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The Newly Elected European Leadership: Who will call the shots in the next five years?

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Some may have stumbled over the fact that the European Union has at least seven principal decision-making bodies. Slimming it down to the three, which are involved in EU-legislation – the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council – looks somewhat better, but the question remains: if Europe has no less than three presidents, who decides what is going on in Europe?

Having three leaders means none of them wants to take a backseat. So, when the Nobel Peace Prize went to the European Union in 2012, all three EU Presidents felt entitled to receive the award. Finally, both Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, and José Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission, took the floor, and EP President Martin Schultz attended the ceremony.

Nobody seems to have the last word in European matters. Although the mocking comment “Who do I call if I want to call Europe” (attributed to Henry Kissinger, who never said it) has been replaced by the answer “Well, it’s Angela Merkel,” the question remains.

According to *Der Spiegel*, “Angela Merkel has more power in Europe than any of her postwar predecessors.” The Polish-US columnist [Anne Applebaum](#) outlined Merkel’s role “as the West’s chief negotiator with Russia.” The German influence became evident when the financial crisis hit all European states but the German economy remained steady. This allowed Germany to push its own way of recovery through, namely austerity. The other enduring crisis that has brought German diplomacy into play is of course the war in the Ukraine and Russia’s role in it.

Such German power nobody expected in postwar Europe, not even Germany, which for a long time was reluctant to take the lead. However, the reason for German power and authority is not hard to find: First, Germany has the strongest economy (and the largest state) in Europe, it is even one of the [strongest economies worldwide](#); second, German chancellor Angela Merkel has also considerable weight and credit as a person for a number of reasons, one of which is that she is the longest serving G7 leader at present.

So, Merkel might have power, but the European Union is not designed for a single person to pull all the strings. Just recently, the newly appointed European leadership showed the limits of the German chancellor’s room for maneuver. Merkel was not deemed to be a strong supporter of Jean-Claude Juncker’s candidacy for President of the European Commission – in fact, she hesitated to back him unreservedly –, but Juncker became the candidate anyway, then President of the European Commission. Now he heads up the only European institution with the power to propose EU laws.

While the [Council of the European Union](#) represents the member states’ governments and the [European Parliament](#) (EP) their citizens, the [Commission](#) stands for the Union as a whole, that is why it is regarded as the most powerful institution in Brussels. Composed of 28 members, one official from each EU nation, it has the power of initiative. Although the decisions are taken by the EP and the Council, the monopoly of legislative initiatives is held by the Commission. As the guardian of the Treaties (by monitoring the fulfillment of the obligation), it is the executive body of the EU, which means, it has the administrative power.

This seems like a big deal, but the downside of being in charge of the European administration is its low reputation. European citizens love to blame the “European administration” for all troubles, and their judgment refers clearly to the Commission.

Therefore, the first thing Jean-Claude Juncker did was to organize a shakeup of the Commission to overcome its inefficient bureaucracy. He created seven decision-making authorities by seven Vice-Presidents led by a strong First Vice President, Frans Timmermans, a social democrat and former foreign minister of the Netherlands, who is to deliver upon what Juncker promised: to cut red tape.



The Juncker Commission © EU 2014

Six Vice Presidents will oversee key areas, such as EU Budget, Energy Union, Jobs & Growth & Competitiveness, the Euro, and the Digital Single Market. This experimental setting should kill two birds with one stone. First, Juncker was able to give something to everyone, considering that there are not as many thematic areas of equal importance as member states. Second, the new hierarchy with Vice Presidents having veto-power over other commissioners creates a more streamlined structure, which should allow easier, and, hopefully, better decision-making.

But how is it supposed to work in practice? Let's take an example: Valdis Dombrovskis, Vice President for the Euro and social dialogue, overlooks a number of portfolios, so he should "work closely" with the French Commissioner for economic and monetary affairs, Pierre Moscovici, and the Belgian Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for employment and social affairs. There are several other Commissioners, who will report to Dombrovskis, such as Lord Hill with his newly created portfolio for financial stability, financial services, and capital markets. All of them have to report to Dombrovskis, before they put an item on the agenda of the College of Commissioners.

Only time can tell how the team, a multitude of bosses, will work. But one thing is certain: the structure of the king-sized European Commission depicts a very basic attribute of the European Union, namely the everlasting negotiations and compromises among 28 member states.

Considered as a canny operator, Juncker was not only bearing in mind to offer something to everyone, but also to balance the power of large and small member states. Yet especially Germany and France found fault with Juncker's drastic reorganization. The "Big Three" – Germany, France, and the UK, the three largest and most influential member states – used to have a prominent office according to their economic and political weight, but none of them was offered a Vice President. "This puts France to shame. It reflects a sad reality: the slow death of the French influence in the EU," said MEP Philippe Juvin. Many in Germany understood former Energy Commissioner Guenther Oettinger's new appointment for digital economy as a degradation. MEP Alexander Graf Lambsdorff called it "a resounding slap in the face" of the German government. Anyhow, this backseat for Germany was good news for many member states, still struggling financially and suffering from German-pushed austerity.

