
An unholy trinity of EU Presidents?: Political accountability of EU executive power

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A trinity of EU ‘Presidents’: out of control?

As the dust settles after years of acute crisis decision-making in the EU and the euro area, the contours of a new and powerful trio of EU ‘Presidents’ have become visible. Herman van Rompuy, President of the European Council, turned out to be a key mover and shaker, who was able to steer the highest-level EU decision-makers on salient political and economic questions confronting the EU and its member states (e.g., banking union). The European Commission in recent years acquired the power effectively to force national governments to adapt their draft budgets to meet EU criteria before they are sent to their national parliaments for final approval (European Semester). The main actor in this regard for the past years was Olli Rehn, Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the euro (hereafter: the euro Commissioner). As one of six Vice-Presidents of the Commission he had an increasingly visible and even seemingly autonomous role in the area of economic governance – hence his nickname, the ‘budget tsar’.¹ And, thirdly, Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank (ECB), took decisive action to keep the euro stable and monetary policy healthy, directly affecting citizens in creditor and debtor states alike.

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1 ‘Europe Close to Creating “Budget Tsar”’, *Financial Times*, 9 November 2011.

Behind each of these three (Vice-) Presidents is a powerful institution whose role and tasks are changing and expanding incrementally in economic governance. These new powers and practices fit within a broader picture of expanding executive power of the European Union (Curtin 2009). Executive ‘dominance’ is more clearly delineated than was previously the case (Curtin 2014). The economic crisis resulted in an acceleration of decision-taking by supranational and national executives at the European level, often with a very profound and wide-reaching national impact (Scharpf 2011; Habermas 2012). Executive dominance by EU institutions and by (some) national actors at the European level has now reached into such sensitive policy fields as national budgets, monetary policy, and macroeconomic decisions (Chalmers 2012; Fossum 2014).

None of these ‘EU Presidents’ (and their respective institutions) is directly accountable to citizens. They are not elected and none of them can be removed when the electorate considers him to be a rascal. Yet their decisions have enormous consequences for the economies of the member states and for the welfare of citizens. There is also a growing asymmetry in the effects and reach of the adopted measures between Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries. This institutional complexity and lack of transparency across the EU as a whole complicates efforts to address issues of accountability across the trinity (and ‘their’ institutions) in a uniform fashion.

The salience of the political control of these powerful EU executives by national parliaments or by the European Parliament is obvious but also complicated. This chapter necessarily constitutes a first cut at this crucial issue. To what extent can we observe emerging political accountability relations between these three executive actors – and the institutions they ‘represent’ – and parliamentary forums at the different governance levels? Given the constitutional provisions and parliamentary practices in the member states, one would expect more extensive political accountability processes in place for the President of the European Council and for the Vice-President of the Commission. Their roles resemble the political executives in the member states, which are subjected to extensive political scrutiny. Central bank presidents, on the other hand, usually operate at arm’s length of parliaments and one would expect the same at the EU level.

Secondly, we are interested in how the roles and practices (as well as internal working methods) of these accountability forums evolved and adapted in recent years. What conclusions can be drawn in terms of the overall levels of political accountability that are being exercised in practice

over this increasingly visible trinity of EU level Presidents and can – and should – change be envisaged?

Executive political accountability: a framework for analysis²

The rise of EU executive power after the various crises raises important issues of executive accountability. Has the rise been accompanied by an equal increase in formal and informal accountability relations? In order to establish this, we need to elaborate on the concept of accountability. In its *White Paper on Governance* and in several consecutive documents, the European Commission (2001; 2003) uses ‘accountability’ rather loosely. It serves not only as a synonym for ‘clarity’, ‘transparency’, and ‘responsibility’, but it is also equated with much broader concepts such as ‘involvement’, ‘deliberation’, and ‘participation’. This lack of clarity is not surprising, as it mirrors the existence of different schools of thought in the wider literature (Bovens 2010).

One school treats it as a normative concept, as a set of standards for the evaluation of the behaviour of public actors. Accountability or, more precisely, ‘being accountable’, is seen as a *virtue* of organizations or officials. Hence, some accountability studies focus on normative issues, on the assessment of the actual and active behaviour of public agents (Dubnick 2002; Koppell 2005). Another school of thought conceptualizes accountability as a social *mechanism*: as an institutional relation in which an actor can be held to account by a forum (Day and Klein 1987; Scott 2000; Mulgan 2003; Pollitt 2003; Bovens, ’t Hart and Schillemans 2008; Schillemans 2008; Meijer and Schillemans 2009). The locus of analysis in such studies is not the behaviour of public agents per se, but the way in which these institutional relations operate; and their focus is not whether the agents have acted in an accountable way, but whether they are or can be held accountable ex post facto by accountability forums.

This chapter fits within this latter tradition. We leave the broader, deontological discussions about accountability and EU governance to others (Schmitter 2000; Arnull and Wincott 2002; Harlow 2002; Lord 2004; Bogdanor 2007). We define accountability as: ‘a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass

2 This section is based on Bovens et al. 2010.

judgement, and the actor may face consequences'. Depending on the nature of the forum, one can distinguish between political, legal, administrative, or social accountability (Bovens 2007). Executive institutions, such as the European Commission, are subject to various accountability relations simultaneously, such as political accountability to the European Parliament, legal accountability to the European Courts, and administrative accountability to the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Ombudsman, and the European Court of Auditors. In this chapter, we only concentrate on political accountability, on accountability to political forums. We will limit ourselves to two types of political forums, the European Parliament and its various committees, and the national parliaments.

When studying these political accountability relations, it helps to distinguish between accountability in the books – *de jure* accountability – and accountability in practice – *de facto* accountability. We will first describe what formal provisions for executive political accountability have been put in place. Secondly, we will explore how these operate in practice. In doing so, we will distinguish three different elements or stages.

First of all, we want to know to what extent the actor is obliged to *inform the forum about his or her conduct*, by providing various sorts of data about the performance of tasks, about outcomes, or about procedures. Often, and particularly in the case of failures or incidents, this also involves the provision of explanations and justifications (Bovens et al. 1999; Hearit 2005; Hood et al. 2007). Informing can be done in a general way, directed at the general public, for example, through online disclosure or freedom of information provisions. However, it also can be done as part of specific accountability relations, for example, by providing explicit information to parliamentary committees.

The second stage is *debate*. For a relation to qualify as an accountability relation, there needs to be a possibility for the forum to interrogate the actor and to question the adequacy of the information or the legitimacy of the conduct – hence, the close semantic connection between 'accountability' and 'answerability'.

