, work begins on the strategic framework. The trio members provide their ideas and invite the Secretariat to weave their suggestions into a political overview of the programme. As for the operational programme, the Council Secretariat writes the first draft of the strategic framework and finalises it on the basis of consultations and comments. If there is already a tendency to agreement on the operational programme, the strategic framework is usually agreed relatively quickly.

Experience has shown that once the members take the approach that they are writing a programme for the Council, rather than agreeing their own joint political manifesto, the process goes relatively quickly. As the name “joint programme” suggests, this is largely a task to programme the Council's work on the basis of an inventory of what is on the table, augmented by whatever new proposals the Commission plans to present before the start of the period. Each Presidency has the opportunity in its own six-month programme to highlight the political message that runs through its programme—for example, the Danish presidency (January–July 2012) highlighted four themes: “Europe—responsible, dynamic, green and safe”.

3.3 Consultations with other actors

The European Commission is brought into the process at an early stage when it is invited to comment on the first draft of the programme. It is important that the work programmes of the Commission and Council be aligned. The Commission is normally represented by officials from its General Secretariat who are not only responsible for the work programme but also have up-to-date information on its evolution.

A consultation with the following trio, as provided in the Council's Rules of Procedure, is usually done at a short meeting between the six Permanent Representatives concerned before the programme is presented to COREPER⁴. This consultation is limited to the relatively short strategic framework⁵ and has never given rise to any serious problems.

⁴ Usually one or two weeks before the document reaches the General Affairs Council for approval.

⁵ The strategic framework is a political overview of the operational programme.

The Council's Rules of Procedure (EC, 2009b, Art. 2(6)) also provide that the draft programme should be prepared in close consultation with the President of the European Council. Under its first permanent President, Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council has emerged as a principal priority- and agenda-setter and it has become important that the common programme for the Council should be coherent with European Council orientations.

At the end of the process, the programme must be adopted unanimously by all 28 members in the Council. To date, on every occasion since December 2006, the General Affairs Council has approved the programme in public session, without any reservations.

4. Analysis and interpretation of observations

Having reviewed the preparation process of the trio programme, now is a moment to return to the main question—what is the effect of the formalised trio programme on the continuity in the decision-making process of the Council? Two central explanatory factors were analysed that impact on continuity: the trio programme as the structural factor and the political will of three cooperating presidencies as the political factor. The process tracing has demonstrated that there are two continuity-improving aspects that derive directly from the programme itself. First, the preparation process of the joint programme demands for an intensive interaction between the three presidencies at political and official levels and with representatives of other key partners, namely the Commission, EEAS, President of the European Council and Council Secretariat. Second, the programme filters out tendencies for presidencies to pursue short-term national interests.

4.1 Structural factor

The trio programme is the first formal task of a future presidency. As it is laid down in the Rules of Procedure of the Council (Art. 2(6)), the draft programme is to be prepared “with the President of the Foreign Affairs Council” and “in close cooperation with the Commission and the President of the European Council, and after appropriate consultations.” This formal framework gives an incentive for the three presidencies to network together and with institutional actors. The necessary engagement between trio partners requires national administrations to look beyond the national agenda at the EU agenda, which prevents formalisation of narrow national objectives. Therefore, the process helps to raise awareness,

especially in capitals, of the presidency's responsibility to advance the EU's rolling agenda.

Since each pre-established group reflects a diversity of geography and of interests, the evaluation of the inventory of work on the Council's table brings the group to focus on the common ground where sustained work over the 18-month period is not only possible, but desirable. In line with the ideas of social institutionalism, the preparation process of the common programme provides an institutional context for "social learning" (Bulmer, 1993) through the interaction among the presidencies and with the Council Secretariat. It means that the process develops common understanding through socialisation between the actors, thus strengthening continuity and coherence of their presidencies.

The common framework and the interaction among presidencies reinforce another continuity-improving factor—there is a constraint on any individual presidency to pursue its national interests exclusively. In the group of three, each presidency requires the agreement of the other two in its proposals for the Council's programme. The first presidency in the group works in parallel on the trio programme and on its six-month programme, as they are published almost together. This minimises diverging or conflicting objectives in the two texts. For the second and third presidencies in the group, their respective six-month programmes are written in the context of the published trio programme and in the light of what has been achieved. This, too, reinforces continuity.

As already said, the term "trio programme" is in fact a misnomer because it has four authors, not three. The fourth author is the permanent President of the Foreign Affairs Council (High Representative) who holds office for five years and has the potential to bring a medium-term perspective, and therefore continuity, to the 18-month programme. This feature has additionally the potential to support greater coherence between the EU's external and other policies.

