

Not a pack of bureaucrats: The new European Commission

No. 1 December 2014

By Sally Brammer

The new President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker sees himself differently, he sees his role differently, he sees his Commission as a 'last chance Commission' which will either succeed or fail. Juncker has laid out an ambitious political agenda for the political cycle of 2014-2019. He views this agenda as a form of political contract - a mandate - and he has implemented broad changes in order to realize it. In doing so he has raised expectations - whether they can or will be realized is another question.

The new Commission officially began work on the 1st November 2014. For the first time there was a direct link between the outcome of the European Parliament elections and the appointment of the Commission President. Juncker puts great worth in the fact that he views himself as elected, believing this gives him much greater democratic legitimacy. In his address to the European Parliament before they voted to accept the new Commission he stated "I have been elected President of the Commission on the basis of a programme that binds me to the European Parliament. I have a contract with you, Mr President, and with this House, and I intend to abide by the terms of the contract I put before you this summer." Despite evidence that the Spitzenkandidat system did not motivate people to vote (a Eurobarometer poll following the election found that only 5% of voters across the 28 member states were motivated to vote in order to influence the appointment of the next Commission president) the Commission's new website proudly states "the President was

elected by the European Parliament on the basis of his Political Guidelines". Juncker is making it clear that his 'Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change' has the support of the parliament, thereby improving the democratic legitimacy of European decision-making.

The bold statement of 10 priorities, within this agenda, raises expectations and also outlines objectives against which the Commission and its actions can be measured, further increasing the pressure for success. One can predict that Juncker will make use this pressure and his argument that he was elected on the basis of these 10 priorities in order to pressure other EU actors such as the Council and the Parliament to support his agenda. Indeed he has already sent a letter to the European Parliament and the Italian Prime Minister, who currently holds the rotating EU presidency, explaining the priorities and calling for the three institutions to work together to develop strategic objectives and deliverables. Therefore whilst increasing pressure on himself and his team he is also creating the opportunity for leverage during negotiations with the other EU actors.

Outlining 10 priorities has not been Juncker's only innovation, he has also shown a determination to fundamentally change the structure of the college with a centralization of power in a more cabinet type structure. Previously the position of Commission Vice President was symbolic and honorary in nature; however Juncker has delegated much of his own power to his Vice-Presidents.

The appointment of 7 Vice-Presidents with real power and coordination responsibilities is meant to improve efficiency and ensure policy coherence. However, an important question is whether this more hierarchical system leads to more or less internal struggles amongst Commissioners, the majority of whom are used to powerful positions at home.

Commissioners have been grouped into 7 project teams and require the approval of their respective Vice President in order to push legislative proposals forward. It is expected that they work together as a college within a dynamic structure, as the composition of the project team changes according to the policy in question. This dynamic and more organic system has the potential to streamline coordination and increase efficiency; however it also could create confusion as Commissioners must sometimes report to more than one Vice President. For this new structure, which moves away from the idea that all Commissioners are equal, to be a success it requires that all Commissioners play nicely with each other and learn to share the management of portfolios, with other Commissioners and with respective Vice Presidents. Time will tell whether these changes will indeed improve internal coordination and lead to better policy making, or whether it creates resentment and internal divisions.

Those who campaigned against Juncker's appointment argued that he is an old Brussels insider; however he has proven he is here to shake things up. He has used his experience and nego-

tiating ability to cleverly appoint Vice-Presidents from smaller member states, whilst ensuring that larger states have all received important portfolios. To support his argument that the Commission is not just a troop of 'anonymous high officials' he has surrounded himself with a college of political heavyweights; with four former Prime Ministers and nineteen former Ministers who have the experience and leadership skills to take charge and not be overrun by director-generals.

2014 was a year of transition in the European Union and there is a sense of change in Brussels. Setting the tone for his 5 year term Juncker faced the press himself following the first meeting of the new Commission, and has proven that he will not be shy in responding to critical comments from national leaders. He has implemented significant change in order to increase the efficiency and transparency of the Commission, something observers have long been calling for. Whether Juncker's bold decisions and sense of purpose can effect genuine change, which satisfies the high expectations so far generated, will become apparent over the next few months.

Sally Brammer is a Research Fellow at ZEI and a ZEI Alumna "Class of 2012"