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Ambitions and Results

Lessons from the Juncker Commission

It appears President-elect Ursula von der Leyen aims at leading an ambitious Commission. Having had to secure a broad alliance in the European Parliament, von der Leyen embraced policy proposals that frequently resemble those of the Juncker Commission. Her ambitions are in some ways remarkable, because the Juncker Commission may have overestimated support for its ambitions in the Council. This policy brief explores possible lessons from her predecessor's performance. A paradox that emerges is that the ambitions of Commission President Juncker seemed to be initially supported by the EP and Member States. Yet, the Council blocked a number of the important ambitions when they were translated into proposals. This has consequences for the next Commission. The level of ambition and related commitment from von der Leyen may work well in showing visionary leadership, but it may harm the moderation required for actual progress.

On 16 July President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (VDL) outlined her agenda in the European Parliament (EP). It appears that she aims to lead an ambitious Commission. Having had to secure a broad alliance across four party lines in the EP, VDL embraced policy proposals that frequently resemble those of the Juncker Commission. In cases where the Juncker Commission's ambitious proposals mostly failed, the VDL Commission is apparently going to take up the reins, having announced objectives such as deepening Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) by introducing the European Deposit Insurance Scheme (EDIS) and further strengthening the banking union, forging a "New Pact on Migration and Asylum" by reforming the Dublin rules, proposing a common consolidated corporate tax base and a digital tax and expanding qualified majority voting (QMV) in climate policy, energy policy, social policy, taxation and Common

Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In cases where the Juncker Commission was only partially successful, she aims to take things further, for instance by "fully implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights" and extending the deadline for full staffing of the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) to 2024. Furthermore, VDL proposes a "Conference on the Future of Europe" that would possibly lead to treaty change, which can be compared to Juncker's disappointing effort to initiate a broad discussion on the future of the EU. Thus, her ambitions are pitched high and range from deepening major policy areas to potentially initiating fundamental institutional reforms.¹

1 Ursula von der Leyen, ["A Union that Strives for More: My Agenda for Europe. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024"](#), Brussels: European Parliament, 2019.

Her ambitions are in some ways remarkable, because the Juncker Commission may have overestimated support for its ambitions in the Council. This policy brief explores possible lessons from her predecessor's performance. From the start, the Juncker Commission was very ambitious, presenting itself as the "last-chance Commission" and underlining that in the aftermath of the euro crisis the Commission had to "deliver" to regain the trust of Europe's citizens. By wanting to make a difference and focusing on being "big-on-big", Juncker also sought to lead a "very political Commission".²

But has the public avowal of ambition turned out to be a successful strategy? Evidently, ambitions may be useful in opening up discussions and "promoting the general interest of the Union", as the Commission's task is defined in the Treaty on European Union.³ Yet a paradox is apparent in the arena of European negotiations. As a rule, rotating presidencies are wise to downplay ambitions even though national politicians tend to be full of ideas and hobby horses (a politician is a politician), whereas the president of the Commission seems to be expected to be ambitious and to be big-on-big. As discussed elsewhere in relation to leadership styles of the rotating presidencies of the Council⁴, visionary (or transformational) leadership can be effective if objectives are few in number, carefully prioritised and meticulously prepared so that within the limited priorities selected the pitch (realistic goal and tone of the proposal)

is just about right. In general, visionary leadership is bound to provoke resistance from Member States, so that in the end a more group-oriented broker role results in more effectively cementing agreements.

Apart from possible personal drivers to show leadership, any president-elect would be expected to show ambition simply because the most pregnant problems have to be solved. Acknowledging the circumstances of the past few years of vying pressures such as high youth unemployment, concerns over climate change, and, for various reasons, marked forms of populism, the tension between the need for and dislike of high EU ambitions is evident. A discussion on the effectiveness of high Commission ambitions is required when moving from one president to the next, but the discussion is also of longer-term relevance as (multi-)annual agendas are a recurring theme. Even though the Council almost unanimously backed VDL's nomination and restated its desire for an EU that acts ambitiously ("big on big and small on small" reads the Council's "New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024"⁵), it is debatable whether, once the real decisions have to be made, the Council will in the end agree.

