

8 take-aways from the new Commission



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ADVANCING INTERESTS



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1 Missing Martin?

With Martin Selmayr departed to the Austrian Alps and Ursula von der Leyen (VDL) placing her former German Defence Ministry chief of staff in charge of her cabinet, there risks being a vacuum at the heart of the transition. Would Selmayr have allowed the frantic last minute reshuffle that saw Reynders in Justice, Vestager suddenly back in charge of competition or Gentiloni insisting on ECFIN rather than internal market? A new Sec Gen is urgently needed to install discipline and order, with Frenchmen, Jean-Eric Paquet and Olivier Guersent, the current front runners.

2 Two is company, three's a crowd

The big surprise of the announcement was the addition of Valdis Dombrovskis as a third Executive VP. Was VDL exerting her independence, carving out an extra position for the EPP on top of the two candidates "imposed" on her by the European Council? Timmermans was reported as being annoyed by the move but remains "first among equals" in having the task of presiding over college meetings in VDL's absence. Power is nicely distributed on 8 Vice Presidents, the triumvirate is buried and VDL remains the ultimate arbiter.

3 VPs get a DG

VDL has clearly learnt the lessons from the Juncker Commission by ensuring that her 3 Executive VPs are serviced directly by a specific DG. Juncker's VPs had to rely on the Sec Gen and go through the cabinets of their Commissioners. It remains to be seen how the dynamics will work and how the new Commissioners' →

→ Groups will operate but there are already some fascinating combinations. Will Dombrovskis be able to exert fiscal discipline on Gentiloni? How will Vestager and Goulard sort out the digital agenda when Vestager is also charged with policing the sector with her competition hat on? On migration Schinas and Johansson will have to square a north-south divide. Strong personalities will have to cooperate and move in the European interest.

4 Balance restored

VDL's first success was to honour her commitment to the Parliament to ensure a gender balanced Commission and her team of 8 VPs also reinstates the geographical balance destabilised by EU leaders. She calls on her Commissioners to ensure their Cabinets strike the "appropriate balance in terms of gender, experience and geography" and all Commission events should now aim for gender-balanced panels.

5 Forget the political Commission, we're now Geopolitical

Being in the lead is not relevant if nobody follows. Action on the climate, is as much about getting other major emitters to follow. Action on taxation of multinationals is about traction in the G20. Protecting the social model of Europe is also about spreading the word among competitors. Effective defense requires more action in the EU, but remains a wider western affair. VDL understands that multilateralism and alliances are under threat from internal populist forces as well as facing risks from Trump, Putin or Xi. But when the chicken come home to roost, will VLD act geopolitically and back the digital "tax lady" in charge of competition, "Big Phil" on trade retaliation and the first Vice President Timmermans on the Paris accord? Time will tell.

6 Protecting our European way of life

The new titles for many Commissioners have led to some initial confusion and controversy. What exactly does the Commissioner for Democracy and Demography do? Are Values and Transparency just for Vera Jourova to work on and where is her power base? The biggest furor was over the migration portfolio being re-branded as Protecting our European Way of Life, as a nod apparently to the EPP manifesto. The excellent communication skills of Schinas will be needed: that yes we want a European way of life. And yes, it's not incompatible with a respectful migration policy, and yes it's also about values, equity and inclusion. Le Pen may not get the answer she wants. MEPs are also asking why research, fisheries, culture and even social affairs don't get a mention in any of the titles. Cosmetic name changes could come in handy.

7 One in, One out principle already under fire

Rumour has it that former Croatian MEP Dubravka Suica was none too keen to take up the role of Commissioner. I doubt she was reassured by the task of developing a new instrument to deliver on a “One in, One out” principle. The drive to cut red tape is commendable and the principle is that every legislative proposal creating new burdens should relieve businesses of an equivalent existing burden in the same policy area. Could putting one rule in place to replace 27 be a nice way of getting around it? The Greens have already labelled the idea “deregulation on steroids” and will no doubt target it during the hearings.

8 The Hearings – the spooky past!

Tradition has it that the Parliament extract their pound of flesh. The Butiglione affair almost derailed the first Barroso Commission and dragged Neelie Kroes and László Kovacs into the snake pit of a political vendetta. But Udre, Jeleva and Bratusek were also shown the door by a Parliament baring its teeth and insisting on quality and a clean track record. Be ready for surprises... especially those that haven't followed the 'European way of life' to the letter...