

European Council preview: who will get the EU's remaining top jobs?

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On Saturday, EU leaders will hold a meeting aimed at selecting the next European Council President and the next High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Ahead of the discussions, [Stuart Brown](#) provides an overview of the main candidates and assesses the most likely winners for each post.



Since Jean-Claude Juncker's appointment as President of the European Commission in July, attention has focused on the remaining 'top jobs' still to be determined in the aftermath of the 2014 European Parliament elections: chiefly the President of the European Council, currently held by Herman Van Rompuy, and the replacement for Catherine Ashton as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. After months of speculation, the new appointments are expected to be made at a [special meeting](#) of the European Council on 30 August, but there is still some uncertainty over which of the possible candidates will be successful.

Both positions will be determined by the members of the European Council using [qualified majority voting](#) (although a consensus would be beneficial politically), while the High Representative for Foreign Affairs role will also have to be approved by the European Parliament, given the position is formally a part of the European Commission. The President of the European Council will serve for a period of two and a half years with the potential for this to be renewed once (as happened with Van Rompuy in 2012), while the High Representative will serve a five year term.

In addition, the Euro Summit – which functions in a broadly similar manner to the summits of the European Council but only includes heads of state or government from members of the Eurozone – will also have a formal President elected. The final makeup of the Commission is not expected to be decided until September, however, in part because there had been some suggestion that certain states may wish to change their nominated Commissioner depending on the outcome of the negotiations over Van Rompuy and Ashton's successors.

President of the European Council

There are at least six serious candidates who have been touted to replace Herman Van Rompuy as President of the European Council: [Donald Tusk](#) (Poland's Prime Minister); [Valdis Dombrovskis](#) (former Prime Minister of Latvia); [Andrus Ansip](#) (former Prime Minister of Estonia); [Helle Thorning-Schmidt](#) (the Danish Prime Minister); [Jyrki Katainen](#) (former Prime Minister of Finland); and [Enda Kenny](#) (Ireland's Prime Minister).

As ever, the discussions have been led not only by the individual candidates' strengths and weaknesses, but also by the need to maintain the right balance among appointments in terms of geography, political affiliation and gender. In this sense there has been a general assumption that the chosen candidate is likely to come from one of the Central and Eastern European member states, given these states had been overlooked for previous appointments since the 2004 enlargement. This would make Tusk, Dombrovskis and Ansip the most likely winners; however, this is not a priority shared by all member states and candidates from elsewhere in the EU are also being considered.

The second key element at play is that with a centre-left candidate widely expected to win the High Representative position, those on the centre-right have a natural advantage with respect to political balance. Of the six candidates mentioned, Tusk, Dombrovskis, Katainen and Kenny all represent parties affiliated to the [European People's Party](#). Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the leader of Denmark's [Social Democrats](#), is the only candidate explicitly affiliated to the centre-left. Ansip, on the other hand, whose liberal [Estonian Reform Party](#) is a member of the [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe](#) (ALDE), has been mentioned as something of a compromise candidate, particularly as ALDE have a pivotal position in the European Parliament and could potentially hold up the

approval of the new European Commission.

The only two candidates meeting both criteria are Tusk and Dombrovskis, but enthusiasm for Dombrovskis seems to be limited due to his low profile outside of Latvia. Although the European Council's experience with Van Rompuy – who was famously [derided](#) by Nigel Farage for having the charisma of a “damp rag” – might suggest that a big personality is not necessarily required to perform the role of the President effectively; the consensus at present is that if a Central and Eastern European politician is selected, Tusk is the far more likely candidate – and, indeed, the Polish Prime Minister was [reported](#) in several media sources on 28 August as being the favourite ahead of Saturday's meeting.



Donald Tusk, Credit: Andrzej Barabas (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Nevertheless, despite not meeting the geographic or political criteria above, Helle Thorning-Schmidt has emerged as the main alternative candidate. The Danish Prime Minister has two key advantages over her Polish rival. First, unlike Tusk, she is fluent in both English and French, which is important not only in terms of her ability to oversee contentious European Council negotiations, but also with respect to the President's role in representing the EU externally. Second, as a female candidate, she would go some way toward alleviating the [under-representation of women](#) at the highest levels of EU decision-making, although it is unclear whether a female candidate being selected in the High Representative role would have an impact in this respect.

The decision is therefore expected to come down to a [two horse race](#) between Tusk and Thorning-Schmidt, with a compromise candidate possible if no consensus can be reached. Jyrki Katainen would be an option in this respect, particularly as Finland's close proximity to Russia arguably makes him more in tune with the concerns of Eastern European member states over the Ukraine crisis. He would also, unlike Tusk and Thorning-Schmidt, represent a candidate from a state currently using the euro, which could work in his favour.

High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Unlike the President of the European Council, there is a clear favourite for the High Representative position in the shape of Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs [Federica Mogherini](#). Despite this consensus, Mogherini has nevertheless produced some disagreement among member states and last-minute changes can never be ruled out with EU appointments.

The key argument against Mogherini is that while she meets all of the criteria for the position in terms of maintaining balance, on a personal level she lacks experience and has been deemed too ‘soft’ on Russia by certain states: notably in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, who objected to her appointment in the previous European Council meeting aimed at discussing the issue in July. Mogherini was only appointed to her role in Matteo Renzi's Italian government earlier this year, but has been accused of pursuing a conciliatory approach toward Russia, underlined by her decision to travel to Moscow for a meeting with Vladimir Putin shortly after Italy took on the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The factors in her favour are chiefly that as a member of Italy's [Democratic Party](#) she is on the centre-left of the political spectrum, while if Helle Thorning-Schmidt failed to be appointed as President of the European Council then it would likely be deemed necessary to have a female High Representative to ensure an adequate gender balance. In addition, a number of media sources, such as the French newspaper [Le Monde](#), have drawn attention to the need for German Chancellor Angela Merkel to provide a concession to Renzi in return for co-operation on her economic

strategy. It is also worth stating that Catherine Ashton was largely inexperienced in foreign policy prior to her appointment (indeed far more so than the current Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs) and was put forward for broadly similar reasons – namely because she ticked all of the relevant boxes rather than for her individual merits as a political actor.

Arguably just as important as the negotiations over the appointments will be the planned [discussions](#) at the European Council meeting over the situations in Ukraine, Iraq and Gaza. This underlines that whoever is selected to take on the High Representative role – whether Mogherini or another candidate – will be faced with the unenviable task of attempting to facilitate a common policy among all 28 member states on several highly contentious and difficult foreign policy issues. Under the circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that issues of geographic and political balance are coming into conflict with the need to produce tangible foreign policy goals.



Frederica Mogherini, Credit: CTBTO (CC-BY-SA-NC-3.0)

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