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Political leadership in times of crisis: the Commission presidency of Jean-Claude Juncker

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the leadership of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president, addressing two questions: to what extent did Juncker exercise political leadership and in what ways did his leadership qualify as explicitly political? Drawing on leadership theory and recent insights into political leadership in the EU, the article first conceptualises the Commission president's potential for acting as a leader – particularly a political leader. The empirical section analyses Juncker's provision of agenda-setting and mediative-institutional leadership in two phases: the first marked by an extraordinary activism and an assertive attitude in agenda-setting, but with limited successes in achieving binding decisions; the second characterised by launching proposals for deliberation and debate, embedded in longer-term visions. The article concludes that around the mid-term of his incumbency, Juncker adapted to the constraining institutional and situational context by engaging in mediative-institutional leadership and carving out a new, more political role for the Commission president.

KEYWORDS Political leadership; Commission presidency; Jean-Claude Juncker; agenda-setting; mediative-institutional leadership; political presidency

In recent scholarly analyses, the European Union is increasingly perceived as changing in fundamental ways. Whether scholars emphasise a turn towards 'New Intergovernmentalism' (Bickerton *et al.* 2015), 'The End of the Eurocrats' Dream' (Chalmers *et al.* 2016), or simply an EU in crisis, they agree that the Union is undergoing profound transformations. These are seen in the growing discord among the members of the enlarged Union, a decreasing capacity to act in the face of multiple crises, the increasing politicisation of EU issues in public debates, and widespread Euroscepticism among citizens (e.g., Chalmers *et al.* 2016). Scholars have also taken note of power shifts between the EU's core institutions – in favour of the Council and

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European Council, and at the expense of the Commission (e.g., Bickerton 2012; Puetter 2014).

Nevertheless, the European Commission appears to be the institution least affected by these changes, standing 'calm within the storm' (Peterson 2015). Indeed, even though the Commission has lost power and influence in the European arena, its institutional position has not changed significantly and its operations appear comparatively stable. Yet the challenges it faces have multiplied. The rapid expansion of the Union to its current 28 member states, the multiple and mostly unresolved crises of the last decade, the ensuing deep discord among the member states, and the spread of Euroscepticism make it extremely difficult to shape and promote further integration. Does the Commission have the capacity to meet these challenges and to play a proactive role?

During the 10 years of the Barroso presidency, the European Council and particularly the governments of the large and powerful member states were the institutions most active in tackling the financial, the sovereign debt and, ultimately, the euro crisis (Bickerton 2012; Bulmer 2014; Schild and Krotz 2013; Puetter 2014). The election of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president seemed to herald a shift. His nomination, through what became known as the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, made the office more visible and connected it more closely to the European electorate (Christiansen 2016; Kassim 2016). Furthermore, Juncker presented himself as a self-assured, assertive leader with clear concepts and visions for the office and the EU. Finally, as both a nominee and later as the office-holder, he made clear his intention to act as a political president.

Juncker's assertion of a political presidency triggered much debate. Peterson (2017: 353), for example, argued that 'the nomination of Juncker via the Spitzenkandidaten system was, by itself, enough to politicize his Presidency as none ever before'. Kassim (2016: 16) concluded that the procedure 'grants a powerful personal mandate to the incoming incumbent'. Juncker himself asserted that 'as Spitzenkandidat, … I had the opportunity to be a political president' (European Commission 2015a: 5). None of these statements, however, clearly defines what a political Commission presidency actually means in practice.

Some observers warned that a political Commission might act in a partisan manner, which would be at odds with the principle of neutrality and independency as laid down in the Treaties (interview 5; Art. 17(3) TEU). Nugent and Rhinard (2019), meanwhile, concluded that the Commission plays in various ways a pre-eminent political role. While these observations refer to the Commission as a whole, Dinan's assessment focused on its president. Writing on Juncker's presidency after his first year in office, he concluded that the incumbent 'was living up to his

promise of being more political by raising the Commission's profile, taking bold initiatives, and occasionally confronting national governments on sensitive policy issues' (Dinan 2016: 110). Obviously, the behaviour of a 'political' Commission could in practice vary widely from engagement in partisan politics to the exercise of political agency in the interest of the Union as a whole.

