EUROPE 18.09.2019 | Manuel Gath

Detox in Brussels

If the EU wants to survive, it can ill afford an artificially inflated European Commission. Six proposals for slimming it down

It's a familiar refrain. Brussels is an out-of-touch bureaucracy, a huge administrative machinery that does nothing more than swallow up or redistribute German tax-payers' hard-earned cash. The perennial anti-European campaign issue works effectively – again and again. Horst Seehofer, the German Taxpayers Federation, Sebastian Kurz: they all want to save money by 'shrinking' the European Commission. Even Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel have shown support for a smaller Commission made up of non-permanent rotating members.

What initially sounds like disempowerment of a key EU institution could actually be a major strength in the context of Europe's increasingly complex political reality. The idea did not exactly come out of the blue: the Treaty of Lisbon mandates a smaller Commission with a reduction in the number of Commissioners to two-thirds of member states. But, up until now, the heads of state and government have insisted on sidestepping this clause.

The main argument in favour of a 'complete' Commission has always been the same: simply that each and every member state wants a seat around the table. It's all about the representation of national positions and the legitimacy of the institution. According to experts on European law like Dieter Grimm, however, the EU's national democratic legitimacy lies with the European Council and not the Commission. So, apart from the fact that the Commission's influence is no more than symbolic, this also cancels out a key argument for taking the perspectives of 28 different nationalities into account. Particularly since the influence of the Council as an institution has increased disproportionately.

Form follows function

Ultimately, the complicated arithmetic of the Commission's composition seems absurd: Depending on what happens with Brexit,

there are no fewer than 27 positions for 27 policy areas, all with corresponding Directorates-General. The big EU member states claim the important areas such as the economy, currency, finances or agriculture for themselves, either to be able to steer the policy area or to be able to spend a lot of EU money. Despite the many variables, there is one overarching objective: an efficiently functioning Commission. Ursula von der Leyen now presented a surprisingly balanced commission, leaving almost no government behind unsatisfied. But is it a commission that works more efficiently than the last one? That remains to be proven.

But what if it were actually much easier to achieve this objective? What if it were possible to go back to the drawing board and design a European Commission which was true to 'form follows function'?

If we want a Commission that is more political and more efficient, a reduced number of portfolios will be unavoidable. Coordination between the Commissioner for Mobility and Transport and the Commissioner for Tourism or a third member of staff responsible for infrastructure, as it was the case under Juncker, all takes time and energy.

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Fabian Zuleeg from the European Policy Center rightly points out that the working structure of the next Commission should build on the experiences of the past five years. Jean-Claude Juncker has already attempted to make the organisation leaner and more efficient. In response to the growing number of EU member states, the Commission's personnel requirements were also artificially increased, new competences were created and policy areas that were once integrated were divided up. Although Ursula von der Leyen seems to be walking down on some paths of the Juncker administration, she faced the challenge of 27 candidates and their (or their government's) claims.

Instead of allowing a large number of project teams to work more or less loosely on strategic topic areas, von der Leyen acknowledged that it makes more sense to pool responsibilities for priority policy areas in one portfolio. However, set aside the fancy titles such as 'Protecting our European Way of Life', her College could still be reduced to strengthen its priorities regarding six key challenges.

Six proposals for the European Commission

Firstly: a modern European industrial policy. Growing tensions linked to international competition and the issue of system rivalry makes a common European approach to industrial policy essential. So why not merge the current portfolios for competition, industry and the internal market? This would take account of the external dimension of the internal market as well as tougher approaches that countries such as the US and China are currently taking. If we want to fight for free trade, we will have to take off our kid gloves. The current situation might most likely lead to a number of in-house fights between two very powerful commissioners.

Secondly: climate neutrality. We have been talking about integrated concepts and holistic approaches for ever and a day, yet silo mentality continues to persist. Collaboration on environmental protection and climate policy, energy policy and transport is long overdue. It's high time these issues were addressed together. Ideally, we would have one person with the authority to agree on climate goals on behalf of the EU at international level. Tis someone would be in charge of these key sectors and can therefore influence compliance with the goals. While the first condition is fulfilled in Timmermans' role as Executive Vice President, the second not so much, as he still relies on not less than five commissioners working on his turf. So why not combine Energy and Environment with the climate action portfolio of Frans Timmermans? Stop the separation of Agriculture and Fisheries and let both DGs be run by the same person.

Thirdly: digitalisation. If Europe really wants to be a key player on the issue of artificial intelligence, this would mean consolidating the competences for research and development, digitalisation and innovation. It's not the administrative apparatus that drives digital transformation, it's the universities, research institutes and innovative enterprises. If Vestager is supposed to be some sort of supervisor to one of the most powerful commissioners (Sylvie Goulard for industrial policy and Digital Single Market), why not hand over the responsibility for Research and Innovation to her? After all, the current portfolio of Mariya Gabriel (Innovation and Youth) seems to be a bit odd and especially the DG Youth and Education could be placed somewhere else.

