

The Juncker Commission: A bold bid to restore the College

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In announcing the composition and structure of the new European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker has indicated his determination to fundamentally change the structure at the top and his capacity to think ahead in the division of the portfolios and to juggle many different personalities in the College. The clustering of commissioners around seven project teams, each headed by a vice-president, promises to improve internal coordination, policy-making and transparency of rule-making and to reduce the personalisation of portfolios. At the same time, Juncker has restructured the Directorates-General to make them fit better with the new division of responsibilities. He will now need to demonstrate that he can make it work in practice.

In his maiden speech before the European Parliament on July 15th, Juncker unveiled his intention to change the functioning of the new Commission, with the proposal to deputise the external portfolios in the Commission to the High Representative. He has now extended this concept to the entire Commission College with the seven 'Project Teams', representing the priority areas for the EU Commission for the years to come. Energy Union is one of these projects, as well as better regulation and the digital single market. The heavy portfolio Single Market, previously under Commissioner Michel Barnier, has been split over several different Commissioners.

Attributing 26 different portfolios across the College, taking into account the personality, nationality, and expertise of each Commissioner-designate and ensuring that the scheme will work efficiently and consistently is a gigantic task. At first sight, the Commission president seems to have managed to come to a well-balanced and workable division of responsibilities, addressing shortcomings related to the large number of commissioners without creating first- and second-class commissioners but promoting collegiality.¹ All the vice presidents, except the High Representative, come from smaller member states. Five of them have no Directorate General. The Commissioners appointed by the governments of the other five larger member states have been given important portfolios, with one or two DGs under their

¹ In its examination of these shortcomings in terms of both efficiency and democratic accountability, the CEPS High-Level Group on EU institutional reform recommended the creation of clustered commissioners (see www.ceps.be/book/shifting-eu-institutional-reform-high-gear-report-ceps-high-level-group).

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responsibility, but they will need to share responsibility for these portfolios with a vice president and work together with other members of the Commission. This is also the case of Commissioner Lord Hill, who will be in charge of financial services and the Capital Markets Union but will also have to work in close cooperation with the Vice Presidents responsible for the Euro and Social Dialogue and Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness. Given the advent of the SSM (Single Supervisory Mechanism) and Banking Union, maintaining coherence in the single financial market will be a challenge, especially for a politician from a non-eurozone member state.

Another novelty is the creation of the post of first vice president. The Commissioner-designate for this new position is the current Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans, who belongs to the other main political family in the European Parliament, the Socialist Party (PES), and enjoys a strong reputation at home. He is charged with two rather different tasks, better regulation and Rule of Law. The socialists therefore have been given a very high profile in the new Commission (the High Representative is also a socialist). The other vice presidents come from the liberal group (Alenka Bratušek for Energy Union and Andrus Ansip for Digital Single Market) and the centre right group (Kristalina Georgieva for Budget and Human Resources, Jyrki Katainen for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness and Valdis Dombrovskis for the Euro and Social Dialogue). This is another important signal that Juncker wants the Commission to work as a college. As he said in his opening statement, the Commission will be political, but not politicised.

Very few of the portfolios of the last Commission have survived as they were previously known, with the exception of those related to core competences that are more difficult to split or to merge with others, such as Competition and Trade. But here again, the designated Commissioners are expected to work together with the others, in project teams under the leadership of a vice-president. The main challenge is ensuring that these teams can effectively work together. The 'mission letters' sent by President Juncker to the members of his team give some additional details, but questions remain.² This novelty is probably most important to clarify today for the portfolio of Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, Economic and Financial Affairs, which falls under the team of Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis, and for the portfolio of Miguel Arias Cañete, Climate Action and Energy, which falls under the team of Vice-President for Energy Union Bratušek. The dynamic team structure implies that some commissioners are expected to liaise with more than one vice-president, which in practice can produce results that are more complicated than expected.

It is now up to the European Parliament to give its consent to the entire College of Commissioners, including the President and the High-Representative and allow the Juncker Commission to start work on 1 November 2014. Despite the huge significance of this step in terms of reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions, it is important that the duration of the transition is kept to a minimum in light of the magnitude of the challenges facing the EU on all fronts.

² See http://ec.europa.eu/about/juncker-commission/mission/index_en.htm for the 'mission letters'.