The challenge of evaluating the Commission presidency

As is the case with public organisations generally⁶, evaluating a presidency is not a straightforward affair given conflicting expectations and differences between immediate and longer-term outcomes (including immediate measurable effects, effects that involve long gestation periods, and changes in attitude that demand long time-frames). Moreover, ambitions also play

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- 2 Adriaan Schout and Hedwich van der Bij, "The Juncker Commission and public support for the EU: Doing good or doing the right thing?" in Hug, A. (Ed.), *Europe and the people: Examining the EU's democratic legitimacy*, ed. Adam Hug (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2016).
Adriaan Schout, "[Commission president Juncker: Good intentions but wrong profile](#)", *Internationale Spectator*, 14 June 2017.
 - 3 Treaty on European Union, Title III: Provisions on the Institutions, [Article 17](#).
 - 4 Schout, A. (1998), "The Presidency as juggler; managing conflicting expectations", *EIPASCOPE*, no. 2, June: pp. 2-10. Schout, A. (2008), "Beyond the Rotating Presidency", in Hayward, J. (ed.) *Leaderless Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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- 5 European Council, "[A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024](#)", 20 June 2019.
 - 6 E.g. Powell, V. (1987), *Improving Public Enterprise Performance: Concepts and Techniques* (Geneva: International Labour Office).

a complicated role in policy processes.⁷ Ambitions are needed to create awareness of, and support for, new developments and to stimulate debates about new values that are needed. Yet we also see that high ambitions tend, for instance in the EU, to become merely symbolic, as in the case of oft-repeated environmental ambitions and reduction targets.⁸ What is more, the European integration process has been typified by a number of high ambitions that keep on being blocked because of conflicts between Member States. Monetary integration is an example of a policy area that, from the 1960s onwards, has been caught in a stalemate between northern Member States demanding solidity (convergence) and southern Member States wanting solidarity.⁹ Some policies simply tend to move forward slowly.

A number of assessments are already available. Juncker's self-assessment, presented at Sibiu, stated: "We have achieved a lot together: we agreed on 348 proposals, 90% of them through unanimity; unemployment and deficits are down compared to 2014 and growth is up. Unity matters and this is our way to the future."¹⁰ He also presented the Commission's account of the "Top 20 EU achievements 2014–2019", such as the ban on single-use plastics and ending roaming charges.¹¹ The most comprehensive assessment of the Juncker

Commission's output to date was conducted by the European Parliamentary Research Service. It concluded that the Juncker Commission tabled 94% of its planned proposals, amounting to a total of 547 tabled proposals, of which 66% were adopted, while 21% of tabled proposals are still in process.¹² EU scholars have also begun to publish end-of-term assessments.¹³ Von Ondarza (2019), for instance, concludes that the Commission has become more focussed and internally coherent even though many of its legislative proposals failed and the Commission politicisation clashed with its control tasks. However, the assessments do not address the usefulness of high ambitions in relation to results achieved.

This policy brief builds on an earlier study on the output of the Juncker Commission¹⁴ in which a selection was made of successful policy proposals that were realised, "partial successes" and proposals that were either withdrawn or parked ("failures").

The apparent legitimacy of Juncker's ambitions

For various reasons it was to be expected that Juncker would lead an ambitious Commission. The multitude of crises that hit the EU, some of them before Juncker took office, heightened the political sensitivity of European integration. The euro crisis tested Member States' resolve to bail out fellow Member States in financial

7 Moran M., M. Rein, R. Goodin (eds) (2008), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Policy*, Oxford University Press: Ch. 1 "Introduction". Dryzek, J., B. Ripley (1988), "The ambition of policy design", *Review of Policy Research*, 7:4, 705–719.

8 Jordan, A., A. Schout (2006), *The coordination of European Governance: exploring the capacities for networked governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

9 Szász, A. (2001), *De Euro*, Alphen aan de Rijn: Haasbroek.

10 European Commission, "[President Juncker at the EU27 leaders' Sibiu Summit](#)" 9 May 2019.

11 European Commission, "[The Top 20 EU achievements 2014–2019](#)", Brussels: European Commission, 2019. Also at Sibiu, the European Commission published an account of its "unfinished business", see: European Commission, "[Unfinished business: the Top 10 EU issues awaiting final agreement](#)", Brussels: European Commission, 2019.

12 Étienne Bassot and Wolfgang Hiller, "[The Juncker Commission's ten priorities: An end-of-term assessment](#)", Brussels: European Parliament Research Service, 2019.

