

# The Trump-Juncker meeting in DC raises urgent questions for the next Commission

Karel Lannoo

It appears that a genuine EU foreign policy is now finally emerging, but is it taking off in a direction different from the one originally envisaged? European Commission President Juncker completed an impressive schedule of international meetings in July, culminating in the unexpected agreement reached with President Trump on July 26th. These accomplishments have far-reaching implications for the European Union and its institutions, including the ‘last chance Commission’, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and the functioning of EU trade policy and the European External Action Service (EEAS). They also raise the question of the single president, which Juncker mentioned prominently in his 2017 State of the Union speech.

Not much has moved on the EU institutional front, possibly because there were so many other more pressing issues to be dealt with. With the European elections fast approaching, however, the fundamental concerns raised at the start of the Commission’s current term will rapidly resurface in the autumn, and even more acutely as a Brexit agreement emerges. These issues – namely the appointment and person of the new Commission President; the role, size and structure of the next Commission; and the vibrancy of the entire European project– must be urgently revisited. Much has changed over the last four years both in the EU and globally, and after a year of relief following Macron’s election, the EU is coming under attack once again.

Given the prospect of an even more fragmented European Parliament, according to the first predictions (by Reuters), the *Spitzenkandidaten* process will be difficult to manage. The two single largest groups in the EP – the EPP and the S&D – will no longer have a majority and will need the support of a third group, the liberals (ALDE) or the expected new group spearheaded by the French President’s party La République en Marche, to secure an agreement on the next Commission President. But on the fringes, populist groups on the extreme left or right are also expected to grow. The size of both the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) and the M5S (Five-Star Movement) in the European Parliament, part of the populist EFDD group (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy), chaired by Nigel Farage, will increase significantly, according to recent polls. Will the European Council use the confluence of these developments as an opportunity to revisit the procedure and find a figure who can rise *au dessus de la mêlée*, as it indicated it would in June 2014, following the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker?

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A strong candidate will be needed not only to persuade the European public that the Commission deserves a new chance, but this person must also enjoy wide international recognition and offer vast executive experience. The agreement that Juncker and the Commission managed to achieve in Washington can stand as a landmark, far exceeding that obtained by any of the other six Heads of (EU) State and Government (HoSG) who have met with the US President over the last few months. One conclusion to draw from this achievement is that only by building a stronger and more unified EU can both the EU and its member states earn and retain respect throughout the world. Hence, the importance of sustaining EU leadership.

Unlike the other international summits in which the EU participated in the same month, Donald Tusk was not present at the White House visit, which immediately raises the single-President issue mentioned by Juncker in his September 2017 State of the Union speech. It's time to face some uncomfortable facts. When the EU is represented by two 'Presidents' abroad, as it was at the recent EU-China, EU-Japan or G-7 summits, it makes the Union appear weak or incapable. And the practice can also cause no small amount of confusion in the minds of foreign dignitaries (not to mention EU citizens!). The Commission President was right to highlight this problem in his annual speech. It is appropriate to recall the reply given by former Commission President Delors when asked in an RTBF interview several years ago whether he would ever return to Brussels: "not with two Presidents".

But it should be acknowledged that a single President would also pose challenges for the foreign representation of the EU. Opinions are divided on the desirability of the EEAS functioning as a separate entity from the Commission. While the clear integration of the High Representative into the Commission College structure under the Juncker Commission has worked, the separation of trade from external relations has not been so effective. It has weakened the EU, compared to the member states, and has created a fair amount of confusion and duplication of effort in foreign representation of the EU. As EU citizens become increasingly aware of the importance of an EU foreign policy, steps should be taken to more closely integrate the EEAS into the Commission's structure as a step towards a stronger and more unified EU foreign policy.

Integrating the EEAS into the Commission could be a first building block towards a pro-active strategy for the new Commission. The next question to tackle will be the size of the College, where the arrival of new EU members from the Western Balkans should be viewed as an opportunity to reduce the number of Commissioners. The current structure, with its much stronger political drive and the enhanced role of the Vice-Presidents and the teams, has a more transparent hierarchy and improved communications and coordination, but a smaller College would help shape more meaningful portfolios and reduce creeping intergovernmentalism.

To be credible, the next Commission President will need to have a grand plan to convince the European public that the institution has a clear mission and mandate. He or she will have to come up with effective ideas for driving reform of the institution to become more responsive and accountable. A business-as-usual scenario is not a viable option; only far-reaching renewal can guarantee survival.

The choice of a new leader will not be easy: Will it be a *Spitzenkandidat* again, with the decline of the core European parties, or will the European Council see this as an occasion to propose its own candidate? Or alternatively, will the selection be based on a combination of these two processes? Policymakers must urgently clarify their plans by the end of the summer in order to build momentum towards the next Commission and to ensure the vital continuity of the European project.