

Beyond individuals: a more effective structure for the Commission

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In recent days, Brussels has been excited by the circulation of diagrams showing a re-organisation and allocation of posts in the new European Commission, reputedly coming from somewhere within Jean-Claude Juncker's team. Many have pointed out that some of the appointments seem unlikely, also noting that the diagram seems to miss the Enterprise and Single Market portfolios, where it is difficult to envisage their complete merger into other portfolios, given their size and importance. In addition, not only is the source of the document unknown, it could have been leaked for a specific purpose, for example to test out the reactions in some Member States or to push individual EU countries into action, for example by appointing a woman to get a better portfolio.

Making everyone happy?

According to the diagram, Germany receives trade which it reputedly aimed for, and France receives a strong economic portfolio in Competition, although not the economic and financial affairs one which was apparently the initial goal. Italy already has the President of the ECB and the High Representative. Poland not only receives a Vice-President (VP) portfolio (Budget) but already provides the next permanent President of the European Council.

Among the larger, more powerful countries, Spain might question whether a Commissioner on Research and Innovation is a significant enough post but the trickiest question is what to give to the UK, given that the UK is increasingly becoming Eurosceptic, making it difficult to give the UK a central, strategic portfolio. In the diagram, the UK receives the energy and climate change portfolio, which at first glance, seems to be a substantive scalp for London. Energy, alongside Single Market and trade, had been mooted as portfolios the UK could live with. In addition, there is a Better Regulation Vice President, ostensibly tackling the reform agenda that the UK has been calling for.

But it is hard to conceive that the UK would be happy with the allocation of some of the other portfolios, in particular handing the powerful Competition brief to France. At second glance, the energy and climate change post also could be a poisoned chalice. It is not clear how the two currently separate portfolios could be combined to create clear and coherent joint priorities. The post is also not the only one covering energy – there is a Vice-President for the Energy Union. It is unclear how competences and resources are going to be divided and who will have the final say on energy issues. While this might be the only way of delivering on such a complex priority, it raises questions about the importance of the UK Commissioner's portfolio.

Not obvious from first glance, but likely to be the most challenging for the UK is the allocation of the financial services brief, currently included in the Single Market portfolio. The most likely place seems to be with the Commissioner covering economic and financial affairs, who currently, is also responsible for the Euro, or with the VP covering growth and new economic governance, including EMU. Having financial services closely linked to the Euro/EMU is likely to raise many concerns in the mind of the British Government and in the City of London.

A better structure?

What is unclear from the diagram is whether the proposals will effectively streamline decision-making in the new Commission to overcome the strong silo mentality that has developed over time and can give rise to uncertainty over the overall direction and even create outright contradictions. No one expected a reduction in the number of Commissioners or having 'junior' and 'senior' Commissioners, given the impossibility to get political agreement for this from the Member States, but at least there seems to be an attempt to enhance the role of VPs, albeit falling short of creating clusters of Commissioners under the leadership of a VP.¹

¹ This proposal was developed in F. Zuleeg 'A more effective structure for the Commission' EPC Commentary, 7 March 2014
http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=4&pub_id=4230

It is not clear whether the leaked diagram proposes free-standing VPs, without a portfolio of their own and without a cluster to lead. If this is the case, while the high-level political background might provide the new VPs with personal authority, it is difficult to see how they can effectively 'direct' other Commissioners. For example, a freestanding VP on Better Regulation, as proposed in the leaked diagram, is unlikely to be effective: They would need to be able to influence all other portfolios in detailed legislative considerations and in a College of equals - which might be a challenge too far.

A VP leading a cluster of Commissioners is a different proposition altogether. Diagram A, in this publication, proposes an alternative to the leaked diagram, showing how existing portfolios could be merged and grouped thematically, with four new Vice-Presidents covering the following issues: *Growth, Single Market, Well-being, Citizenship & Mobility* and *Environment & Natural Resources*.² These four Vice-President posts do not have their own portfolio in order to ensure that there is not a particular focus on a specific policy agenda, thus taking a cross-cutting approach. Reflecting on their special roles, in the proposed structure there are Vice-Presidents with the Economic & Financial Affairs and with the Energy portfolios (without other Commissioners to coordinate but with their own portfolio) and the High Representative who leads a thematic cluster, but also retains their High Representative role. In this way, the structure of the Commission would mirror the overarching challenges of the EU, such as low growth, social divergence, the lack of a coherent policy on energy and the continuing need to reform and govern the Eurozone. It would also make for more effective translation of policy priorities into action.

If the leaked diagram was a test, it could be said that we have made some progress - but there is still some way to go. Let's hope that when Jean-Claude Juncker publishes the final allocation of posts in the new Commission, possibly sometime this week, it does not only reflect an acceptable political bargain but also makes progress in making the structure of the Brussels' executive more effective.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Commentary are the sole responsibility of the author.

² Some changes have been made to the original proposal presented in F. Zuleeg 'A more effective structure for the Commission': energy has become a Vice-President in its own right, citizenship and mobility has been merged under one VP with policies relating to well-being (health, employment) and regional policy has been moved to the Growth cluster, recognising the important role this portfolio should have to deliver a new European Investment Programme.

Diagram A: Proposed new structure of Commission

