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António Costa, a Socialist from the South, to preside over the European Council

Since taking office on 1 December, the new President of the European Council, António Costa, 63, has followed a busy schedule: [visit to Ukraine](#) with an [interview with President Zelensky](#); working meeting with the President of the European Commission to demonstrate the easing of relations between the two sides of the Rue de la Loi; preparation of the EU summit with the Western Balkans on 18 December. António Costa travelled to London on 13 December to [meet British Prime Minister Keir Starmer](#), who is behind the “EU Reset” initiative. The aim is to go beyond [painful experience of Brexit](#), to show unity regarding the Ukrainian and Syrian crises and to assert a shared commitment to the [Windsor Framework](#) and also to the [Free Trade Agreement](#). He will chair his first [Council on 19 December](#). In less than two weeks, the former Portuguese Prime Minister (2015-2024) has already taken centre stage, since the President of the European Council plays a crucial role in the Union's institutional triangular configuration.

Responsible for ensuring the continuity and stability of the European Council's work under the terms of article 15 §5 TEU, and elected for a mandate of two and a half years, renewable once, the President of the European Council guarantees the long-term coherence of the work and priorities of the Union's Heads of State and Government.

The European Council is seen as the embodiment of former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's (1974-1981) ambition to give Europe a clear and coherent political direction capable of responding to crises. Since December 1974, the European Council has brought together the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the European

Communities to give impetus to ‘Europe's voice’. In the 1970s, economic and political challenges called for greater coordination at the highest level, particularly in response to the oil crisis. At the time, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt shared a common vision of the need for a framework where European leaders could meet informally to discuss major strategic orientations.

In 1986, with the [Single Act](#), the European Council was formally recognised as a body that contributes to defining the broad guidelines of the Communities. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty placed it at the heart of the European decision-making process, with its presidency held in turn. Finally, the European Council became a fully-fledged institution with the Treaty of Lisbon, which amended article 13 TEU.

After [Herman Van Rompuy](#) (2009-2014), [Donald Tusk](#) (2014-2019) and [Charles Michel](#) (2019-2024), António Costa is the fourth President of the European Council. His appointment has come at a time when leaders are hoping to strengthen the mediation role of the President of the Council, particularly after episodes of strained relations between the European institutions under the previous mandate. Prior to his investiture, António Costa toured the capitals of Europe to consolidate his programme and gauge Member States' expectations. He also expressed his intention to organise regular, informal discussions between leaders to address priority issues such as security and international cooperation, a central focus of his mandate. Finally, he promised to promote constructive dialogue, particularly on issues such as the defence of Europe, which necessarily implies good relations with the United Kingdom.

A SOCIALIST FROM SOUTH-WEST EUROPE

It is difficult to establish a typical profile for the President of the European Council. For the time being, they are all men, all former Prime ministers in their own countries, and therefore elected by direct universal suffrage. But unlike his Belgian and Polish predecessors, António Costa comes from the south of the continent. He is also the first Socialist incumbent, after two EPPs and one Liberal. This political choice can be explained by the wish to represent the European majority (EPP, S&D, Renew) which was already in place in 2019. With Ursula von der Leyen (EPP) having been re-elected for a second term as President of the Commission, the alternation applied to the other posts: High Representative Kaja Kallas (Renew) succeeds Josep Borrell (S&D) and António Costa (S&D) succeeds Charles Michel (Renew). This balance was supported by both the President of the Commission and the current Portuguese Prime Minister, Luís Montenegro (PSD).

When considering Europe's presence on the international stage, it is worth recalling Article 15(6) of the TEU: *'The President of the European Council shall, at his or her level and in his or her capacity, ensure the external representation of the Union in matters covered by the common foreign and security policy, without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy'*.