4.2 Political factor

Examining the political factor, the observations were made that the trio programme would neither be drafted nor agreed without political will and commitment of the three presidencies. In agreement with the sociological institutionalism, the political will to find agreement and make compromises with other political actors is steered by the behavioural aspects of the rotating presidency. Beyond the rational calculation of interests, the presidency also performs a powerful symbolic function conferring upon the incumbent country a special role, which permits the government to emphasise its specific understanding of the

goals and the direction of the integration process (Christiansen, 2006). Thus, the future presidencies tend to behave along the “logic of appropriateness”, which according to March and Olsen (2006) means that a certain pattern of behaviour of political actors is conducted because it is considered to be natural, expected and legitimate. The conventional role of the modern presidency is seen as supplying a service to the Council, facilitating processes and building consensus. All those qualities demand from a Member State preparing for its presidency a certain commitment to the European agenda and the capability to put this before narrow national interests.

4.3 Intervening actor

Having analysed two main factors generating positive effects on continuity, the role of the Council Secretariat as an intervening actor should be considered further. The Secretariat holds the institutional memory of the Council and is the chief advisor and assistant for the presidency on working methods and internal procedures (Christiansen, 2006). These qualities make the Secretariat, in its low-profile way, the central hub of the preparation process of the trio programme. The Secretariat monitors every single step in the process of the trio programme. Its officials brief the presidencies on precedent and experience; they consolidate and integrate ideas and first drafts of texts and, when invited by the presidencies, they act as the honest brokers to converge divergent ideas. The technical skills, legal and procedural know-how and close interaction with the presidencies enable the Secretariat to support the continuity aspect as a distinct player by advocating the re-use of the same flexible template for the working method for every programme.

5. Conclusion and future developments

The creation of the trio presidency was not a radical revolution introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. The trio mechanism grew out gradually over decades as a response to several institutional changes in the wider context of European governance. The rotating presidency needed to adapt to these institutional developments. Consequently, the Council sought options for a smoother transition from one presidency to another in order to focus and sustain its efforts in pursuing agreed priorities and goals. The launch of the trio programme was the first successful formalised attempt in the post-Lisbon era to add more continuity in the Council decision-making process.

As this article demonstrated, there are several continuity-improving aspects related to the launch of the trio programme. In line with the rationale of social institutionalism, the preparatory phase of the programme provides an appropriate institutional context for social learning through intense interaction between the presidencies and other institutional actors. This kind of socialisation process creates a greater coherence and common understanding between three successive presidencies and the EEAS, helping to strengthen the continuity and advancing thereby the EU's rolling political agenda.

In order to secure the common goal of agreeing the programme, three successive presidencies become transformed national political actors, working with the EEAS in its field of competence, developing and demonstrating the political will and commitment to cooperate with each other. In the process of consensus-building, the behaviour of an individual presidency is steered by the logic of appropriateness—presidencies tend to follow a certain behaviour, which is considered to be natural and expected from that role.

The paper emphasised also the stabilising role of the Council Secretariat in the preparation process of the programme. The Secretariat provides a comprehensive guidance and support for the presidencies during the full preparatory period, helping successive presidencies to maintain stability and to foster continuity in the process.

Despite generally positive conclusions, it needs to be stressed that there are still a number of shortcomings that remain to be addressed in order to achieve greater continuity in the Council's decision-making framework. In particular, until now there is no mechanism to link one trio programme with the next; the 18-month cycles are not synchronised with the five-year cycles of the Commission and the European Parliament, nor with the periods for the mandate of the President of the European Council.

Recently, there have been other enhanced forms of trio cooperation, beyond the programme, under discussion. Some ideas have been explored about a division of labour among trio members in relation to the co-decision procedure with the European Parliament. Since it is the Council Presidency that represents the Council in legislative negotiations with the European Parliament, the presidency-in-office can usefully associate incoming presidency (in trilogues) with some of these negotiations to ensure consistency and to demonstrate unity within the Council. This practice was innovated by the Lithuanian presidency (2013), which invited the officials of the incoming Greece presidency (2014) to observe certain legislative negotiations (trilogues) with the European Parliament. It has also been

suggested that some of the informal ministerial meetings and conferences that are hosted in the country of the presidency could be spread over an 18-month period, rather than taking place every six months. There has also been some exploration of the idea of shared training before the presidency. Although these ideas are raised in the trio framework, they in fact represent cooperation between any presidency and its successor. Nonetheless, the trio framework remains the only structure in which three presidencies and the Council Secretariat meet to discuss such cooperation. It is therefore a platform on which dialogue and cooperation can take place, including on issues not set down specifically in the rules, in the interests of medium-term consistency and continuity in the Council's work.

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