

Juncker raises high expectations with ambitious agenda

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Energy Union, Capital Markets Union, a stronger EEAS and no new enlargements over the next five years. Jean Claude Juncker has clearly opted for ‘more Union’ during his term as President of the European Commission, offering up an ambitious agenda that raises a host of expectations, some of which will be hard to meet. To some extent, it could be considered as a traditional Commission agenda, with the completion of the single market; on other issues, however, it opens the scope for institutional reform, with better decision-making and a stronger hierarchy within the Commission, with for example the idea of ‘deputising the High Representative’ for all the external action portfolios and the acceptance of a multi-speed Europe. And as a Luxemburger, he has also placed further tax harmonisation on the agenda.

The central theme of the speech he delivered at the European Parliament following his election yesterday is an ‘Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change’. Jobs and growth would mainly be addressed via a massive public and private investment programme of €300 billion using existing facilities under the EU budget and European Investment Bank programmes. The Digital Agenda should create further growth opportunities generating “hundreds of thousands of new jobs”. The new Commission President will therefore pursue an ambitious legislative programme towards a connected digital single market.

A focal point of his speech is the Energy Union, which mainly aims at reducing import dependence by pooling resources, combining infrastructure and diversifying energy sources. Contrary to the June European Council Conclusions, Juncker also emphasised the need to unite member states’ negotiating power vis-à-vis third countries. No details were given, however, how all of this would be put in place beyond the fact that energy infrastructure, renewable energy and energy efficiency were named among the primary targets of the investment programme mentioned above. More generally, we may expect ‘more Europe’ in energy policy, and his call for Europe to become “the world number one in renewable energies” together with his call for a binding and ambitious energy efficiency target may be an indication that he is serious about the transition to a low-carbon economy. If Juncker wants to limit the cost of this transition, however, he must also put a stronger focus on energy prices to avoid excessive cost for households and industry.

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A more disappointing point on Juncker's agenda is his stated ambition to restore the industry's weight in the EU's GDP "back to 20% by 2020" from its less than 16% share today, which has also been the motto of DG Enterprise for some time. It remains unclear how this target was arrived at, and how Europe could regain competitiveness in sectors where it has lost market share. It is as absurd as advocating a greater share of agriculture in the EU's GDP. It would have been more useful to call for a more European industrial policy or greater coordination of national R&D agendas across member states.

On the external side, the President-elect called for a reasonable and balanced trade agreement with the US, and for a better functioning external action service. "The next High Representative (...) will have to be a strong and experienced player to combine (...) all the tools available in the Commission, in a more effective way than in the past." The successor to Catherine Ashton will need to work in a clear hierarchical relationship with the other external relations Commissioners. Also remarkable was Juncker's statement that "no further enlargement will take place over the next five years", which raises questions about the expectations it creates both inside and outside, as the EU is still actively engaged in accession negotiations with six different countries.

The final item on Juncker's agenda – to bring about a union of democratic change – can only materialise if the European Parliament plays a stronger role. The Commission President-elect supports greater politicisation of the European Commission, a development of which many within the Commission are fearful. He calls for a political dialogue with the EP, not a technocratic one, through, for example, sending political representatives to the trilogues. This should also increase the transparency of these negotiations. In the last Parliament, trilogues in first readings had become very common, but they are not a hallmark of transparency in decision-making.

A full slate of ambitions has been placed on the table to be rendered more concretely in the months ahead. But the tone has been set, and expectations have been raised.