The creation of the European Council symbolised the Franco-German rapprochement. Donald Tusk symbolised the reunification of the continent. Here, the Portuguese politician also intends to embody reconciliation, and this is probably the message he conveyed to Keir Starmer. The choice of António Costa can be seen as a symbol of openness and diversity, at a time when the enemies of the European Union are attacking its model and its values. Born in Lisbon, António Costa grew up with his father, Orlando da Costa, a writer (author of *O Signo da Ira*, a critique of colonialism) and his mother, Maria Antónia Palla, a renowned feminist, one of the first female journalists under Salazar and author of *Viver Pela Liberdade*. A Lisbon native of Indian and Franco-Mozambican descent on his father's side, António Costa embodies one of the many post-colonial heritages of the European continent. Under his government, Portugal initiated a public debate on

colonial memory, with initiatives such as the recognition of crimes linked to slavery and the creation of a [Discoveries Museum](#). He can therefore be regarded as having turned diversity into an asset, embodying a modern Europe that is open to the world, breaking with the divisions inherited from the past and those that others are trying to reintroduce.

[In a tribute to](#) Mário Soares at the Gulbenkian Foundation on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the former Prime Minister and President of the Republic, who died in 2017, António Costa made a point of referring to the European commitment of the figure of Portugal's democratic transition, whose integration into the European Economic Community in 1986 profoundly changed society by embracing the values of integration, tolerance and cosmopolitanism. António Costa recalled that this inspiration was more relevant than ever for Portugal and the European Union in terms of dealing with *'everything that tries to separate us: imperial impulses, protectionist temptations, nationalist intentions, xenophobic intuitions, disinformation and plans for disruption'*.

It should be remembered, however, that António Costa is not the first Portuguese to hold high office within the European Union: [José Manuel Barroso](#), also a former Prime Minister (PSD), was President of the European Commission from 2004 to 2014. During his two terms in office, he worked to consolidate the European Union with the enlargement to twenty-five, twenty-seven and then twenty-eight Member States.

BUILDER OF "CREATIVE BRIDGES"

The role of President of the European Council is particularly complex because of the European decision-making mechanisms. In most cases, decision-making is based on the [qualified majority](#): 55% of the Member States (at least 15 out of 27), which must represent 65% of the Union's population. This means that the President must win over a sufficient number of states, which involves intense bilateral negotiations and reciprocal concessions. Added to this is the responsibility of working with the European Commission and the European Parliament, which have their own objectives. These mechanisms involve varying majority

requirements, which influence the way decisions are negotiated and adopted within the institution.

Some decisions require the agreement of all the Member States: this is the case in particular for the common security and defence policy or the acceptance of a new candidate to the European Union, as well as for the various stages of accession negotiations[1]. Unanimity could lead to gridlock, as each Member State has the right of veto and some use it to put their national ambitions ahead of those of Europe. The President will have to use diplomacy to reconcile divergent interests: he will assume the role of mediator to overcome these stumbling blocks, by proposing compromises.

In practice, this is a long way from what Article 15(6) TEU seems to imply: chairing and leading the work of the European Council. The difficulty lies in ensuring that the work is carried out in a spirit of cooperation and efficiency so that leaders can take decisions. The President is then responsible for ensuring the follow-up and consistency of the strategic decisions and political priorities adopted by the European Council (Article 15(1))[2]. He must therefore juggle these constraints while giving a clear political direction.

António Costa became Prime Minister of Portugal in November 2015 thanks to an unprecedented alliance between left-wing parties, a coalition nicknamed 'a Geringonça' (i.e. rather tenuous government structure). As Álvaro de Vasconcelos, former director of the EU Institute for Security Studies, reminds us, such a coalition was considered as unthinkable at a time when the tensions were still very high between the socialist party, the communist party and the Left Bloc. He demonstrated his ability to transcend ideological divides to offer unexpected political stability in a country emerging from a serious economic crisis. This experience helped to reconcile traditionally opposed segments of society, by combining budgetary rigour with social policies. He has a reputation for pragmatism and a diplomatic style that favours dialogue, reinforcing the balance between states. His experience and commitment to a united and strategic Europe could make him a visionary and operational President. His past demonstrates that he has the skills to manage complex situations and mobilise European players around

common objectives. This realistic pragmatism, combining firmness on European values (on a constant basis regarding Ukraine) and a principle of non-confrontation, seems to be António Costa's baseline through all his most recent positions on international affairs: privileging the improvement of commercial relations with China; adopting a positive stance in relation to US president-elect Donald Trump; playing prudence and consensus-building on bold institutional reform projects previously proposed by France; giving priority, on the recognition of Palestine, to building a common line in front of individual initiatives of Member-States such as Ireland and Spain; or, at the intra-EU level, always keeping open the communication channel with Viktor Orban.