Against this background, this article explores the leadership of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president by posing two questions: to what extent did he exercise political leadership and in what ways did his leadership qualify as explicitly political?

In order to address these questions, the article draws on leadership theory and recent insights into political leadership in the EU. It first conceptualises the Commission president's potential for acting as a leader – particularly a political leader – as well as Juncker's room to manoeuvre in an extremely unfavourable institutional and situational context. In its empirical part, the article analyses Juncker's provision of agenda-setting and mediative-institutional leadership in two phases: the first marked by an extraordinary level of activity and an assertive attitude in agenda-setting, but limited success in achieving binding decisions; the second characterised by a shift towards proposals that prompted deliberation and debate, embedded in longer-term political visions. The article concludes that, around the middle of his term in office, Juncker had adapted to the constraining institutional and situational context, engaging in mediative-institutional leadership and succeeding in carving out a new, more political role for the Commission president.

Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative approach. It draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources (analyses of speeches, white papers, other official documents and the relevant literature), as well as on 14 semi-structured expert interviews with officials of diverse EU and member states' institutions (European Commission: interviews 10, 11, 12 and 13; Commission Think Tank: interviews 1 and 7; General Secretariat of the Council: interview 5; European Parliament: interview 14; European Central Bank: interview 3; Permanent Representations: interviews 2, 6 and 9; regional offices: interviews 4 and 8).[1]

Conceptualising the political leadership of the Commission president

Commission presidents as leaders

Political leadership is generally conceptualised as a *relationship between leaders and followers*.[2] According to Burns (1978: 18), leadership is exercised 'when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize …

institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers' (see also Müller and Van Esch 2019; Nye 2008: 19). Obviously, this definition applies to leaders in national political systems, particularly heads of state or government. In the case of the Commission presidents, a leader–follower relationship is not simply given, as the officeholder does not directly relate to the citizens of Europe. Such a relationship, however, might emerge between the Commission president and the members of the other core institutions of the EU: the Council, the European Council and the European Parliament (EP). Of course, these institutions and their members do not self-evidently constitute the Commission president's followers, as they themselves hold important powers and may act as leaders or even rivals in European affairs. Nevertheless, in view of the Commission's role as the 'motor of integration', these institutions can be said to constitute followers when one or the other collectively embraces and supports the president's proposals. To achieve followership in this sense, a Commission president, as any leader in a modern democracy, must engage in mobilisation and persuasion (Helms 2016).

Regarding the extent to which leadership can be exercised, most scholars agree that it depends on institutional as well as situational *opportunities* and *constraints* (e.g. Barber 1992; Blondel 1987; Elgie 1995). Accordingly, they theorise the interplay between the *institutional setting*, *situational factors* and *personal qualities* of the incumbent as decisive for exercising leadership (for the EU, see Endo 1999; Müller 2019; Nugent 2001; Tömmel 2013).

The most important *institutional opportunities or resources* of the Commission president are defined in the Treaties: the Commission's monopoly on the initiation of legislation, its broader rights of initiative and its far-reaching executive powers (Art. 17(1) TEU). The most important *institutional constraints* result from the Commission's dependence on decision making in the Council and the European Council, that is, on the political will and support of national governments (Tömmel 2013). Additional constraints are imposed by the EP's legislative and monitoring powers and, most recently, its say in the election of the Commission president (Christiansen 2016).