13 See, for instance: Nicolai von Ondarza, "[A Redefinition of 'Spitzenkandidaten': The Next European Commission Needs a Common Political Mandate](#)", Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2019. See also: Steven Blockmans, ed., "[What Comes After the Last Chance Commission? Policy Priorities for 2019–2024](#)", Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2019.

14 The wider study looked at 23 cases, for which 18 interviews were conducted with Brussels negotiators at the end of 2018 and in early 2019 (Schout, A., A. Nunes 2019).

turmoil, to implement painful reforms and to respond to persistent high levels of (youth) unemployment. The migration crisis heightened demands for solidarity while mounting tensions between east and west demanded solutions at the political level. The magnitude of the impact these crises had on the EU and its Member States cannot be overstated, raising fundamental questions about the feasibility of the Union. Difficulties over rule of law and climate change sharpened the profile of the Commission as a political actor. Moreover, the international context had also become more volatile and the election of US President Trump added to the need for drastic soul-searching in the EU regarding its internal posture. Finally, Juncker himself has the reputation of being a committed European and warm supporter of, among other things, “completing” EMU.

However, Brexit highlighted the desire of Member States to retain room for manoeuvre and for the EU to respect national idiosyncrasies. Even within Member States, tensions have heightened. Political discourse has become increasingly polarised and Member States have seen the rise of far-right parties (the Forum voor Democratie (FvD) in the Netherlands, the Front National/National Rally in France (RN), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and Lega Nord in Italy, to name just a few). It is in this context of mounting tensions between North and South, and East and West, that Juncker argued for the “last chance” Commission and employed “big on big and small on small” as his motto.

Juncker also had an unprecedented level of democratic legitimacy as Commission president. He had been elevated to the office of European Commission president through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, which meant that he and his agenda had stood at the forefront of the campaign of the most successful party (European People’s Party – EPP) during the 2014 EP elections. Moreover, Juncker’s ambitious agenda drew legitimacy from the European Council, based not only on his nomination for the Commission presidency by the Council (eventually supported by 26 out of 28 Member States), but also by drawing on the Council’s own 2014 “Strategic Agenda for the Union in

Times of Change” in designing his political guidelines (and later the Commission’s work programmes).¹⁵ The Council’s approval of ambitious Commission projects was later repeatedly reaffirmed, for example at the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017,¹⁶ when the Council granted the Commission a mandate for tabling proposals that would significantly expand the EU’s role in social policy.

Reasons for resistance

It is far from clear, however, that the Council was altogether pleased with the Commission’s ambitions when it came to the implementation of the agenda. Member States blocked cooperation with the Commission on, roughly, four recurring grounds:

- fear of losing sovereignty (including questions of subsidiarity and conferral and fear of integration by stealth),
- reluctance to show solidarity (transfers – monetary and otherwise – between Member States),
- doubts about proportionality (relating to the cost of Commission proposals),
- a disinterest in wide-ranging institutional reform discussions.

The Juncker Commission was most successful in advancing ambitious proposals in policy areas where Member States did not fear having to shoulder substantial costs or losing sovereignty and in which, despite the major sensitivities involved, Member States shared the ultimate objectives or recognised the need to make progress (see Table 1). This includes much of the Juncker Commission’s work on “small on small”, the Digital Single Market and the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI), which can be regarded as part of the Commission’s traditional role of regulating and fostering the internal market. Even though issues are

15 European Council, “[Strategic Agenda for the Union in Times of Change](#)”, Brussels: European Council, 2014.

16 European Parliament, Council of the EU and the European Commission, “[European Pillar of Social Rights](#)”, Gothenburg: European Commission, 2017.

sensitive, advancing the internal market is in the end a shared objective. However, it is noticeable that in some instances the extent to which the Commission's legislative advances have translated into real added value is questionable.¹⁷

The Commission achieved minor successes in developing a European Pillar of Social Rights, the Energy Union, a “fully operational” EBCG, the European Investment Stabilisation Function (EISF)/ Budgetary Instrument for Competitiveness and Convergence (BICC), climate change policy and the proposals for the 2021–2017 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). More substantial successes are probably unlikely in the foreseeable future. Resistance resulted from Member States' concerns over issues of sovereignty, solidarity and proportionality. In the case of social security coordination, Member States argued that according to the principle of subsidiarity, national governments were best placed to shape their welfare systems. Member States also rejected the notion of QMV in social policy, fearing that majority decision-making would lead to creeping integration, meaning the loss of sovereignty and transfer of competences to the EU. For similar reasons, Member States were opposed to the notion of a fully operational EBCG, with a planned total of 10,000 operational staff, although it has remained unclear what authority they would have. The notion of mutual support was acceptable, but the institutional creation of a “fully operational” border and coast guard was a bridge too far. The Energy Union, the Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness (BICC), climate change policy and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations met resistance not least due to Member States' unwillingness to shoulder or share high financial and economic costs. In the case of BICC, this resistance was reinforced by Member States' reluctance to show solidarity with fellow Member States who seemed unwilling to pursue necessary economic reforms.