Thirdly, in a full accountability relationship the forum may *pass judgment* on the conduct of the actor. It may approve of an annual account, denounce a policy, or publicly condemn the behavior of an official or an agency. In passing a negative judgment, or following it, the forum may impose *consequences* on the actor. These consequences can be highly

formalized, such as fines, disciplinary measures, civil remedies, or even penal sanctions, in case of a negative judgment, but they can also be based on historical conventions, such as a vote of non-confidence by a parliament, or on informal practices, such as naming and shaming.

Given this analytical framework, our main question is: *to what extent can we observe (emerging) formal and informal accountability relations between the selected three executive actors and the European Parliament and/or (some) national parliaments?*

In answering this general question, we focus on three sub-questions:

- (1) *Informing.* To what extent are there formal obligations and informal practices regarding the active provision of information by each of these three executive actors to the European Parliament and to the national parliaments?
- (2) *Debate.* To what extent are there formal possibilities and informal practices regarding the questioning of each of these three executive actors by the European Parliament or the national parliaments?
- (3) *Judgment.* To what extent are there formal possibilities and informal practices regarding the approval or denouncement of the conduct of these three executive actors by either the European Parliament or the national parliaments?

We try to answer these questions by mapping the emerging formal political accountability provisions that are in place for each of the three executive actors. Also, we have made an explorative analysis of the actual accountability practices in various settings in the European Parliament, involving these three presidents, in the post-financial crisis years (2009–14). In the latter exercise, we distinguish between the Presidents appearing before the committees (mainly the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee, occasionally the Constitutional Affairs Committee) and in the Plenary.³ We have also gathered information – to the extent that it is available – on debates and hearings of each of the three Presidents before some national parliaments and have undertaken an explorative and selective analysis in this regard on aspects of information, debate, and judgment, as well as considering the inter-parliamentary dimension.

3 This was based on an analysis of the minutes of all the meetings of the Plenary and the various committees, which Van Rompuy, Rehn and Trichet/Draghi attended within the parliamentary term of 2009–14.

The political accountability of the President of the European Council: informal bits and pieces

President Van Rompuy and the European Parliament

The *de jure* accountability arrangement between the European Parliament and the European Council is traditionally very limited. Only the obligation to inform the European Parliament after a summit has taken place is laid down at Treaty level (Art. 15(6)(d) TEU). The European Council shall submit a report after each of its meetings and a yearly written report on the progress achieved by the Union. To fulfill this obligation, the President must attend plenary sessions (Van der Steeg 2009: 5). There have been some further *de jure* developments in some of the (legislative) measures adopted to combat the crisis. The Regulations of the 'Six Pack' provide *inter alia* for the President of the European Council to come before a committee of the European Parliament, in particular the ECON, and to inform it and engage in an 'economic dialogue' (Fasone 2014: 175–76).⁴

These economic dialogues give the competent committee the opportunity to invite, among others, the President of the European Council to discuss different topics mentioned in the specific Regulation. Attending these meetings is not mandatory but facilitative. Besides, the Committees have the right to invite any person to attend and to speak at a meeting (Rule 193 of European Parliament Rules of Procedure).⁵ Rule 110 of the Rules of Procedure allows the Presidents of the Institutions to give statements, after which the President of the Parliament may invite them to join in a debate on the content of the statements. The nature of all these rights is facilitative and informative, rather than obligatory and pressuring. The Parliament holds no real formal powers. It can table a motion according to Rule 120 of its Rules of Procedure, but it cannot attach real negative consequences (Van der Steeg 2010: 130).

4 Regulation 1177/2011 amending Regulation (EC) No. 1467/97 on speeding up and clarifying the implementation of the excessive deficit procedure, OJ 2011, L306/33, Article 2a; Regulation 1176/2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, OJ 2011, L306/25, Article 14; Regulation 1175/2011 amending Regulation 1466/97 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies, OJ 2011, L306/12, Article 2-ab; Regulation 1174/2011 on enforcement measures to correct excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the euro area, OJ 2011, L306/8: Article 6; Regulation 1173/2011 on the effective enforcement of budgetary surveillance in the euro area, OJ 2011, L306/1: Article 3.

5 5 of Procedure of the European Parliament, 7th Parliamentary Term, March 2014 version, available at www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+RULES-EP+20140310+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&language=EN.

Overall the *de jure* accountability arrangement between the European Parliament and the European Council is weak, and mainly covers, to a limited extent, the first aspect of our definition of accountability (information) and not debate or judgment and consequences. Moreover, it is scattered across a number of legal sources (Treaties and secondary legislation) with some salient variations among them.

The story is somewhat richer when one looks at the *de facto* political accountability of the European Council President to the European Parliament. In the pre-Lisbon years, the rotating Presidents of the European Council occasionally visited the European Parliament to give a statement (Crum 2009; Van de Steeg 2010). Since 1997, some informal accountability practices *vis-à-vis* the European Parliament emerged (Van de Steeg 2010: 142). After the Lisbon Treaty (which instituted the full-time Presidency) and the financial crisis, these practices have developed further.

During the parliamentary terms of 2009–14, Van Rompuy attended 15 debates in plenary. These were almost exclusively meetings on *Conclusions of the European Council* as well as some on *Economic Governance*. Van Rompuy often started with an introductory speech. Afterwards, the Parliamentarians reacted. At the end of the meeting, Van Rompuy almost always took the opportunity to respond to the questions and comments given by the Parliamentarians in the meeting.

During these meetings before Plenary, the Parliamentarians mainly used the opportunity to ask questions and express their views by adding pressure on Van Rompuy to take effective steps to overcome the crisis. The questions and comments directed at Van Rompuy during these meetings were both informative and criticizing. Usually he did not specifically react to all questions, but used his final speech to summarize the most important points raised and answered by telling what had been done to improve the situation with regard to these points and what work still had to be done. In some meetings Van Rompuy extensively reacted to the ‘you need to act, you need to act now’ type suggestions in his final speech. He stipulated what had been done and justified any delays by referring to the difficult circumstances. He said that both the member states and the institutions should take the blame and that the crisis had been underestimated. He ended by summarizing what steps were to be taken and by reassuring them that he would work hard. In that regard he really responded to the major line of criticism and concerns. Nevertheless, he was not eager to admit that he or the European Council in general had made a mistake. He acknowledged problems, referred to difficulties and other factors and, in

very general terms, reiterated what had been done and explained how he wanted to continue to solve the remaining problems.⁶ The setting of the meetings did not stimulate a really intensive debate, owing to the structure of introductory speech followed by questions and a concluding speech, and owing to the fact that the blue card procedure⁷ was never used on or by Van Rompuy.