The *situational factors* relevant to the Commission president's leadership vary widely between opportunities and constraints (Barber 1992: 6–7). The most important factor is the – positive or negative – attitude of the governments of the member states towards further integration (Tömmel 2013). Particularly influential are the attitudes of the large member states, most especially of Germany and France (Schild and Krotz 2013). The wider public's mindset, whether pro-European or Eurosceptical, plays an important role as well (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

The relevant *personal qualities* of the Commission presidents, besides those shared by any political leader, are, first, the strength of their commitment to promote European integration and the capacity to develop corresponding visions, objectives and projects (Endo 1999; Majone 2016; Müller 2019; Nugent 2001; Tömmel 2013). Second, in view of the Commission's dependence on decision making in the intergovernmental bodies and the EP, the presidents should have the ability to define common ground, submit politically feasible proposals, mobilise and persuade governments and EP members to advance down the envisioned route, and broker compromises among them (Müller 2017; Nugent 2001; Tömmel 2013).

Turning to the functions that Commission presidents perform, Kassim *et al.* (2013: 164) distinguish four: 'setting a policy agenda, effectively managing the house, delivering on policy priorities, and defending the Commission'. Müller (2019: 3) identifies 'three essential functions …, namely agenda-setting leadership, mediative-institutional leadership, and public leadership'. The two definitions agree not only on agenda-setting as the first function; they also concur regarding 'delivering on policy priorities' – which Kassim *et al.* (2013: 164) define as 'securing the passage of key policy initiatives' – and 'mediative-institutional leadership', meaning 'to influence, mediate among, and align with other actors in the institutional framework' (Müller 2019: 44). Indeed, agenda-setting and mediation in the decision-making bodies comprise the core agency of Commission presidents,[3] whereas the other functions play auxiliary roles.

To what extent and in what ways do Commission presidents act politically? The position of the Commission within the institutional architecture of the EU and particularly its core functions of agenda-setting and mediation make it by definition a political actor (e.g. Nugent and Rhinard 2019). Yet the political agency of individual Commission presidents may vary. On the one hand, they might behave in a partisan fashion, in the interest of certain political parties, constituencies, stakeholders or ideologies – though the founders of the European Communities established strong checks and balances to prevent the exercise of such agency. On the other hand, Commission presidents might clearly act in the interest of the Union as a whole. In this case, they might act in a rather technocratic manner, quietly submitting modest proposals to the decision-making bodies of the Union. Or they might well act in an overtly political manner. As Miller (1980) has explained, *political* behaviour is that which is oriented towards a political community or a polity, aimed at initiating and taking part in deliberation and debate. A Commission president acting in this way would explicitly advocate for their proposals, actively foster debate on them and visibly participate in inter-institutional

deliberations. In sum, they would politicise European affairs and thus engage in persuading and mobilising potential followers (Helms 2016). Political behaviour in this sense would fit with the principle of a neutral and independent Commission, as laid down in the Treaties.

In conclusion, it is first important to note that Commission presidents can and do exercise political leadership within the institutional setting of the EU. They can rely on institutional resources, particularly the Commission's right of initiative, even as they face serious constraints on decision making. Furthermore, the situational context can provide opportunities, but also severely constrain agency. A given president, if possessed of suitable personal qualities, can strive to transcend these constraints through proactive leadership. When combined with strong agency in deliberation and debate on European affairs, such leadership can be unambiguously political. Successful Commission presidents establish a leader–follower relationship with the other core institutions of the EU. Overall, Commission presidents are constrained in exercising leadership because of limited institutional resources and often unfavourable situational contexts; yet with strong commitment and agency, particularly explicit political agency in the interest of the Union as a whole, they can partially compensate for or even overcome these constraints (Müller and Van Esch 2019).

Juncker's scope for providing leadership

In recent decades, Commission presidents have faced major obstacles to the exercise of political leadership, due to gradual changes in the EU institutional structure and an increasingly difficult situational context. The personal qualities of the incumbents have also been less than outstanding. Scholars largely agree that the Commission presidents who followed Delors and his exceptional leadership – Santer, Prodi and Barroso – were rather weak, even though they achieved certain successes (e.g. Cini 2008; Kassim *et al.* 2013; Müller 2019; Tömmel 2013). Furthermore, none of them, and not even Delors, acted explicitly as a political president as defined above; as one interviewee commented: 'Delors was not a great politician but rather a technocrat' (interview 5).