Pierre Moscovici's appointment triggered widely controversial debates. Northern European countries are not in favor of France with its outstandingly weak economic performance winning the much coveted post. Many find it even worse that the responsibility for Europe's already stricken economic and financial performance goes to the former French finance minister, who clearly has failed European rules regarding public deficit and debt. In 2015, the French deficit will grow to 4.6% of GDP (while the EU-limit is set by 3% and the public debt to 98% instead of 60%). Lambsdorff said to Moscovici's appointment, this is as if you'd ask the fox to guard the chicken.

Although Moscovici will be overseen by austerity-friendly Vice Presidents, Finland's Jyrki Katainen and Latvia's Valdis Dombrovskis (the latter led his country through a severe financial crises by implementing austerity measures), the trouble remains that the French Commissioner, a leading voice in Europe calling for more budget-flexibility, could weaken the euro zone's fiscal rules.

Ironically, Pierre Moscovici, who himself was criticized on account of his former performance, felt the need to defend Jean-Claude Juncker, when he came under pressure. Moscovici commented Juncker's 'Luxleaks' scandal with the words: "He should not be judged on his past."

In any event, one of the lessons that can be learned from the delicate power-balancing in the EU (some call it "horse-trading") is that apart from skills and experiences the dominance of particular EU member states is the main challenge for European institutions. Brussels can stand for ensemble playing and collegiality, but the match is played by nations.

Therefore, the heads of the national governments also have a say. The forum, in which they meet, the European Council, defines the general political priorities of European issues. The President of the Council has to bridge divides and broker political deals between national leaders.

Since the 2008 crisis, the summits take place more frequently, thus the influence of the Council increased substantially. Accordingly, newly elected Council President Donald Tusk heads an institution with widening influence
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– which is for many an alarming rise, because the real power of the EU should derive from directly elected European institutions like the Parliament. In the course of strong efforts to rescind the democratic deficit of the EU, even the President of the European Commission was (indirectly) elected for the first time this year.

Tusk's election was a big surprise for many political observers, since nobody was seriously expecting an Eastern European leader on the top of the heads of governments. Tusk kept distancing himself from the rumors to give up Warsaw for Brussels. But his appointment makes sense for at least two reasons: First, faced with a stagnating economy, Europe should benefit from the success of the former Polish Prime Minister, who has led his country through the turbulence of the European debt crisis, achieving economic and political stability for seven years – a rare accomplishment in former Eastern bloc countries. Second, faced with the current tensions between Russia and the EU, Tusk's "new" Europe plus the Eastern Bloc experience can be put to good use: being a neighbor to Russia is to be seen as supplementary to a deeper European understanding. Moreover, Tusk's engagement should be somehow also a counterbalance to the new EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, who has been attacked for being Kremlin-friendly and inexperienced in international policy.

The difference in the political experiences and views between Tusk and Mogherini could not be more eye-catching: Tusk was fighting as a civil rights activist against soviet-communist oppression and was one of the EU's most successful prime ministers of recent years, while Mogherini was member of the Italian Communist Youth Federation before joining the Italian Democratic Party. She has served no more than seven months as Foreign Minister in Italy. But in order to understand the whole, there are more issues to know. First, Italy's very reserved criticism of Putin's aggressive foreign policy has to do with its dependence on Russian gas. Second, Mogherini's candidacy was first blocked by Eastern European states, for the reason of her Kremlin-friendly position. Third, Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi gained a spectacular win in the 2014-European elections, so he was able to push Mogherini for a senior posting. Fourth, the European leadership was desperately looking for qualified women in order not to remain a "gentlemen's club," as EP President Schultz said.

However, besides all the remaining problems of the new European leadership, Juncker's announcement of seeking closer inter-institutional cooperation is a notable novelty. Cooperative interaction is definitely a praiseworthy approach in the jungle of European institutions. From dialogue, all can benefit. Cooperation between the Parliament and the Council, which has never taken place, would generate more attention to Europe's directly elected heads of states and the citizens of the EU.

Creating a stronger cooperation between Europe's leaders and institutions is certainly important, but perhaps the easier part. Finding a decision maker in the European team of leaders when faced with a threatened European security will be far harder. Neither of them has been explicitly elected for a strong mission in the world nor to claim superiority.

EuroPoint: Ever more frequently, the European Union is asked to play a powerful role in the world, yet it has not been designed for this task. Created in peaceful and prosperous times, it has been built for the teamwork of partners. Now, in one crisis after another Europe is asked to do more. Besides the hope, that the historical achievement of the EU (to change enemies into allies) might become a global model, a new task is emerging: will the new Europe be able to change its mission and operation?

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