Occasionally, some form of judgment could be perceived. For example, European Parliament member Swoboda accused Van Rompuy of adopting legislation without consulting the Parliament.⁸ Van Rompuy acknowledged this issue in a short but summarizing speech in which he addressed the general topics of the meeting. After this, the President of Parliament reiterated that Van Rompuy was wrong in not consulting the Parliament and underlined the importance of democratic legitimacy through the European Parliament.

Van Rompuy visited and debated with ECON only three times during the parliamentary term of 2009–14. During these three meetings, Van Rompuy (and others) gave a speech. Twice the speeches were followed by exchanges of views and a Q&A session. The nature of these exchanges of views and the Q&A was more than just informative, but not of an accusatory or strongly criticizing nature. During the session of 30 January 2013, Van Rompuy (and, in fact, almost all speakers) left the meeting directly after their speeches. European Parliament member Servaas expressed his disappointment because under those circumstances the meeting could not lead to a debate (although one Commission representative and another speaker did stay). The exchange of views was, therefore, limited to the views of the different Parliamentarians. Van Rompuy did not respond to comments and questions.

President Van Rompuy and the national parliaments

The European Council has two parliamentary political accountability relations – the national and the European. Here lies the nub: only the European Parliament can (in a very limited fashion) hold the collective

6 For example, Van Rompuy's speech half way into the European Parliament plenary debate of 23 June 2010, Brussels.

7 Rule 149 of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure, n. 5 above.

8 Hannes Swoboda's statement during the European Parliament debate of 3 July 2012, Strasbourg, in which he is being supported by Rebecca Harms and Sylvie Goulard, who (together with Kathleen van Brempt and Phillippe Lamberts) had already made this point during the debate of 16 November 2011, Strasbourg.

European Council to account. At the national level, individual national parliaments can hold only their individual Prime Minister or Minister to account depending on their national constitutional arrangements. Apart from the French President (and the President of the Commission), each member of the European Council is a head of government and formally accountable as such to his respective national parliament. All national parliaments have developed to some extent specific structures and procedures (Wessels et al. 2013: 14). However, these were on the whole designed for the ordinary legislative procedure and not for the very different context of European summits. Thus, the fact that national parliaments may have the right to be informed and to give their opinion on draft regulations or draft directives as part of the traditional EU law-making process will not assist in holding Prime Ministers to account in the context of the rapidly evolving role of the European Council. Generally there are no specific rules and procedures aimed at controlling Euro summits. In fact, in the overwhelming majority of the member states, there is no differentiation between the various kinds of European Council meetings. In several countries a debate occurs only before and after *ordinary* European Council meetings even though the rules do not specify this focus (Wessels et al. 2013: 31).⁹

Likewise, the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 12 TEU and subsidiarity protocol), which installed new opportunities for an ‘early warning mechanism’ on subsidiarity issues, do not bite in the explicitly non-legislative context of the European Council. Article 10 TEU merely states the formal nature of the accountability relationship of Prime Ministers in the European Council with national parliaments. The implication is that the ensuing obligations of information, debate, and sanctioning are purely a matter for national (constitutional) law and practice. In the end, there are in fact 28 different national accounts with very different views as to the required and or desirable relations between national parliaments and the European Council.

There are no specific rules and procedures to control the President of the European Council either in the Treaties or in national laws. Yet the fact that since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty the European Council is a formal institution with a semi-permanent President has brought about some changes to *de facto* political accountability to the national parliaments. We can observe the new phenomenon of the President of the

⁹ In Austria, however, committees debate also the extra-ordinary European Council meetings as well as Euro summits.

European Council appearing before individual national parliaments in order to inform, explain, and justify decisions that are being taken by the European Council or in implementation of European Council decision-making. Van Rompuy has visited a number of national parliaments over the course of the past few years (for example, Cyprus, Malta, Romania, Estonia, Slovenia, and France).¹⁰ On the whole these are ‘set’ speeches, and there seems to be little opportunity for real dialogue or debate and there is certainly no possibility of any sanctioning or other consequences.

President Van Rompuy and inter-parliamentary forums

Inter-parliamentary cooperation is encouraged through COSAC (Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union).¹¹ Van Rompuy has attended and engaged in a dialogue on a number of occasions.¹²

In addition, a plethora of inter-parliamentary meetings have been arranged outside the formal framework of the Treaties. They may be organized at the initiative of the relevant committees of the European Parliament, who invite their counterparts in national parliaments. For example, the meeting held on 27–28 February 2012 addressed the so-called ‘European Semester for Economic Policy Coordination’. In the words of Van Rompuy during this event, the ‘growing interweaving of European and national politics’ was illustrated by an Inter-Parliamentary Committee meeting on the European Semester for Economic Policy Coordination.¹³ In this context, the President of the European Council engaged in a dialogue with representatives of both the European Parliament and the national parliaments jointly.

10 Van Rompuy’s speech at the Parliament of Cyprus, Nicosia, 28 May 2012; speech at the House of Representatives of Malta, Valletta, 11 July 2013; speech at the Joint meeting of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate of Romania, Bucharest, 25 April 2012; speech at the Estonian Riigikogu, Tallinn, 26 February 2013; speech at the National Assembly of Slovenia, Ljubljana, 25 May 2012; speech at the French Assemblée Nationale, Paris, 9 October 2013.

11 Articles 9 and 10 of Protocol No. 1 on the Role of National Parliaments in the European Union (annexed to the Lisbon Treaty).

12 See Van Rompuy’s speech at the COSAC meeting of 26 October 2010, Brussels.

13 Van Rompuy’s speech of 27 February 2012, Brussels. See too a number of other inter-parliamentary meetings which he has attended, in particular: speech of 30 January 2013 during European Parliamentary Week 2013; and speech of 20 January 2014 during European Parliamentary Week 2014.

Article 13 of the Stability Treaty provides for the installation of an inter-parliamentary meeting. Two meetings of this ‘Conference of Parliaments’ have taken place, with Van Rompuy addressing both. In his words at the second one on 20 January 2014: ‘although each national parliament remains responsible for its country’s own economic policy and its own budget, these powers are now exercised in a context of enormous interdependence and in a framework that we are developing together to manage that interdependence.’¹⁴ Through a forum like this, which unites all national parliaments, the President of the European Council is able to provide information and engage in some dialogue – although again in a context devoid of any judgement or consequences.

