

THE JUNCKER COMMISSION: WHAT PARTY BALANCES?

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The inauguration of the Commission put together by Jean-Claude Juncker brings to a close a nomination process in the course of which the commissioners' party ties have played an important, though not an exclusive, role. Introduced by the innovative "Spitzenkandidat" procedure, it is nevertheless balanced on fairly stable partisan grounds in comparison with the "Barroso Commission", on three counts. Yves Bertoncini takes a stand in this Viewpoint from Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute.

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1. The party affiliations of the Juncker Commission's members have played an ambiguous role in their appointment

The adoption of the "Spitzenkandidat" procedure has strengthened the party aspect in terms of the choice of a president for the Commission because Jean-Claude Juncker was nominated in his capacity as lead candidate in the party (the EPP) that garnered the highest number of votes in the May 2014 European elections. The party affiliations of the Juncker Commission's members, on the other hand, have played a less clear role in their appointment, both on the European Council and in the European Parliament.

Naturally, almost every single member state nominated its candidates to the Commission from parties belonging to whatever national coalition is in office in their country, but Bulgaria and Luxembourg, which are governed respectively by a member of the PES and of the ALDE, opted for commissioners affiliated to the EPP; while four member states nominated candidates who were not members of the government leader's party: two commissioners affiliated to the ALDE were nominated by governments led by Social Democrats, in Denmark and in the Czech Republic; a commissioner affiliated to the EPP was nominated by the Austrian government, also headed up by a Social Democrat; and a commissioner affiliated to the S&D was nominated by the Netherlands government, which is led by a member of the ALDE.

The European Parliament's hearings interviewing the commissioners nominated gave rise, as in the past, to occasionally lively exchanges, and at times even to outright questioning of the candidates' expertise or profile. As in 2004 and in 2009, they led to the replacement of at least one commissioner-designate (liberal

Slovenian candidate Alenka Bratusek) as well as to a little minor tinkering with the portfolios entrusted to other commissioners - the Slovak commissioner, in particular, being assigned the post of vice-president with responsibility for the "energy union" and the new Slovenian commissioner being given the transport portfolio. These hearings were marked by the occasionally implied invocation of a "pact of non-aggression" between the S&D, EPP and even ALDE groups, which appeared to assign priority to the defence of candidates from the same party over an assessment of their real merits, as provided for in Article 17.3 in the Treaty on the European Union (in connection with their expertise, commitment and independence). It is by no means a given that such conduct adds lustre to the legitimacy of commissioners thus appointed, or indeed to the image of the political groups in the European Parliament.

2. The Juncker Commission's makeup reflects a stable balance of forces among the parties, despite the electoral rebalancing that has taken place since 2009

The Commission chaired by José Manuel Barroso comprised twenty one members from right-wing and centre-right parties, as opposed to seven from left-wing and centre-left parties; the Commission chaired by Jean-Claude Juncker comprises twenty members from right-wing and centre-right parties, as opposed to eight from left-wing and centre-left parties. The only noteworthy changes concern the smaller number of commissioners affiliated to the ALDE (five instead of eight in the second Barroso Commission) and the arrival of a commissioner affiliated to the ECR group (Britain's Jonathan Hill), while the commissioners

affiliated to the EPP and to PES number fourteen and eight (instead of thirteen and seven) respectively.

This virtually unchanged status quo in party terms is at odds with the party rebalancing that has taken place since 2009: on the one hand, in the European Parliament, where the EPP's relative superiority over the S&D group has diminished considerably (29% of seats rather than the previous figure of 36%, as against 25% for the PES both before and after May 2014); and on the other, in the European Council, which currently has sixteen government leaders from the right or the centre-right, as against twelve from the left or centre-left. A purely party-based interpretation is, of course, insufficient to explain the political rationales at work within the Commission - rationales which also owe a great deal to its members' national origins and personal profiles. But if the Juncker Commission adopts a more collegial and political style in its work, as its president has promised, it will be in a position to vote on the basis of a balance of forces assigning twice as much clout to commissioners affiliated to right-wing and centre-right parties, who will have, on their own, the simple majority required to adopt its decisions.

So it is on a more quality-related register that we could perceive a kind of party-based rebalancing, symbolised in particular by Social Democrat Frans Timmermans' appointment to the post of first vice-president of the Commission, by the presence of an equal number of EPP and S&D vice-presidents (three each), and by Pierre Moscovici's appointment to the post of commissioner for economic and monetary affairs. Yet it is still worth pointing out that the commissioners as a whole will have to work on the basis of a system of "clusters" and of "project teams", within which political compromises will have to be thrashed out under the president's supervision.

3. The Juncker Commission is going to have to act on the basis of variable-geometry political majorities both in the European Parliament and in the European Council

The Juncker Commission's inauguration has made it possible to discern the broad outlines of a "coalition pact" between the EPP, S&D and ALDE groups, which together account for over 62% of the seats in the EP and

for virtually all of the members on the European Council (the British Government leader being the exception).

Unlike a "legislative term pact" in force at the national level, this coalition pact will not enforce any form of systematic "governing majority discipline" on the members of the European Parliament or of the Council, who will continue to vote on the basis of the issues involved from time to time.

Thus it is likely that in the European Parliament we shall continue to see both "grand coalition majorities" including members of the EPP, the S&D and the ALDE, and "confrontational majorities" pitting the EPP against the S&D, but also "consensus majorities" comprising almost all the MEPs. The increase in the number of eurosceptic and europhobic MEPs is likely to increase the number of votes adopted on the basis of "grand coalition majorities", and thus also the clout of the EPP and S&D groups.

It is also likely that party rationales will continue to come to the fore at the member state level, for instance at meetings between heads of state and government with the same party affiliation, held ahead of European Council meetings. But those party rationales will coexist alongside diplomatic rationales at least as strong, as shown for instance by the weight carried by the compromises made by France and Germany, even when the parties governing the two countries do not come from the same side of the political divide. The Juncker Commission is going to have to take these at once party-based and diplomatic rationales into account when it uses its right of initiative and implements the political guidelines laid down by its president.

It appears that the Juncker Commission is going to have to rely on internal party balances comparable to those of the legislative term that has recently come to an end, but also to take into account the rebalancing that has occurred in the European Parliament and in the European Council. The fact that it must act in a very different economic, social and geopolitical context may also explain why it is likely to move toward political choices oscillating between continuity and a break with the past.

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