

The new European Commission

Jean Claude Juncker, the former Prime Minister of Luxemburg elected as President of the European Commission in July, presented his new team on September 10.

It took him the whole summer to accommodate the often excessive or contradictory wishes of the EU Member States. But his biggest challenge was to find a substantive portfolio for each of the twenty seven candidates presented to him.

Even if, according to the Treaty, their number should have been reduced by one third after the last enlargements of the EU, smaller Member States insisted on keeping the current principle of one Commissioner per Member State; the Irish even made it a condition for their ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

Juncker's predecessor, Jose Manuel Barroso, had managed to find a portfolio for each, but he used this dispersal of responsibilities as a pretext to centralise power in his office and in the Secretariat General. Juncker apparently aims to achieve the opposite: he appointed seven "vice presidents", supposed to "steer and coordinate" the twenty other commissioners.

As the Treaty imposes equality and collective decision-making in the College of Commissioners, a formal hierarchy is not possible. The new president had to square the circle in a rather imaginative way: the Vice presidents will have the power to filter proposals coming from the commissioners and will meet more regularly with him, but the individual commissioners will remain in charge of the Directorates and responsible for the dossiers assigned to them.

An indication of where the real power will remain might be the fact that major Member States - France, Germany, the UK, Poland, Spain - asked to have a Commissioner and not a Vice president's post. Italy is the exception but, thanks to the efficient lobbying of Matteo Renzi, it received the envied post of Vice President for Foreign Affairs, which is double hatted with the role of "High Representative" played currently by Cathy Ashton.

The "First Vice President" will be the Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans. He will be in charge of "better regulation", which means less regulation as asked for by the EU citizen. Four other Vice Presidents are ex-Prime Ministers of small countries (Estonia, Latvia, Finland and Slovenia). They will supervise the four priority domains presented by Juncker: growth and jobs, digital single market, "Energy Union" and the Euro coupled with social dialogue. The seventh vice president, the Bulgarian Georgieva, will be in charge of the EU budget.

In the choice of his commissioners, Juncker applied an interesting principle - appointing those who have a specific link to their post: the French Moscovici received economic affairs at the time when his country is not able to respect the stability pact; the British Jonathan Hill, in charge of Financial Services, will supervise the City (which is also a signal that Juncker wants as much as he can to help the UK to stay in the EU); the Spanish Miguel Arias Canete, who has interests in the oil industry, will cover energy and climate change; Dimitris Avramopoulos, from Greece, the country with the most porous EU's external border, will be in charge of immigration etc...

Three powerful women will manage some of the most important portfolios: the Dane Margrethe Vestager has competition, the Swede Cecilia Malmström was given Trade and the Pole Elzbieta Bienkowska, the Internal Market.

Even if some observers wonder how such a subtle power sharing will work in bureaucratic Brussels, Juncker's new Commission was well received. But each Commissioner will have to pass hearings in the European Parliament, which is not a formality. The Parliament cannot impeach individual commissioners but it can reject the whole "College", and in the past, this threat was enough to replace a targeted Commissioner in each of the two Barroso Commissions before the vote in Strasburg.

What does it mean for business? More interlocutors, more confusion but hopefully a more focussed agenda, fitting better with today's priorities.

If all goes well, the Commission will start functioning on November 1, just one month before Donald Tusk, the former Polish Prime Minister, succeeds Herman Van Rompuy as president of the European Council, bringing to an end the almost complete reshuffle of EU leadership posts which started after the European Parliament election in May 2014.

Jean De Ruyt – September 2014