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Fourthly: the future of European democracy. Due, in no small part, to the bungled *Spitzenkandidaten* process, von der Leyen has been under pressure to scrutinise the EU's

Security Policy or indeed to split environmental protection and transport, agriculture and fisheries or innovation and digitalisation into separate areas of responsibility.

institutional structures. Evidently, the EU needs to work on ways of bringing EU processes closer to the citizens and increasing their legitimacy. For a long time, civil society has been calling for a dedicated Commission post for public accessibility and participation. Even the OECD has set up operating units specifically centred on the future of participation with a focus on 'citizens as innovators', a far cry from sober consultation procedures. The job description for such a post would certainly be attractive: using national democracy as a springboard to shape the future of supranational democracy. Youth organisations and civil society actors such as those organised within the European Youth Forum for example could be role models and valuable partners in reforming the European institutions. So why not combining the future of democracy portfolio with the DG Education and Youth?

Fifthly: A strong common foreign policy. Although Federica Mogherini can legitimately boast a few respectable achievements in the international arena, at the end of the day, even she fell short when it came to the expectations of a European foreign policy. With Josep Borrell's nomination we have an even more experienced and assertive successor to take the bull by the horns and run a tighter ship. Strictly speaking, the 'High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy' should also perform coordinated duties for trade, development aid and European Neighbourhood and Enlargement policy. The Spanish think tank Real Instituto Elcano has already come up with some ideas for how this could work in practice. International cooperation for example could be managed by the High Representative himself, by including a 'classic' DG next to coordinating the European External Action Service into his portfolio.

Sixthly: A cohesive and social Europe. Growing inequalities in all areas of economic, social and cultural life are not only a well-researched issue among academics in recent years, they shape the way all Europeans live their daily life. Balancing out social insecurities and deliver on one of the founding principles of Europe – social cohesion and convergence of living conditions throughout the continent – is a crucial point for how many citizens see their life and their future improved by the European Union. So why not combining the portfolios for Jobs and Cohesion and Reform? Create a counterbalance to the dominant economic approach

(with its still powerful DG) to social affairs and underpin this social super portfolio with the money of the regional funds.

A new start for Europe

It's not in the EU's interests to have an isolated Commissioner for Security Policy or indeed to split environmental protection and transport, agriculture and fisheries or innovation and digitalisation into separate areas of responsibility. The new Commission President was smart to introduce at least six Vice Presidents, who also coordinate different specialised departments and head a team of Commissioners. If we want synergy and added value to be more than just empty phrases from soapbox speeches, then they have to become guiding principles for the everyday working practices of EU institutions.

Nevertheless, maybe the new start for Europe, which has been somewhat forgotten in Germany, will still come – and rather fittingly from Brussels.

At the same time, new challenges such as the future of European democracy, global multilateralism and climate neutrality, an issue that will take generations to solve, need to be tackled with more transparency and political clout. If von der Leyen is really serious about pursuing her agenda, she will have to go on the offensive. Reducing the number of commissioners would have been a bold statement and would have demonstrated the necessary courage in the face of the heads of state and government to whom she purportedly owes a mountain of favours for nominating her to the post. Her commission now has to deliver on a lot of promises on key issues and needs to go way beyond the invention of fancy job descriptions.

The ideas outlined here are the logical next step when it comes to improving the structures that Jean-Claude Juncker's successor inherited. Given that over half of all MEPs and members of the Commission will be taking up a new post, some kind of continuity is both necessary and very appealing. It would have been of course also a constructive signal of solidarity if the heads of state and government could have brought themselves to actually consent to the downsized Commission that has already been contractually agreed. However, Estonia and Romania's farcical antics surrounding their nominations for just two months of the outgoing Commission was not exactly convincing evidence of any real willingness for sacrifice.

Nevertheless, maybe the new start for Europe, which has been somewhat forgotten in Germany, will still come – and rather fittingly from Brussels. After all, Ursula von der Leyen's Commission Presidency represents the start of two new eras for Europe: she is the first woman to be elected to the post and her election also signifies the end of the Martin Selmayr era. Juncker's powerful puppet master and right-hand man will now represent the EU in Austria.

A new start would be a strong message from the new President and would also contain an element of surprise that would serve her own interests as it would distract from the fact that she was elected with just a small majority. She could go down in history as the woman who led the European Union out of its phase of turmoil towards a confident future. Neither von Leyen nor the European Union need 27 commissioners to do this.



Manuel Gath
Rabat

Manuel Gath is the head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Morocco. He was previously responsible for European integration in the Department of International Political Analysis.