The political accountability of the Commission: extensive information, a bit of debate, no consequences

‘Tsar’ Rehn and the European Parliament

The European Parliament does have some formal powers to hold the Commission accountable. Article 230 TFEU obliges the Commission to answer all written and oral questions asked by the Parliament. Article 121(5) TFEU lays down the obligation for the President of the Commission (as well as the President of the Council of Ministers) to submit a report on the results of multilateral surveillance to the Parliament.

The most important tool for the Parliament in this respect is the economic dialogue. This gives the competent committee the opportunity to discuss certain issues with the Commission. Article 15 of Regulation (EU) No 473/2013,¹⁵ for example, confers on Parliament the power to invite the Commission to discuss certain budgetary matters. Besides, the Parliament must be duly involved in the European Semester. The purpose of this economic dialogue explicitly is to ensure more transparency and accountability.¹⁶ Attending the dialogues is not obligatory, although the ECJ can, in exceptional circumstances, be involved under Article 265 TFEU (Fasone 2014: 176). In other words, the Parliament can ask the (Vice-) President of the

14 See Van Rompuy’s speech of 20 January 2014, n. 13, above.

15 Regulation 473/2013 on common provisions for monitoring and assessing draft budgetary plans and ensuring the correction of excessive deficit of the member states in the euro area OJ 2011, L140/11.

16 The other examples are Article 3 of Regulation 472/2013; Section 1 A of Regulation 1177/2011; Article 14 of Regulation 1176/2011; Section 1 Aa of Regulation 1175/2011; Article 6 of Regulation 1174/2011; and Article 3 of Regulation 1173/2011.

Commission to answer some questions and elaborate certain choices, but that is, in principle, as far as it goes.¹⁷ Rule 110 of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure¹⁸ gives the Presidents of the Institutions the right to give statements after which the President of the Parliament may ask them to elaborate these statements during a debate. Rule 111 gives the President of the Parliament the right to invite the President of the Commission or another Commissioner to make a statement to explain decisions taken during a meeting and to take part in a debate on this decision with the Parliament. Rule 114 prescribes that the Commission must present its recommendation on the broad guidelines of economic policy to the relevant committee. Rule 115 grants the parliamentary committees the right to ask the Commission questions, and provides the possibility for oral answers and a debate. Rule 116 arranges Question Time with the Commission, the questions of which are bound by some strict requirements (laid down in Annex II of the Rules of Procedure). The answers, however, must be concise and relevant. This seems to be one of the only clear obligations.

All these rights to be informed and to participate in a debate with the Commission representative, however, lack pressuring power because there are few real consequences attached to these meetings. The Parliament does hold the power to table a motion for a resolution according to Rule 120 and a motion for censure under Article 234 TFEU. The latter article probably contains the strongest tool for Parliament, containing a voting procedure which might result in the resignation of members of the Commission.

As to the *de facto* accountability of the Commission to the European Parliament: during the parliamentary term of 2009–14, Olli Rehn attended no fewer than 44 plenary meetings.¹⁹ The nature of these meetings in general was a mixture of informative statements and comments by members of Parliament, sometimes followed by a short dialogue. During most meetings, Rehn stayed somewhat in the background. He gave a speech in which he reacted to some of the comments and in which he sketched the objectives and ideas of the Commission. There were no extensive debates between him and members of the European Parliament.

17 An additional tool 'to be informed' is Rule 193 of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure (n. 5, above), which allows a committee to organize a hearing with experts, where this is considered essential to its work on a particular subject. This rule must be read in line with point 50 of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission [2010] OJ L304/47.

18 European Parliament Rules of Procedure, n. 5, above.

19 For an overview of the attendances see: www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/home.html.

Six of these meetings were part of the European Semester. The nature of these meetings was also informative.²⁰ During these debates, different Parliamentarians asked questions and gave statements. Sometimes, a European Parliament member used the so-called ‘blue-card’²¹ immediately to ask another speaker a question or perhaps to interrupt him or her with a comment. Rehn, however, was not really participating in the debates. He provided an opening speech and sometimes an additional speech to finalize his contribution.²² This contained a summarizing note in which he formulated a general reaction to the points raised during the meeting. In between these two speeches he did not really participate. Mostly the Parliamentarians asked for the vision, opinion, or strategy of the Commission or of Rehn. Some questions, however, went a bit further. In those cases, European Parliament members pointed out to Rehn and others the (mostly negative) facts, asking them (although not explicitly) to justify or at least explain what had caused these facts to occur. On other occasions, they suggested that the focus should lay on these facts and that action must be taken. An example is the question of Hannes Swoboda during the meeting of 25 February 2014.²³ In general, Rehn did not immediately react. He gave rather extensive speeches and broad answers, but they were often not really to the point or were insufficiently detailed. There were no, or very few, consequences or other means of serious pressure and Rehn was able to leave the sittings without responding to questions addressed to him.

Rehn and the national parliaments

Olli Rehn was heard by the Commission for European Affairs, the Commission of Foreign Affairs, the Commission of Finances of the French Assemblée Nationale,²⁴ and then by the Commission for Finances

20 For example, during the European Parliament debate of 12 March 2014, Strasbourg. The questions asked to Rehn were informative in general, however, Rehn didn't stay to answer them. He only gave an introductory speech. It was a debate at times, but Rehn wasn't really involved in it.

21 Laid down in Rule 149(8) of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure, n. 5, above.

22 For example, during the European Parliament debate of 5 February 2013, Strasbourg.

23 Hannes Swoboda, during the European Parliament debate of 25 February 2014, Strasbourg.

24 18 June 2013. Transcript available in French at www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/europe/c-rendus/c0069.asp.

and Budgetary Control of the French Sénat.²⁵ Rehn spent one hour at the Assemblée and probably one hour at the Sénat, and gave the same speech to both institutions. He also visited a number of other national parliaments – for example, the Greek one in 2010 and the Italian one in 2013.²⁶ In the Netherlands it seems there were several meetings (and a live recording) with the Dutch parliament in the context of the European Semester, but transcripts of these meetings are not available.²⁷

The transcripts that do exist (such as for the French parliament) suggest two key insights: first, the dialogue between national parliaments and EU leaders enables the latter to explain the policy choices made at the EU level, thus permitting information to reach the benches of parliament. Secondly, it is the opportunity for parliamentarians to question EU representatives, notably concerning the evolution of the EMU, even though the time allotted to such dialogues is often too short. For example, in France Rehn came to explain and defend the 2013 CSRs addressed to France. He presented the recent achievements of the EU (the economic governance, the banking union, fiscal consolidation, and the renewed credibility of the EU on the markets) and its objectives (an autonomous EU able to manage internal crisis without the help of the IMF and sustainable growth). Rehn went a bit into the details of the ESM, EFSF, and the EMU when asked by Jean Arthuis, a centrist Senator, but his answer was rather brief.

