



On Juncker's list: improving EU external action

by Antonio Missioli

Jean-Claude Juncker – the president-elect of the European Commission – has only a few precious weeks to decide how his future college of commissioners can deliver on the ambitious agenda he presented to the European Parliament earlier this month. But before he starts juggling names and portfolios, he needs to design the ‘chassis’ of what is actually to be the first truly post-Lisbon Commission.

After the gradual process of adaptation to the new treaty that characterised the past legislature, this is particularly true of the Union's foreign policy. Juncker has made explicit his determination to contribute to a more effective common external action, even in areas where the Commission has traditionally feared to tread – such as defence. This will surely entail the need for the institution as a whole to work more closely with the next HR/VP and the EEAS (and vice versa). Juncker and his transition team will surely not lack for advice and recommendations from various quarters. Nevertheless, it may be useful to highlight a few issues worth adding to his checklist.

Diagrams as organigrams

Many analysts have criticised the limited coordination and collegiality among the members of the Commission dealing with external relations since 2009. True, a dedicated ‘group of commissioners’ was created in 2010 – under the stewardship of Catherine Ashton (and, if and when required, Commission President Barroso himself) – but it was

rarely convened and never really worked. Meanwhile, however, the need for such coordination and collegiality has only increased, as the crises in North Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine have amply demonstrated. The challenge now is not so much recreating official groups (in whatever formation) as establishing a more fitting internal *modus operandi*: for instance, dedicated teams of commissioners could be enabled to operate jointly – under the supervision of the HR/VP, the president himself, or both – to deal with specific crises or policies.

These teams need not be permanent: they could act as task forces in their own right (with the support of staff from relevant Commission services and the EEAS) and their composition may vary over time. Inside the Commission and across the EU, such targeted clusters, or hubs, could function as overlapping and interlocking ovals – much like a dynamic Venn diagram – rather than concentric circles, and offer the kind of variable geometry the Union needs when dealing with conflicts and crises. This has already happened, in part, at an operational level – on Ukraine or maritime security – but without an agreed template at the top.

With 27 jobs to share out, the push towards specialisation (and to some extent fragmentation) will be hard to resist: hence the need to reconfigure, in parallel, the way in which the institution operates. As it is legally and politically tricky to create formal hierarchies amongst commissioners – with the notable exception of the HR/VP – it may prove essential to

intervene in terms of delegation of powers and financial regulations.

Usual and unusual suspects

Foreign policy is indeed one area where such ‘clustering’ is already evident. Development cooperation and humanitarian aid – spheres where the Commission possesses competences, resources and know-how – are, in principle, an integral part of the Union’s foreign policy toolbox. The relevant financial regulations may need to be reviewed, however, in order to facilitate common and swift action and prevent the inter- and intra-institutional turf wars of the previous years.

Trade and enlargement, for their part, constitute ‘hybrid’ portfolios, each with specific procedures but sharing a similar predicament as external projections of internal policies: in other words, they both belong in the foreign policy domain but also retain a specific ‘community’ dimension.

By contrast, what has been for a decade now the Commission’s ‘neighbourhood’ post may require a fresh approach, as its association with enlargement since 2004 has created more problems than it has solved. In fact, dividing the neighbourhood portfolio into two – roughly, one for the east and one for the south – may make sense, in light of the ever more different needs and perspectives of the two adjoining regions. Two neighbourhood commissioners could well act in close coordination with (and as deputies to) the HR/VP.

Interestingly, Juncker has already displayed his willingness to allow other commissioners in the domain of external relations to fill in for the HR/VP – both internally and externally – thus also enabling the HR to act as a fully-fledged VP. Historically, the Santer Commission (1994-99) was indeed organised also along geographical spheres of competence, with different commissioners in charge of macro-regions. This allowed them to be more focused, with overall coordination being provided by the legal framework of the old ‘first pillar’. Today, procedures and competences are much less clear-cut, yet the need for a greater geographical focus is much more evident.

The past few years have also demonstrated how increasingly complex it is for the Union to deal with ‘security’ at large. Take energy, where there is a growing need to link the development of the internal market with the curbing of Europe’s external dependency. Or take climate action, turned into a dedicated Commission job in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit in 2009, and still high on the agenda in the run-up to the Paris Conference next year.

Even issues related to migration, asylum, visas and, more generally, border management (which all featured prominently in the electoral campaign for the European Parliament) remain high on the political agenda of many national governments – none of which has the means to cope with such issues in isolation. In all these areas, there appears to be an overwhelming case for ‘clustering’.

And a new D-drive(r)?

Defence was at the top of the EU agenda last year and is expected to return in 2015: the time may have come for the Commission, too, to grant the matter adequate visibility. Defence-related issues are currently dealt with by several Directorates-General, and relevant competences are, at times, dispersed even within individual DGs. Moreover, the Commission handles these matters only through other well-established policies: defence procurement as part of public procurement; security research as part of the framework programmes; defence industrial restructuring as part of single market policy; cyber security as part of communications – and so forth. This is in part inevitable, since the Commission as such has no direct mandate in this field (bar the internal market). However, the current administrative dispersion makes it more difficult to develop a coherent EU approach and establish a structured dialogue with stakeholders; and it confines ‘defence’ to small corners of various DGs with little hope of being given real attention.

By contrast, having a dedicated commissioner with specific responsibilities for security- and defence-related industry *and* markets *and* research would establish a single port of call within the college, building on the good work recently done by the Commission’s own task force led by Commissioners Tajani and Barnier. It could effectively complement the clusters mentioned above as well as represent a key partner for both the Council and external stakeholders. And, crucially, it would support the work of the next HR/VP (unless, of course, that portfolio is given directly to the VP), stimulate much-needed synergies with the EDA and the EEAS (also headed by the HR), and boost the overall credibility of EU policy.

A small step for the Commission, maybe, but potentially a giant leap for the Union’s external action.

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