Juncker's scope for providing political leadership as Commission president appeared to be particularly constrained – during his tenure, the combination of institutional and situational constraints created enormous challenges to his presidency.

The *institutional setting* has been gradually transformed by Treaty amendments, which did not directly affect the Commission president's position, but weakened it in relation to other European institutions

(Helms 2016; Müller 2016). The Maastricht Treaty established new policy areas under exclusive intergovernmental control and elevated the European Council to the supreme authority in the Union. The Lisbon Treaty formalised the European Council as the highest body of the EU and introduced permanent presidencies for the European Council, the Foreign Affairs Council and the Eurogroup. Together, these changes resulted in a more complex and diversified leadership-setting in the EU, significantly constrained the Commission's scope of action, and undermined the president's agenda-setting and mediative-institutional functions (Müller and Van Esch 2019; Puetter 2014; Tömmel 2017). The election of the Commission president by the EP weakened his authority in regard to the intergovernmental bodies and made him more dependent on the Parliament (Christiansen 2016). While it is true that recent Treaty amendments also strengthened the Commission president by providing him with additional powers, these involve only the inner workings of the Commission and not the president's position vis-à-vis his institutional counterparts (Kassim 2016; Nugent and Rhinard 2019).

The *situational context* has been severely worsened by several factors. The recent enlargements of the Union have exacerbated the discord between the member states in the intergovernmental bodies (e.g. Chalmers *et al.* 2016). Decision making in these bodies is increasingly dominated by the large and powerful states (Bulmer 2014; Helms 2016), relegating the Commission president to an inferior position, especially as the deliberations and decisions within those bodies are largely depoliticised (Bickerton 2012; Puetter 2014). This contrasts with an unprecedented politicisation of EU issues and widespread Euroscepticism within member states, which have made national governments reluctant to pursue any further steps towards integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Finally, the Union has been affected by multiple crises – the financial crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, the eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis; the attempts to overcome these crises have further aggravated the disagreements between the member states. In concert, these factors make it difficult for the Commission president to launch bold policy proposals that will satisfy all governments and to visibly play a leading role.

In sum, besides the multiple crises affecting the EU, Juncker's presidency faced a set of additional and often contradictory constraints:

- more powerful, yet deeply divided intergovernmental bodies;
- many rival leaders at the European level;
- depoliticisation of policy issues at the European level and their increasing politicisation in national arenas.

By contrast, Juncker possesses *personal qualities* that have provided him with the necessary preconditions for the exercise of strong leadership (Kassim 2016: 2–3; Tömmel 2018: 139–40):

- long-standing experience in high-level executive offices at national and, hence, at European level (20 years as finance minister and member of the corresponding Council, 18 years as prime minister of Luxembourg and member of the European Council, 9 years as president of the Eurogroup);
- a strong commitment to promoting European integration;
- self-assured attitude and behaviour, particularly vis-à-vis the members of the intergovernmental bodies.

Against this background, the following empirical section examines how Juncker has performed the two key functions of his office – agenda-setting and mediative-institutional leadership – given the severe institutional constraints and an extremely unfavourable situational context. It proceeds to analyse whether Juncker's leadership qualifies as political in the sense of fostering and engaging in deliberation and debate. This implies analysing whether Juncker succeeded in defining, introducing and actively advocating common goals, projects and visions for the Union as a whole, and in mobilising and persuading potential followers – national governments and EP majorities – to embrace his proposals and make the decisions necessary to realise them.

Juncker's presidency – the first phase: ambitious agenda, political Commission

Analysis of Juncker's leadership performance as Commission president during the first half of his term shows an exceptional level of activity in agenda-setting and ambitious steps towards strengthening the role of the Commission. Yet he faced an extremely unfavourable situational context: besides having to deal with a deeply divided Council and European Council, a series of unresolved and newly emerging crises put his leadership under additional strain. Juncker reacted to these circumstances with bold proposals, yet without engaging in the sort of mediative-institutional leadership that could have raised the odds of their adoption.