Rehn and inter-parliamentary forums

In the past years, Rehn has attended a number of inter-parliamentary forums. The Inter-Parliamentary Committee Meeting on the European Semester which took place on 27–28 February 2012 is one of them. In his speech at that event,²⁸ Rehn argued that while economic policies were a matter of common concern, national governments remained in charge of these policies; therefore, there was a need ‘to ensure that national

25 Transcript available in French at www.nossenateurs.fr/seance/9555#table_40124.

26 Rehn’s speech at the Italian Parliament, Rome, 17 September 2013; Rehn’s speech at the Greek Parliament, Athens, 9 December 2010.

27 Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV), *Public Support for the European Union: Building Trust*, Advisory Report No. 88, April 2014, 29–30, citing H. Beun (2014), Tweede Kamer voert al dialoog met Europese Commissie (House of Representatives, already in dialogue with the European Commission), *Internationale Spectator*, no. 45, 44–45.

28 Rehn’s speech of 28 February 2012, Brussels.

parliaments [were] completely involved in the whole cycle of economic policy-making at the European level'. According to Rehn, ownership and democratic accountability at the national level was indispensable for success on the European level.

Another key inter-parliamentary event which Rehn attended was the European Parliamentary Week (EPW) on the European Semester which took place on 28–30 January 2013. Rehn's speech, delivered at the opening plenary session of the event,²⁹ was followed by a brief exchange of views with MEPs and national parliamentarians.³⁰ A recent COSAC report, however, points out that some national parliaments were dissatisfied with the level of engagement with representatives of EU institutions during the 2013 EPW.³¹ For instance, the Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna* argued that there was a 'lack of opportunities for a dialogue and debate with the Presidents of the European Union Institutions', while the Czech *Senát* complained of a lack of genuine dialogue on semester-related topics, with the 'EU representatives showing up only to read their short speeches and then leaving the event without engaging in any dialogue with national Parliaments'. The French *Sénat* referred to the debates as simply a juxtaposition of speeches with no conclusions, while the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* claimed that these types of meetings tended to result in 'unrelated monologues'.³²

Rehn also attended the 2014 EPW which took place on 20–22 January and hosted within its framework the second Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Economic Governance along with inter-parliamentary committee meetings on the European Semester.³³ During this event, Rehn addressed the parliamentarians on two separate occasions, and his speeches were followed by an exchange of views of more than one hour.³⁴

29 Rehn's speech of 29 January 2013, Opening Plenary Session Parliamentary Week, Brussels.

30 Based on the EPW 2013 event programme available at www.europarl.europa.eu/webnp/webdav/site/myjahiasite/users/malfons/public/week%202013/EPW%20FINAL%20programme.pdf.

31 COSAC, 'Nineteenth Bi-annual Report: Developments in European Union Procedures and Practices Relevant to Parliamentary Scrutiny' (May 2013), 17–18.

32 Ibid.

33 Created on the basis of Article 13 TSCG.

34 Based on the EPW 2014 provisional event programme available at www.europarl.europa.eu/webnp/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/EPW%202014/European%20Parliamentary%20Week%202014%20EN%20-%20draft%20100114.pdf.

The political accountability of the European Central Bank: informative and intensive dialogues, some critical debates

President Draghi and the European Parliament

In the context of monetary policy, the legal basis for the ECB's accountability to the European Parliament is Article 284(3) TFEU (ex-Article 113(3) TEC), which provides that the ECB will send the European Parliament an annual report on the activities of the ECB and on the monetary policy of both the previous and current year. Moreover, the President of the ECB is to present this report to the European Parliament which then may hold a general debate on the basis of this report. In addition, it is provided that the President of the ECB and the other members of the Executive Board may, at the request of the European Parliament or on their own initiative, be heard by the competent committees of the European Parliament. While Article 113(3) TEC only mandated the presentation of the annual report to the European Parliament, Rule 113 of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure created the additional requirement of the ECB President appearing before the ECON committee at least four times a year (Fasone 2014: 175).³⁵ These appearances of the ECB President before the European Parliament – in plenary and in the ECON committee – is what became known as the Monetary Dialogue (ibid.). Finally, according to Rule 118 of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure, any Member of the European Parliament may also submit a question for written answer to the ECB.

Article 284(3) TFEU provides that not just the President but also the other members of the Executive Board may be heard by ECON, but it makes no reference to the members of *the Governing Council*. The Governing Council is composed of the six members of the Executive Board and the governors of the national central banks of the 18 euro-area states. As Article 284(3) TFEU makes no mention of the Governing Council, there is no Treaty obligation for the national central bank presidents to appear before the ECON committee (Amttenbrink 2002: 161). Thus, 18 out of the 24 members of the Governing Council are shielded from accountability at the European level, and it is doubtful whether this accountability gap is properly filled by national parliaments. According to Amttenbrink, 'it seems difficult to imagine that an individual central bank governor [...] would be held accountable for the conduct of the Governing Council as a whole' (ibid.). Moreover, the argument that presidents of national central

35 European Parliament Rules of Procedure, n. 5, above.

banks should be accountable only to national parliaments does not hold because when they act as members of the Governing Council, they perform ECB-related tasks (*ibid.*) and take decisions, which affect the euro area as a whole.

As to the *de facto* accountability of the ECB to the European Parliament on monetary policy, in the post-financial crisis years (2009–14), the ECB Presidents Trichet and Draghi attended five meetings in plenary. These were all meetings to discuss the *ECB Annual Report*. Trichet attended the meetings on the reports of 2008³⁶ and 2009,³⁷ while Draghi attended the meetings on the reports of 2010,³⁸ 2011,³⁹ and 2012.⁴⁰ Both Trichet and Draghi gave an introductory speech and concluded with general remarks on what was discussed during the meetings. The Parliamentarians expressed their views, gave comments, and asked questions. Trichet and Draghi did not answer them immediately, but made a selection and commented on this selection during the concluding speech. The majority of the contributions by the Parliamentarians consisted of political statements. Most of them did not contain explicit criticism or accusations, with some exceptions.⁴¹ The structure of the meetings did not really allow for a debate to take place. In that regard the meetings were very similar to those with Van Rompuy and Rehn. There was an opening speech, the Parliamentarians expressed their views and concerns and asked the Presidents to elaborate and, in some instances, to justify certain decisions. The Presidents ended the meeting with concluding remarks which covered most of the topic but almost never included specific responses to the critiques. Apart from some individual members of parliament, there were no strong negative judgements expressed.