17 Schout, A. D. Bevaqua (2018), “EU Added Value – Fact-based policy or politicised facts?”, Clingendael Policy Brief.

While these proposals hardly succeeded in their originally intended form, they may lay the foundation for further integration in their respective policy areas. Observers have long recognised the EU's tendency to “fail forward” and “integrate by default”¹⁸: the tendency of the EU to agree to incomplete structures, which are prone to fail in crisis situations and therefore necessitate further integration at a later stage. Whether this phenomenon will occur in the above-mentioned cases remains to be seen, but judging by the discussions so far Member States will continue to block transfers of sovereignty or engagement in risk sharing. In such cases, the Commission was evidently overly ambitious.

Ambitious initiatives that were more or less fully blocked and failed concerned EMU, taxation, migration and asylum policy, CFSP, the attempt to spark debate about institutional reform, and the discontinuation of seasonal time change. EDIS and Sovereign Bond-Backed Securities (SBBS), both ambitious proposals pertaining to EMU, were met with resistance by Member States who felt that they were misplaced attempts to create financial solidarity and that the appropriate remedy would be economic and financial reforms at Member State level. Another ambitious EMU proposal, the creation of a European Monetary Fund (EMF), was blocked primarily by Member States who were afraid of losing sovereignty in the form of decision-making power over the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). In matters of taxation, Member States feared losing sovereignty as well as income, as the Commission appeared to be aiming for integration through majority decision-making, the harmonisation of tax bases (Common (Consolidated) Corporate Tax Base – C(C)CTB), a Digital Tax and a Financial

18 Erik Jones, R. Daniel Keleman and Sophie Meunier, “Failing Forward? The Eurocrisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration”, *Comparative Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (2015). See also: Adriaan Schout, “[The EU's existential threat: Demands for flexibility in an EU based on rules](#)”, in: *EU60: Re-founding Europe. The responsibility to propose*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017.

Transaction Tax (FTT). Both the Digital Tax and the FTT were also opposed on the grounds that they might incur an undue and possibly unintended tax burden for crucial stakeholders (auto manufacturers, pension funds).

Interrelated ambitious proposals in the policy area of migration and asylum policy included an emergency relocation scheme, a permanent relocation scheme and revision of the Dublin rules for asylum applicants. These proposals failed because a significant portion of Member States felt that asylum policy should not be determined by the principle of solidarity – or at EU level. Instead, they understood migration and asylum policy to be a matter of national sovereignty.

Foreign policy proved similarly controversial, for similar reasons. Small Member States fear that majority decision-making on questions of CFSP would lead to their foreign policy interests – and therefore an integral aspect of their national sovereignty – being overridden. These fears were especially pronounced when Juncker suggested in the media that – in the very long run – a “European army” could be created, something VDL had also indicated as defence minister.¹⁹ Some Member States consider themselves neutral and in other countries there is serious resistance to the notion of a European army. National political leaders felt obliged to qualify Juncker’s suggestions. This shows that a Commission president has to be careful when flagging ideas and has to be aware of the effects it has on the support for his ideas in the Member States and among the wider public.

Finally, the Commission’s attempt to spark a post-Brexit referendum debate about the future of the EU27 and their institutions failed due to a lack of interest in a wider debate about the EU on the part of the Member States. This lack of interest can be regarded as the result of all the Member States’ concerns outlined above: there was no consensus among Member States about the degree to which they might give up sovereignty, engage in projects aimed at solidarity or shoulder the financial burden of increased integration. Moreover, a lesson from the veto of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 in the Netherlands was that it is better to talk about concrete policy objectives than to engage in encompassing institutional debates that can be regarded as navel-gazing for EU specialists.