Setting the agenda – an ambitious programme

While still a candidate for the Commission presidency, Juncker proposed an ambitious agenda, encompassing 10 priorities (Juncker 2014; Kassim

2016; Kassim *et al.* 2017: 667; Nugent and Rhinard 2019; Peterson 2017). Besides covering the usual policy areas, such as Jobs, Growth and Investment, Internal Market, Economic and Monetary Union, Free Trade with the US and Stronger International Actor, his agenda also aimed at tackling new challenges, by focusing on the Digital Single Market, Energy Union and Climate Change, as well as Migration. Furthermore, two priorities addressed political issues: the area of Justice and Fundamental Rights and the envisioned Union of Democratic Change. In support of the first of these priorities, Juncker proposed a major new project: a fund to boost investment in Europe and thus foster jobs and growth. Taking advantage of existing funds and lending facilities, he intended to mobilise €350 million in investment.

Immediately after taking office, Juncker started implementing his agenda. Within the remit of his priorities, he continuously launched proposals, detailed the necessary steps forward and set up the so-called Juncker Fund to drive investment. Yet the Council and the European Council reacted reluctantly to Juncker's activism. His proposals were often subjected to protracted consideration and negotiation or simply put on the backburner. A prime case in point was the envisioned reform of the Monetary Union (Sanjurjo Hanck 2018). The European Council decided to charge Juncker with drawing up a reform proposal, submitted in 2015 as the Five Presidents' Report (European Commission 2015b). The European Council did not explicitly discuss the report. Its members clearly disliked certain proposals envisioning more centralisation – for example, an EU minister of finance and a budget for the eurozone; they also disliked that the EP president, Martin Schulz, figured as co-author of the report (interview 5).

Transforming the Commission: more effective, more political

Besides his substantive priorities, Juncker also pursued managerial and political objectives that he sought to realise through transformations of the Commission's organisational structure and performance.

In managerial terms, he declared that the Commission would work more efficiently and deliver tangible results. 'I want a European Union that is bigger and more ambitious on big things, and smaller and more modest on small things' (Juncker 2014: 4; see also Kassim *et al.* 2017: 668). Under Juncker's presidency, the legislative output of the EU decreased significantly, and much of the legislation that was tabled concerned the revision of existing laws instead of expanding the *acquis communautaire*. He thus created room to focus on 'big things'.

In pursuit of his political objectives, Juncker fundamentally reorganised the College of Commissioners (Bürgin 2018; Ivan 2017; Kassim 2016; Tömmel 2018). He introduced a system of vice-presidents, exclusively vested with responsibility for coordinating groups of commissioners with related portfolios. This system centralised decision making within the Commission, increased the coherence of the Commission vis-à-vis the intergovernmental bodies, and, most importantly, allowed for making more explicit political choices when deciding on policy priorities.

National governments welcomed Juncker's managerial objectives: 'the overregulation clearly decreased … Juncker deserves great praise for that' (interview 2). They were less appreciative, however, of the idea of a political Commission (Dinan 2016). 'The Commission has always been political; there is no need to emphasise that. The Commission is designed to be neutral; if it leaves that, it will be dead' (interview 5).

Coping with unresolved and newly emerging crises

From the very beginning, Juncker faced a series of unresolved and newly emerging crises, posing additional challenges to his presidency. The first challenge, in early 2015, was posed by the new left-wing Syriza government in Greece. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras sought to renegotiate the bailout programme, with the aim of achieving debt relief (Featherstone 2016; Hodson 2016). Juncker and his commissioner for economic and financial affairs, Pierre Moscovici, were sympathetic to such a move and attempted to lend it support (Dinan 2016: 109; Hodson 2016). However, the Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN) Council and particularly German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble were strongly opposed; finally, the EU imposed a third bailout programme with extremely harsh conditions. Juncker was unable to achieve another outcome, though behind the scenes he did work to prevent the worst: Greece's exclusion from the euro area, which Schäuble had favoured (Dinan 2016: 109; interview 5).

