

Blair reappears on shortlist to head EU

By Tony Barber in Brussels

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Tony Blair, the former UK prime minister, is re-emerging as a possible choice to be the European Union's first full-time president after four momentous crises reinforced the argument for having a high-profile international personality in the job.

According to EU officials and diplomats, the impressive performance of Nicolas Sarkozy, France's president, during his six-month spell in charge of the EU last year has strengthened the hand of those who say a big name should guide the 27-nation bloc.

In one sense, the discussions are premature. The full-time president will take office next year only if the EU's Lisbon institutional reform treaty, which creates the position, is ratified by all member-states – notably, Ireland, which is expected to hold a second referendum on the treaty between September and December.

But the sheer scale of the challenges facing the EU – from last August's Russia-Georgia war and the global financial meltdown to the Gaza conflict and the shutdown of Russian gas deliveries to Europe – is redefining the debate.

Whereas last year Germany and other countries looked favourably on candidates such as Jean-Claude Juncker, the long-serving prime minister of Luxembourg, more policymakers now feel the EU presidency demands an occupant from a much bigger member-state.

"Sarkozy concentrated minds," said an EU diplomat. "He made a lot of us think, 'When the going gets rough, you've just got to have a big person in this job.'"

At present the EU presidency – held since January 1 by the Czech Republic – rotates every six months.

However, the balance of EU opinion is now in favour of not letting the vital task of representing the EU to big powers such as the US, China and Russia pass from one capital to another every six months.

Mr Blair's name has often cropped up in connection with the job, but last year several factors worked against him, such as his close partnership with George W. Bush, the outgoing US president, and his perceived talent for publicly supporting the EU without being bold enough to commit the UK to closer involvement, for example, by adopting the euro.

EU diplomats said these reservations still applied but had diminished over time and with the recognition that Mr Blair was one of Europe's few genuine stars on the world stage.

In what looked like a "rehabilitation" of Mr Blair's standing in the Franco-German core of the EU, the former premier shared the spotlight last Thursday with Mr Sarkozy and Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, at a Paris conference on the future of capitalism.

Mr Blair's chances of getting the job – should it ever be created – may improve as a result of an impending re-distribution of powerful jobs among European leaders.

Under one scenario, José Manuel Barroso of Portugal would keep his job as European Commission president, and the post of EU foreign policy chief would go to Jaap de Hoop Scheffer of the Netherlands, currently Nato's secretary-general.

The Nato job would go to Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark's prime minister, and the European parliament presidency would be shared between Martin Schulz of Germany and Jerzy Buzek of Poland.

With France's Jean-Claude Trichet as European Central Bank president and Dominique Strauss-Kahn as International Monetary Fund managing director, the case for having a Briton as EU president would on paper be strong.

Mr Blair's spokesman said on Sunday: "The job [as EU president] doesn't even exist so the question doesn't arise. He's fully focused on his work in the Middle East."