NEW WORKING METHODS

During his nine years as Prime Minister[3], António Costa has attended almost forty European Councils, and has been noted for his ability to defend his country's interests, but always in the common, European interest. He has helped redefine Portugal's place in the European Union. His work at the European Council has reinforced the idea that 'medium-sized' countries like Portugal can have a significant influence when they adopt a strategic and cooperative approach. He is recognised as having succeeded in reconciling the demands for budgetary rigour imposed by the European Union with the need to invest in social policies[4]. When he was appointed in 2015, Portugal was just emerging from [a financial assistance programme](#) and António Costa was quick to argue in favour of a more flexible approach to European budgetary rules, in the interests of the countries of Southern Europe[5]. A fervent advocate of a revision of the Stability and Growth Pact, he advocates an approach that favours more long-term investment. He has been noted for his ability to build consensus between often divided camps, particularly with the so-called frugal countries and those of the South on budgetary issues. However, he has not hesitated to adopt a firm stance in defending Portugal's interests, particularly in the negotiation of structural and cohesion funds. His good knowledge of this subject can be explained by his seven-year term as Mayor of Lisbon[6].

During the pandemic crisis of 2020-2021, António Costa proved to be a major player in coordinating European

[1] For example, the opening of negotiations for Ukraine's accession to the European Union in June 2024, [unanimously adopted by the European Council](#).

[2] He is also accountable to the European Parliament, an institution with which Antonio Costa is familiar, having served as Vice-President from 2004 to 2005.

[3] Under article 201 of the Portuguese Constitution, the Prime Minister is the head of government, responsible for conducting the country's general policy and representing Portugal in international relations.

[4] The achievements are marked by controlled inflation (around 1%), a decline in public debt (from 130% to 118% in 2019), a reduction in unemployment (5.6% in July 2020 compared with 12% in 2015) and GDP growth of 18%.

[5] Moreover, in 2019, although he was already being considered for the post of President of the Council, António Costa chose not to stand for election, preferring to focus on reforms in Portugal and managing the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2021.

[6] He is mayor of the city that hosted the signing of the last treaty reforming the European institutions, in 2009.

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efforts. During the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2021, he announced three priorities: sustainable economic recovery, the digital and green transition, and strengthening the Union's strategic sovereignty, including the entry into force of the first *NextGenerationEU* funding. António Costa has called for a collective response to crises that transcend borders, stressing the need for a robust European mechanism to support the hardest-hit economies, especially those in southern Europe, which are often weakened by the economic aftermath. An ardent advocate of issuing common debt, a historically sensitive issue, to finance recovery measures, he succeeded in finding an echo for this once marginal position in July 2020, when the *NextGenerationEU* plan was approved.

On the strength of his experience (former Prime Minister, former Vice-President of the European Parliament and Mayor of Lisbon), he proposed, in his [inaugural speech](#) a method for Council meetings, which will now be reduced from two to one day. Another possible element of change: on enlargement issues, there will be no recourse to the production of unforeseen obstacles or artificial deadlines, in a departure from previous arm-wrestling matches.

Considered to be less [technocratic](#) than Charles Michel, António Costa seems to be heralding a more engaging and unifying approach, adapted to the complex geopolitical challenges of the next five half-years. As was the case with Donald Tusk, his political commitment is set against the backdrop of a country undergoing post-autocratic democratic reconstruction, which celebrated its fiftieth birthday in 2024. In his various roles, he has always supported the development of democratic institutions, European integration and modernising reforms. His career reflects the ambition to strengthen democratic values and reconciliation, in line with the ideals born of the post-Salazar transition.

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