The second challenge, later that year, was the refugee crisis. When thousands of refugees entered the EU – particularly Italy and Greece – Juncker proposed an ambitious programme to distribute the immigrants across all member states according to fixed quotas (Dinan 2016: 107). 'The obligatory quotas were mainly a demand of the Parliament'; with these quotas, 'the Commission wanted to show, we are political' (interview 5). An interviewee cited by Peterson (2017: 363) stated that 'this Commission takes political risks … Barroso never would've proposed quotas'. The Council accepted the relocation programme by majority vote; however, the outvoted states, particularly Poland and Hungary,

vehemently refused to accept any refugees in their territories. And, as it turned out, most of the other member states did not fulfil their commitments (European Commission 2017a). An interviewee (5) criticised the decision, as the binding quotas 'divided Europe' and 'played into the hands of Orban and Kaczinski, since all of Poland and Hungary then stood behind them'.

The third challenge, in June 2016, was the Brexit referendum in the UK (Peterson 2018). Juncker secured a mandate for the Commission to lead the negotiations with the British government, even though the European Council had already established a task force for that purpose in its own ranks (Eckert 2018). As chief negotiator, he nominated Michel Barnier, an experienced politician who had held high-level executive offices in France and the EU. At an early stage, Juncker defined clear conditions for a British departure and succeeded in rallying the members of the European Council behind his position; at the time of writing this, the Commission has firmly defended Juncker's bottom line in the negotiations with the UK (Eckert 2018). Thus Peterson (2018: 3) concluded: 'the Commission's performance has been astute and mostly successful (so far)'.

Summary

Juncker's leadership in the first half of his term has been marked by bold activism in agenda-setting, the launch of ambitious proposals, the streamlining of the Commission and timely and resolute responses to newly emerging crises. He has often advocated positions contrary to those of the member states; accordingly, his bold attempts at providing political leadership have not been particularly welcomed, let alone supported, by national governments. Only on occasion Juncker succeeded in rallying the member states around a common position, as in the Brexit negotiations. When he openly opposed the position of the leading member states, as in the bailout negotiations with Greece, he had to give in. In sum, Juncker has proactively engaged in agenda-setting, but hardly in mediative-institutional leadership. In light of Juncker's limited achievements versus his personal ambitions, it is hardly surprising that he undertook a strategic reorientation.

Juncker's presidency – the second phase: less confrontation, new political efforts

Around the middle of his term in office, Juncker seemed to have grown disappointed about the reluctance of national governments to take up his

proposals (interview 4); hence he changed direction. His leadership style became less confrontational and less marked by 'continuous hype' (interview 5). Furthermore, with the departure of Martin Schulz, the main architect of the Spitzenkandidaten process, he surely felt more independent of the EP and its president. In the face of a divided European Council, Juncker realised that he had to 'push the ball back into their courts' (interview 1). He continued to launch bold proposals, though in a form – often involving multiple alternatives or scenarios – that left much room for discussion and reflection; stimulated political debate; and focused on a long-term reform strategy instead of short-lived successes. Furthermore, he now complemented agenda-setting with detailed strategies to influence decision making in the intergovernmental bodies. In short, he paid more attention to mediative-institutional leadership, to mobilising and persuading followers, and to acting more visibly as a political president for Europe as a whole.

Launching fundamental reforms – the White Paper for the Future of the Union

In March 2017, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, but also right before the UK government was set to trigger article 50 to exit the EU, Juncker presented a 'White Paper on the Future of Europe' (European Commission 2017d). The subtitle of this document 'Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025', signalled a multifaceted, longer-term, and at the same time open vision, clearly transcending Juncker's incumbency. It seems that Juncker developed the idea of the White Paper shortly after the Brexit referendum in June 2016: 'he very much felt that after the many crises, he wanted to regain the initiative' by presenting 'a positive agenda' (interview 1).