Trichet and Draghi also engaged in a *monetary dialogue* with the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee four times a year. Between 2009 and 2014, they attended these monetary dialogues 21 times. According to the minutes on the website of ECON, Draghi only visited the Committee one other time as President of the ECB. The same goes for Trichet.⁴² The nature of the monetary dialogues, in general, is informative, but with some room for critique and debate. Draghi usually starts with a speech, followed

36 (25-03-2010).

37 (22-11-2010).

38 (01-12-2011).

39 (16-04-2013).

40 (12-12-2013).

41 For example, the European Parliament debate of 22 November 2010, Strasbourg.

42 They did attend public hearings as Chairman of the ESRB.

by Parliamentarians asking questions, which are immediately answered by Draghi. This setting is rather informal and allows Parliamentarians to react immediately to a response given by Draghi, thereby creating opportunities for more genuine political debates.⁴³ This occurs during most of the meetings, although not always.⁴⁴ Parliamentarians ask mostly informative questions. They seek to know Draghi's (and the ECB's) position on certain matters and (possible) developments. They want Draghi to explain how some words are going to be put into action.⁴⁵ These questions are mostly combined with their own views, suggestions, or speculations. The responses given by Draghi are mostly extensive and detailed. He explains the views and strategies of the ECB and does not go into the negative speculations and scenarios expressed by Parliamentarians. Sometimes a critical question⁴⁶ or a comment forces Draghi to take a defensive position,⁴⁷ and in very rare instances Draghi is asked to give some sort of justification.⁴⁸ It also occurs that a Parliamentarian is not satisfied with the answers given by Draghi and asks additional questions.⁴⁹ Draghi always responds to these questions. For Trichet the analysis is almost entirely the same: the majority of questions were informative and concerned the views,

43 For example, during the Monetary Dialogue of 3 March 2014, Brussels, where Sampo Terho, Pablo Zalba Bidegain, and Markus Ferber used this opportunity, or the Monetary Dialogue of 23 September 2013, Brussels, where Sylvie Goulard wouldn't stop after one answer. The best example is the dialogue between Draghi and Philippe Lamberts during the Monetary Dialogue of 9 July 2012, Brussels (which was in fact partly on the accountability of the ECB/Draghi).

44 Indeed, in some meetings the structure was more like those of the economic dialogues with Olli Rehn: 3 questions – reaction, 3 questions – reaction, etc. See, for example, the Monetary Dialogue of 9 October 2012, Brussels.

45 For example, Arlene McCarthy during the Monetary Dialogue of 17 December 2012, Brussels.

46 See, for example, Nikolas Chountis and the Chair during the Monetary Dialogue of 23 September 2013, Brussels; Derk Jan Eppink during the Monetary Dialogue of 25 April 2012, Brussels, or during the Monetary Dialogue of 8 July 2013, Brussels, where he sketches a possible negative scenario that would be caused (at least partly) by a decision taken by Draghi, or the question asked by Wolf Klinz during the Monetary Dialogue of 16 December 2013, where he ascertains that the ECB policy might not be functioning.

47 For example, Pascal Canfin during the Monetary Dialogue of 25 April 2012, Brussels, or Olle Schmidt during this same meeting.

48 For example, Astrid Lulling during the Monetary Dialogue of 16 December 2013, Brussels.

49 For example, Nikolas Chountis and Astrid Lulling during the Monetary Dialogue of 8 July 2013, Brussels or Werner Langer, Pablo Zalba Bidegain and Anni Podimata during the Monetary Dialogue of 23 September 2013, Brussels.

expectations, and strategies of Trichet and the ECB. Critical questions and debates were very rare.

Overall the structure of the monetary dialogues provides a good platform for an intensive debate with the President of the ECB. The Parliamentarians ask many questions to Draghi and Trichet and never debate with each other. The questions are mostly of an informative nature. Draghi and Trichet answer almost all questions, although sometimes they avoid commenting on the core issue (especially with regard to speculations and comments made by others). As one of them said, 'they comment on facts only'. In addition to informative questions, sometimes doubts and criticisms are expressed, but these tend to be rather mild and remain limited to individual members. In some instances, a debate takes place between the President of the ECB and a European Parliament member. The member mostly asks follow-up questions, but in some instances reacts with comments and mild countering ideas. The Presidents both respond to almost all follow-up questions and comments.

In addition to such 'immediate' responses it seems that there may be a delayed response in the sense of the ECB incorporating points raised during the European Parliament dialogue in its further monetary policy-making (Eijffinger and Mujagic 2004). Earlier qualitative work found that the ECB is in fact 'highly responsive' to the ECON and some changes were implemented (*ibid.*). There is clearly scope for the monetary dialogue to evolve and improve further especially when account is taken of its national equivalents in the USA and in the United Kingdom (Claeys et al. 2014).

The ECB is now empowered in addition to monetary policy with specific tasks concerning the prudential supervision of credit institutions established in participating member states. It carries out these tasks within a Single Supervisory Mechanism (hereafter: SSM) composed of the ECB and the national competent authorities. Accountability to the European Parliament within this framework is governed by Article 20 of the SSM Regulation⁵⁰ and an Interinstitutional Agreement signed by the ECB and the European Parliament.⁵¹ The requirements of accountability with regard to the prudential supervisory role of the ECB are more demanding than

50 Regulation 1024/2013 conferring specific tasks on the European Central Bank concerning policies relating to the prudential supervision of credit institutions, OJ 2013, L 287/63.

51 Interinstitutional Agreement between the European Parliament and the European Central Bank on the practical modalities of the exercise of democratic accountability and oversight over the exercise of the tasks conferred on the ECB within the framework of the Single Supervisory Mechanism [2013] OJ L 320/1.

those in relation to its monetary policy function. Thus, under Article 20 SSM Regulation, the Chair of the Supervisory Board is not only required to present an annual report to the European Parliament in plenary, reply to questions from MEPs, and appear before the ECON committee upon request, but she must also divulge sensitive information – although in ‘confidential oral discussions behind closed doors’ – and cooperate with European Parliament investigations.