Opposition to Commission proposals also appeared to have been strong especially from smaller and/or more peripheral Member States, though there were numerous exceptions to this rule (e.g. Germany on sensitive fiscal and economic matters or the UK on CFSP). Some of the most active opposition came from those Member States that are part of a strategic alliance, namely the Visegrád Four and the New Hanseatic League. Put more provocatively, the question is raised as to whether the Commission was mostly in line with French preferences: “Whose Commission is this?”.

19 Dave Keating (3 September 2015), [Juncker calls for a European army](#), *Politico*.

Table 1 Successes, partial successes/partial failures and failures

	Successes	Partial successes/ partial failures	Failures
Policy proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Small on small” - Digital Single Market (legislative framework, consisting of 30 initiatives) - European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - European Pillar of Social Rights (legislative framework, consisting of 26 initiatives) - Energy Union (the third of Juncker’s ten political priorities, consisting of 45 initiatives) - Fully Operational European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) - European Investment Stabilisation Function (EISF)/Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness (BICC) - Climate change policy - Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027 (package) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - European Monetary Fund (EMF)/European Minister for Economy and Finance - European Deposit Insurance Scheme (EDIS) - Sovereign Bond-Backed Securities (SBBS) - Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in matters of taxation - Common (Consolidated) Corporate Tax Base (C(C)CTB) - Digital Tax - Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) - 2nd Emergency Refugee Relocation Scheme - Permanent Refugee Relocation Scheme - Revision of the Dublin Rules - “European Army” - (QMV) in matters of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) - White Paper on the Future of Europe - Discontinuation of seasonal time change
Drivers for success/failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General support for the objective - Willingness to commit despite reservations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Member States fear the Commission is overstepping boundaries of subsidiarity - Political resistance related to costs - Member States fear creeping integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Member States lack motivation for solidarity - Member States argue that the Commission is overstepping boundaries of subsidiarity - Political resistance related to costs - Member States fear creeping integration - Member States lack interest in wide-ranging institutional debates

Conclusions and implications

Are high ambitions conducive to a successful European Commission? The Juncker Commission was highly ambitious, and as a corollary “very political” both in terms of policies and in engaging Member States in far-reaching institutional debates. A paradox that emerges from the discussion is that the ambitions of Commission President Juncker seemed to be initially supported by the EP and Member States. In fact, the Council formulated the objectives in the Strategic Agenda and chose the motto of being “big on big and small on small”. The Council nevertheless blocked a number of the important ambitions when they were translated into proposals. This raises questions not only about the wisdom of an ambitious Commission President but also about the Council supporting a motto such as “big on big” whereas the real successes were in being small on small.

In addition, a considerable amount of the proposals that concerned *solidarity* (such as sharing of costs and risks, relocating refugees) and *deeper integration* (e.g. in taxation, EMU, asylum and migration, and CFSP) ended up being blocked by the Member States. Moreover, efforts to engage in *institutional reforms and the future of EU discussions* did not pay off (including discussions on easier voting procedures).

A deliberately moderate approach did help to make limited advances in sensitive policy areas where Commission proposals encountered Member State resistance, namely in the MFF negotiations and the EISF/BICC. Hence, a careful selection of

the pitch of the ambitions in proposals is important for success. But the pitch tends to suffer from the high ambitions that the Commission, EP and Council impose on themselves at the start of the Commission and this “can-do” atmosphere subsequently overtakes the willingness of Member States to go along with ambitions. As such, visionary (or transformational) leadership appears to create opposition, whereas group-oriented leadership seems more effective.²⁰ This also settles the paradox noted at the beginning: leadership expectations are apparently high for the Commission but low for the rotating presidency, yet trying to be an honest broker is no less relevant for the Commission.

This has consequences for the VDL Commission. We see a similar level of ambition and related commitment from Commission President-elect Von der Leyen to the level we saw with President Juncker: “We should not be shy about being proud of where we are or ambitious about where we want to go.”²¹ The parallels with the start of the Juncker Commission are clear: being “big on big” and promising a new institutional discussion including hints at treaty change, as well as an overhaul of asylum and migration, EMU, taxation and CFSP, may work well in showing visionary leadership, but it may harm the moderation required for actual progress.

Hence, modesty is a virtue and the Council may be well advised to consider this when formulating a Strategic Agenda and a motto for the new Commission President.

20 For details, see Schout, A., S. Vanhoonacker (2006), “Evaluating Presidencies of the Council of the EU: Revisiting Nice”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44/5: 1051-1077.

21 Jean-Claude Juncker, “[A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change – Political Guidelines for the next European Commission](#)”, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014.

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