

# CHALLENGE EUROPE

## Challenges and new beginnings: Priorities for the EU's new leadership

September 2014



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## **Building up European leadership – an assessment of the recent process**

*Maria João Rodrigues*

Europe is in need of a new leadership capacity able to recreate stronger European unity in the external and internal fronts. Otherwise, anti-European forces will increase their influence and presence in European governments and EU institutions with large implications for the direction of European integration. This will be the central concern in making a first short assessment of the recent process of building European leadership capacity for the next five years to come.

This assessment will particularly focus on the choice of the President of the European Commission, of the President of the European Council and, finally of the members of the European Commission.

### **Choosing the President of the European Commission**

The most important game changer was the new procedure to select the President of the European Commission.

For the first time the Lisbon Treaty was applied, enabling a choice which took into account the outcome of the European elections. The candidate of the European party winning elections was recognised and proposed by the European Council to the European Parliament to be submitted to election. This new procedure will be probably and hopefully taken for granted in the future, which was not the case this time. Several European Council members had assumed until the final moment that the choice of Commission President should be mainly made by themselves.

The President of the European Commission was elected by the European Parliament according to a formal vote in secret ballot requiring the majority of the seats, after presenting and discussing a formal document with political guidelines. This new procedure has empowered him with a stronger democratic mandate, but it has also made him more accountable to the European Parliament.

Finally, it is important to underline that nothing of this would have been possible without the stronger role played by European political parties, which had become more organised and active throughout the process: when inviting candidates for President of the European Commission to emerge; when selecting them to run in European elections; when organising pan-European campaigns; when making alliances inside the European Parliament to force the recognition of the electoral outcome; when defining conditions to support the President candidate; or when organising the political opposition to him. It was in this context that Jean-Claude Juncker became the first elected President of the European Commission, backed by his European party EPP, and conditionally supported by S&D and ALDE groups.

## **Choosing the President of the European Council**

The choice of the President of the European Council also deserves consideration. First of all, it is important to underline that the European Council had been changing its institutional and political nature as a consequence not only of the Lisbon Treaty, but also of the systemic chairmanship conducted by Herman Van Rompuy. It became a more powerful institution, able to set the political agenda on the internal and external fronts, as well as driving the most relevant EU processes. Some will argue that this has weakened the community method, others will argue that this has increased the sense of community interest which should be acquired by the heads of state and government. Beyond this, it is impossible to ignore that the new strength of the European Council has also enhanced the European influence of some particular national leaders, further than the traditional Franco-German couple.

Secondly, the choice of the European Council emerged from a complex game of distribution of posts, not only the top ones such as the High Representative, or the Eurogroup President, but also many portfolios in the European Commission.

Finally, the criteria which were formally or informally taken into account have also evolved: not only bigger or smaller countries, geographical, gender, political parties, but also political relevance. When the major challenges of the European Union are linked to Russian pressure and the Ukrainian crisis, or to consolidate enlargement and to heal the wounds of the past, as well as to design an inclusive future for the euro zone, we should not be surprised that the final choice was the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

## **Choosing European Commissioners, as European actors**

The choice of the members of the new Commission's members became a controversial issue across Europe and should also be assessed more in-depth in the future. This can provide a new opportunity to discuss how future Commissioners should be chosen and organised in order to build up an EU institution whose purpose is to represent the community interest. Some lessons of the recent experience should be learnt for the future.

According to some opinions, we should make a distinction between a European Commissioner and a national minister, to argue that his/her selection should be conducted by the Prime Minister alone and under similar full reservation. Should this be the case? Before speaking about the selection process, we should first ask what a 'good' European Commissioner is.

A 'good' Commissioner is one who can make an assessment of European challenges and develop a plan to address them, overcoming or reducing political divergences, and pulling together the relevant actors, i.e. governments, Council, European and national parliaments, civil society organisations, and experts across Europe.

Hence, there is a big difference between candidates if, for example, one has negotiated the structural funds for his/her own country, and another who has negotiated the EU budget as a

whole; if one has negotiated a national plan and the other has negotiated the European growth agenda; or if one has conducted an adjustment programme and another has co-participated in the general reform of the euro zone. This is the difference between knowing how to operate at national or at European level.

If, in addition, a candidate has been elected in the European elections he/she should have more legitimacy (which is called input and not just output legitimacy), although this should not be a *sine qua non condition* to be selected.

What is fundamentally at stake is the construction of a European Commission as a supranational entity able to defend the European interest and not just the sum of national interests, or the influence of private interests.

With this aim, the President of the European Commission should be given sufficient latitude so that he can build a team that has an adequate number of suitable Commissioners and a political mix – able to implement the priorities according to which the Commission President was elected. If this President has been elected by the European Parliament reflecting the European elections outcomes, as it was, by the first time, the case of Jean-Claude Juncker, he will have even more legitimacy to require this latitude, and to select or discourage national suggestions.

It is important to emphasise that, under the Lisbon Treaty, the Member States present suggestions, but the final selection depends on the President of European Commission, because he/she needs to build up a team which is able to implement the priorities endorsed by the European Parliament. These suggestions of Commissioners should be made by governments, not on behalf of themselves but of the Member States they represent. This should be understood as the national contribution to build up a strong European Commission and should imply a process of national consultation which is open enough to identify suitable candidates.

But, to be appointed, the Commissioner candidate will still have a long way to go, outside the national sphere. He/she will first have to be evaluated by the President to build up a consistent team. This year, this process was also revised to increase the weight of women, which originally was very insufficient. Prior to final approval by the European Council, each Commissioner candidate will still be submitted to a hearing by the European Parliament, which may require replacement of some as a condition of its overall vote of consent on the new Commission.

It follows that the source of political legitimacy of a Commissioner goes beyond one Member State. It derives from a process involving the European Council and the European Parliament, and ultimately European citizens as a whole.

A European Commissioner is a European actor or, even better, a central actor of the European Union as a *sui generis* political entity. He/she should not be considered neither as a top official of an international organisation which is selected with the support of his/her national

government, nor as a national delegate to an international organisation, which is appointed by the government without previous consultation of their own country.

Hence, when identifying names to suggest to the President of the European Commission, each Member State should encourage a debate on the key challenges of the European Union in the coming years; the priorities from the national perspective; the most credible names that the country may propose to the Commission President to develop responses to these challenges; and how to get a more relevant portfolio.

It is this debate that was almost absent in several Member States. Many of them were not open to consider possible personalities, men and women with different political sensitivities, as Jean-Claude Juncker explicitly called for. Their relative merits should be assessed and compared to those priorities, on the basis of proven facts of competence and political successes. It is understandable that the criterion of political and personal trust plays a role, but not to the point of sacrificing the criteria of European merit to limited objectives of national politics.

Moreover, the alignment with the top priorities of Jean-Claude Juncker – growth; investment and employment; and the need to increase the presence and political weight of women in the Commission should not be downplayed either.

This article was concluded when the final list of chosen commissioners with their portfolios was about to be announced. We need to wait for the next developments of this story to identify the kind of political chemistry which would be needed to build up stronger European leadership capacity.

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