The Interinstitutional Agreement between the European Parliament and the ECB provides for more detailed arrangements regarding the requirements spelled out in Article 20 SSM Regulation. The agreement requires the Chair of the Supervisory Board to attend two *ordinary public hearings* at the ECON committee ‘in the course of the following year’,⁵² that is during the transition period from 3 November 2013 to 4 November 2014. No reference is made to a specific number of meetings following the transition period – once the ECB formally assumes its supervisory tasks. Accordingly, it is still to be seen whether these meetings will take place twice a year or more frequently, as is the case for the ECB President who attends four monetary dialogues annually. What is also striking is that only the Chair and the Vice-Chairs of the ECON committee may attend the *confidential meetings* with the Chair of the Supervisory Board.⁵³ Moreover, the Interinstitutional Agreement states that: ‘No minutes or any other recording of the confidential meetings shall be taken. No statement shall be made for the press or any other media. Each participant to the confidential discussions shall sign every time a solemn declaration not to divulge the content of those discussions to any third person.’

These strict confidentiality requirements make it difficult to assess the de facto accountability arrangements at the time of writing this article (and perhaps permanently). Even though the Interinstitutional Agreement provides room for more accountability to the European Parliament as such, the extensive emphasis on secrecy and confidentiality with regard to all the information supplied by the ECB to the European Parliament does not leave much room for public discussion or debate on this information in plenary or even in the ECON committee. This in turn removes the raw ingredients for accountability – information and deliberation – from public space. The question whether this is justified in a general fashion and the wider context of parliaments (in this instance the European Parliament) agreeing to non-public accountability processes is beyond the scope of this

52 Section I.2, first para. of the EP-ECB Interinstitutional Agreement.

53 Section I.2, tenth para. of the EP-ECB Interinstitutional Agreement.

chapter. For now, the SSM web presence under the heading accountability is (much) thinner than its monetary dialogue counterpart with only the quarterly reports submitted by the ECB to the European Parliament during the preparatory phase available at the time this chapter was written (in addition to answers to MEPs' written questions).

President Draghi and the national parliaments

It was explicitly stated by the ECB in its response to a recent European Parliament questionnaire that, '[t]he ECB is not accountable to national parliaments.'⁵⁴ This statement applies to its activities in the areas of both monetary policy and banking supervision. However, when it comes to reporting obligations and an exchange of views, there are differences between these two distinct spheres of activity of the ECB. In the context of monetary policy, there is no legal framework for scrutiny by the national parliaments, nor are there any reporting obligations on the ECB. In contrast, the supervisory functions of the ECB entail certain formal reporting obligations towards the national parliaments along with the possibility to invite the Chair or a member of the Supervisory Board to appear before a national parliament. This is laid down in Article 21 of the SSM Regulation.⁵⁵

Jean-Claude Trichet, former President of the ECB, was heard once within the framework of a French parliamentary commission of inquiry concerning tax avoidance. He explained how and why the financial crisis of 2008 emerged, and notably advocated for an international entity responsible for the enforcement of international standards for supervision of banks.⁵⁶ He refused (7 May 2014) to attend the *Oireachtas* Committee of Inquiry into the Banking Crisis arguing that there was no responsibility to the national level or need to account. This attitude seems a bit out of kilter with newer practices of his successor and may have to do with a (secret) letter he sent to the Irish Finance Minister just before Ireland bailed out Anglo Irish Bank.

In recent years, the ECB President has visited several national parliaments. Draghi's first visit to the German *Bundestag* took place on 24 October

54 'ECB response to the questionnaire of the European Parliament on the Troika' published on the ECB website on 10 January 2014. www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/other/140110_ecb_response_troika_questionnaireen.pdf.

55 Regulation 1024/2013, n. 50, above.

56 16 July 2013. Transcript available in French at www.senat.fr/rap/r13-087-2/r13-087-224.html#toc35.

2012. In his speech Draghi stated that '[i]t was rare for the ECB President to speak in a national parliament' and that the ECB was accountable to the European Parliament.⁵⁷ However, he stated that the purpose of his visit was to 'explain ECB's policies' and to listen to the views of the parliamentarians. The remainder of his speech was devoted to the explanation of the rationale behind ECB's introduction of the Outright Monetary Transactions (OMTs) and addressed the potential concerns of German observers over the impact of this policy. He also emphasized that the ECB was acting within its mandate and that it was still fully independent. He concluded by stating that he looked forward to the discussion with the MPs.

Draghi appeared before the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados* on 12 February 2013. His speech focused on three subjects: the state of the economy, the ECB's monetary policy, and its long-term vision on the economic and monetary union.⁵⁸ Regarding the state of the economy, he stated that there were some improvements (also in Spain), but that he was aware of the heavy social costs of the adjustments. However, he argued that 'the reforms should not be seen in isolation: they aim[ed] to create stronger, better functioning and [...] fairer economies, for the benefit of all citizens.' Regarding the ECB's monetary policy, he discussed the provision of liquidity to banks through long-term refinancing operations (LTROs) and the ECB's bond-buying activities through OMTs, arguing that these measures had led to improvement in the financial environment. Finally, as to the longer-term vision of the EMU, he talked about the financial, fiscal, economic aspects and eventually a 'deeper political union'. He mentioned the SSM and the SRM as the steps towards a financial union and the need to restore competitiveness in order to achieve a genuine EMU. He concluded the speech by opening the floor to opinions and questions.

Draghi visited the French *Assemblée Nationale* on 26 June 2013. His speech to the French parliament was very similar to the one delivered before the Spanish congress.⁵⁹ He discussed the same three topics: ECB's monetary policy, growth and adjustment in the euro area, and progress towards a deeper EMU. In the final part of his speech, he also spoke of increasing democratic legitimacy parallel to the transfer of greater authority to the EU level, stating that the European Parliament and national parliaments had a key role to play in this respect.

57 Opening Statement at Deutscher Bundestag by Mario Draghi, Berlin, 24 October 2012.

58 Introductory Statement at the Congreso de los Diputados de España, Madrid, 12 February 2013.

59 Introductory Remarks at the French Assemblée Nationale, Paris, 26 June 2013.

To sum up, Draghi's visit to the German Bundestag was primarily aimed at explaining and justifying the ECB's unconventional measures, while his Spanish and French visits focused greatly on underlining the positive effects of the unconventional measures and emphasizing the importance of structural reforms. Moreover, in both the Spanish and the French speeches, he advocated the banking union, a deepening of the EMU in all other dimensions of economic policy, and the achievement of a political union. In this respect, the speech before the French assembly was much more ambitious than the one before the Spanish congress, as Draghi made explicit references to a transfer of power to the EU and even to a United States of Europe.

