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Commentary

Three cheers (and questions) for the new Commission

By Antonio Missiroli and Janis Emmanouilidis

The new European Commission unveiled last week by José Manuel Barroso constitutes an almost optimal solution. The President has demonstrated once again his tactical skills by making the most of the cards he had been dealt by the Member States' governments.

The set-up of the new College is a virtuoso act of balancing - in political, geographic, personal and even gender terms. The distribution of portfolios and competencies, the allocation of Vice-Presidencies, the treatment of incumbent Commissioners *vis-à-vis* newcomers - all display a profound knowledge of the rules of European politics as well as familiarity with 'selling' EU policy.

Barroso has shared out jobs fairly among the three main political families, between bigger and smaller countries, old and new members, and - in the end - even between men and women. He has also highlighted new policy priorities by assigning them dedicated portfolios and administrative resources: climate action, energy, and the "digital agenda".

He has finally split the Justice, Liberty and Security portfolio by giving primacy to fundamental rights and citizenship - conferred to his most senior Vice-President, Viviane Reding - and by giving home affairs proper to a Nordic liberal, Cecilia Malmström. He has also emphasised the need for improving inter-institutional links (especially in light of the new and complex institutional architecture and the increased powers of the European Parliament) by appointing an *ad hoc* Vice-President supported by the Commission's Secretariat-General.

He has brought together two policy areas which are closely linked to each other, namely enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, into a single Commissioner's job. He has eliminated meaningless or powerless portfolios such as "multilingualism" and "communication". And he has rewarded loyalty, merit and effectiveness while shuffling all second-term Commissioners into new significant responsibilities and preventing the establishment of personal or national fiefdoms.

In other words, well (and cleverly) done. This Commission has a good chance to pass the hearings planned for January in the European Parliament relatively unscathed. Although it is impossible at this stage to rule out bad showings or personal problems for individual nominees, it is the overall 'package' that seems convincing and, above all, consensus-oriented.

It is also a package set to strengthen Barroso's personal leadership. The new Commission is bound to be even more 'presidential' - although it is too early to predict whether it will also be stronger as an institution. In addition, and in light of the latest other appointments at the EU top, President Barroso is likely to be the pivotal figure in the new Brussels set-up - but we have to wait and see what he will make out of this hard-won privilege.

Unfinished business

Having said all this and praised Barroso's masterful stroke, it also seems fair to raise a few questions.

First of all, the post-Lisbon Agenda - a key priority in the foreseeable future - does not seem to fall neatly into any one Commissioner's portfolio, although the Digital Agenda given to the experienced Neelie Kroes could well be expanded (and even re-branded) when the new priorities will be agreed in 2010.

Secondly, immigration and asylum policy remain part of the new Home Affairs portfolio. Fortunately, the initial idea to call it Security and Immigration was dropped, as it would have sent all the wrong messages inside and outside Europe. Still, in perspective, there is room here for a separate portfolio, which could bring together the competencies and units currently spread around other Commission services, starting with DG EMPL and DG RELEX itself.

Thirdly, and finally, EU Foreign Policy is unlikely to remain confined to the domain supervised by Catherine Ashton and the new Commissioners who will work with her (including one for Enlargement and ENP, one for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, and notably the more traditional one for Development). External issues related to trade, innovation, the regulatory aspects of the Single Market, energy security but also climate change, visa and immigration policy may well be part of an 'extended' family of EU policies that require better coordination and coherence.

Maybe President Barroso could test more creative and flexible ways of organising the work of his new team - e.g. by creating 'pools' of Commissioners (under his own direct supervision or that of Vice-Presidents) to address specific policy challenges that cross the boundaries of existing portfolios and require focus.

He could also start imagining how to reshuffle the College if and when new members join the Union, in order to avoid a repetition of the Commissioner for Multilingualism case and, possibly, also seize an opportunity to improve and adjust the initial set-up to respond to emerging policy challenges.

What for

Besides these rather concrete issues, there is also a more general but no less crucial question to raise: once the Lisbon Treaty is in force and all the new teams fully in place, what is likely to be the next big overarching project the EU engages itself in? In the 1990s it was first the Single Market and then Monetary Union, soon followed by the 'big bang' Enlargement. Ever since we have been caught in the throes and labours of delivering the new Treaty. This is over, at long last, as of today - but what is next?

The appointments of the past weeks do not answer this fundamental question, which may trump all other policy-specific priorities and expectations. In order to unleash new dynamism, the EU needs a new grand project and future-oriented *raison d'être* to prove its added value, well beyond the preservation of what has been achieved in the past.

Preventing collective decline and irrelevance while adapting Europe to a globalised and less 'Western' world are indeed urgent imperatives - but they need to be driven by a less defensive and more tangible common project. Maybe the MEPs could start asking the new Commissioners this question during the hearings next month?

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