President Draghi and inter-parliamentary forums

There seems to be no track record of the ECB attending inter-parliamentary conferences organized by the European Parliament.⁶⁰ The bi-annual reports of COSAC barely mention the ECB and there is no record of President Draghi engaging with them.

Conclusion: emerging post-crisis political accountabilities

Some Presidents are more accountable than others

We can observe the emergence of some formal and informal accountability relations between the trinity of executive actors and the European Parliament and (some) national parliaments in the post-crises years. However, the emerging political accountability regime is denser for some presidents than for others.

Contrary to our expectations, the political accountability relations of Draghi, the ECB President, are the most developed.⁶¹ The structure of the monetary dialogues provides a good platform for an intensive debate with the President of the ECB. The Parliamentarians ask many questions

60 See the European Parliament webpage on Relations with National Parliaments: www.europarl.europa.eu/webnp/cms/pid/11;jsessionid=8F715C78DF5D938D3F1FA12F9200BE00.

61 It must be noted that despite our conclusion that compared to Rehn and Van Rompuy, Draghi is more accountable to the European Parliament, we do not claim that the ECB is a very accountable institution as such. The criticisms voiced by Claeys, Hallerberg and Tschekassin (2014) regarding the European Parliament's lack of sanctioning powers and its merely consultative role in the appointment of the ECB executive board are certainly valid. The European Parliament does have the right to approve the Chair and Vice-Chair of the SSM Supervisory Board but the ECB selects the candidates. The long-standing criticism regarding the publication of the minutes of the Governing Council is currently being addressed by the ECB: www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2014/html/pr140703_1_en.html.

to Draghi and Trichet and some forms of political debate do develop. Secondly, the requirements of accountability with regard to the supervisory role of the ECB are more demanding than those in relation to its monetary policy function. The Chair of the ECB Supervisory Board is not only required to present an annual report to the European Parliament in plenary, to reply to questions from MEPs and appear before the ECON committee upon request, but she must also divulge sensitive information and cooperate with European Parliament investigations. Some preliminary steps have been taken to engage in a dialogue with national parliaments.

Olli Rehn, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the euro, comes in second. The European Parliament has several formal powers to oblige him to provide information and to engage in debate. The most important tool for the European Parliament in this respect is the economic dialogue. Accountability in the books is not yet fully matched by accountability in practice. During the parliamentary term of 2009–14, Olli Rehn attended no fewer than 44 plenary meetings. However, the nature of these meetings is rather informative. The European Parliament does not confront Rehn and he can get away with rather extensive speeches and broad answers. There are no, or very few, consequences or other means of serious political pressure. With regard to national parliaments, while Rehn has made several visits, they appear to be more informative in nature rather than of the kind that entail genuine debate, let alone judgement by parliamentarians.

Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, has been the least accountable of the trinity in the post-crises years. The *de jure* accountability arrangement between the European Parliament and the European Council is traditionally very limited and basically only covers the provision of general information. Van Rompuy appeared in the European Parliament only three times a year on average and the setting of the meetings does not stimulate a real and intensive debate. The accountability relationship with national parliaments is still in its infancy and was restricted to occasional visits and ‘set’ speeches with very little debate and no opportunities for judgement or sanctioning.

*Evolving supranational, very-limited
intergovernmental political accountability*

Most accountability relations that have evolved are with the European Parliament and with its committees. Particularly the economic and monetary dialogues with the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee

provide promising venues for political executive accountability. Accountability relations with national parliaments are non-existent or very limited. Some of these presidents have visited some national parliaments, but there are no formal requirements to do so and the informal practices are fragmented and incidental. There are some inter-parliamentary initiatives, such as COSAC, that may provide a road towards future executive intergovernmental accountability. However, these are still in their infancy and do not go beyond informing.

An important question for further research is how EU executive accountability compares with national executive accountability. This first exploration suggests that the political accountability of the presidents of the ECB comes out most favourably. Trichet and Draghi often appeared in the European Parliament and its committees and they have been quite forthcoming, compared to some of their national counterparts.⁶² The political accountability of the EU Commission and its (Vice-)President vis-à-vis the European Parliament is gradually 'normalising' (Wille 2013) and step by step starts to resemble executive accountability to parliaments at the national level. However, there are still many steps to be taken. Vice-President Rehn visited the European Parliament no fewer than 44 times, but the accountability relation did not go much beyond informing. The political accountability of the President of the European Council compares the least favourably with national political leaders. There is virtually no regime of political accountability to the European Parliament, or to national parliaments, and in this respect this President is still 'out of control'.

The new executive powers that have been put in place at the EU level after the financial crises have not yet been followed by an equally robust set of formal accountability institutions and informal accountability practices. There are some provisions 'in the books', particularly regarding the relation between the Commission and the European Parliament, but these have not yet given rise to mature practices of political account giving. This is, to some extent, a natural course of affairs. In many member states it took years before parliamentary practices of political accountability fully matured. Often, accountability trails behind the establishment of executive power and it may take a while before we can observe a full 'normalization' of political-administrative relations (Wille 2013). However, given

62 For the relationship with parliament of the Banque de France, the Bank of England, the Bundesbank, the Nederlandsche Bank, among others, see Amtenbrink 1999: 286–308.

the outcome of the 2014 European Parliament elections and the strong parliamentary involvement in the formation of the new Commission, it is to be expected that the new European Parliament will exercise more of its accountability powers towards Moscovici, the new 'budget-tsar', and that the process of normalization will evolve further.

The desired level of political accountability of the ECB President is a point of vehement debate between the 'German' and the 'French' schools of thought. In past years, the ECB Presidents have been more forthcoming towards the European Parliament than some of their national counterparts towards their respective parliamentary forums.

The 'youngest' of the three presidencies, the President of the European Council, is by far the least accountable. The intergovernmental nature of this institution stands in the way of the development of substantive accountability practices. Twenty-eight national parliaments are too fragmented an institutional architecture to provide real countervailing powers. The EU presidency is, in practice, a form of supranational executive power and is very difficult to control by solitary intergovernmental forums. In the long run, either some sort of assembly of national parliaments will have to be developed that can act as an intergovernmental forum of parliamentary accountability or the European Parliament has to step in here too. Time will tell if Donald Tusk remains 'out of control' or even if it matters.

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