The White Paper, 'a bold and innovative move' (interview 1), envisaged five scenarios for further developing the EU: (1) 'Carrying on'; (2) 'Nothing but the single market'; (3) 'Those who want more do more'; (4) 'Doing less more efficiently'; and (5) 'Doing much more together'. For each scenario, the White Paper briefly specified the main characteristics of possible reforms and the steps towards achieving them, their impact on the major policy areas of the EU, the consequences for the budget and the prospect of delivering results.

At first glance, the five scenarios seemed to present a sequence from preserving the status quo to pursuing a set of fundamental reforms. However, all the scenarios clearly envisaged steps towards reform, even if to varying degrees; just maintaining the status quo was definitively excluded. It was, then, the sum of these scenarios that constituted

Juncker's agenda (Russack 2017: 7). Yet the choice of how best to take concrete steps towards reform remained open for debate and deliberation.

Soon after issuing the White Paper, the Commission presented more detailed reform proposals through a series of so-called reflection papers, covering five themes: (1) 'The Social Dimension of Europe'; (2) 'Deepening the Economic and Monetary Union'; (3) 'Harnessing Globalisation'; (4) 'The Future of European Defence'; and (5) 'The Future of EU Finances' (Russack 2017; Tömmel 2018). The reflection papers thus directed attention to the EU's most pressing policy challenges, and to the budget as a means to face these challenges.

Like the White Paper, the reflection papers presented various options for future reforms and aimed to stimulate further debate (Russack 2017: 9; Sanjurjo Hanck 2018; Tömmel 2018). At the same time, they also incorporated concrete proposals for short-term and long-term action. For example, in the reflection paper on Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the Commission 'suggest[ed] upgrading the ESM [European Stabilisation Mechanism] into a European Monetary Fund (EMF)' and 'develop[ed] the idea of a permanent EU Finance Minister' (Sanjurjo Hanck 2018: 14). In arguing for certain steps to be taken, the reflection papers illustrated their benefits as well as the potential costs of inaction. The papers thus displayed Juncker's dual strategy: boosting debate and channelling it in the desired direction.

Together with these substantive proposals, Juncker engaged in strategically structuring inter-institutional debate and deliberation. First, presenting reform proposals as a sequenced process served to guide the initiation of debates. Second, submitting a tight timetable and later a detailed 'roadmap' shaped discussion and deliberation in the core institutions of the EU (European Commission 2017c, 2017d). Third, and most importantly, by presenting proposals in the form of scenarios, alternatives, long-term visions and concrete policy options, Juncker highlighted that the Commission does not deal simply with technical matters, but also with inherently political choices. Interviewees confirmed that his proposals were indeed intensely debated, particularly in Council and European Council meetings (interviews 1, 5 and 8), but certainly not to the extent that Juncker had hoped for.

Tackling the impossible – the proposal for the multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2021–2027

Since the beginning of his incumbency, Juncker has paid close attention to budget matters, as 'the budget for us is … a means to achieve our political goals' (European Commission 2017b: 4). Yet negotiating and

adopting a Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is one of the most difficult tasks in the European arena. The issue is in itself highly divisive, as it obviously entails painful distributive choices. The negotiations are complicated as they have to determine both the overall size of the budget and the allocations to specific budget lines and policy areas, and thus indirectly to individual states. There are also increasingly more players – more leaders – involved in the negotiations, and the president of the European Council, rather than the Commission president, now acts as the main broker. For Juncker, the impending Brexit was an additional challenge, as it meant losing a net payer.

Delors initiated the MFF procedure and succeeded in achieving significant budget increases. His successors were much less successful, and the most recent agreement of 2012–2013, concluded during Barroso's presidency, marked a low point: for the first time, the MFF was reduced in both absolute and relative terms (Tömmel 2017).

In light of this situation, Juncker launched far-reaching, yet, at the same time, not too divisive proposals for the next MFF. Once more, he presented the proposals as a carefully sequenced process. That process started in June 2017 with the *reflection paper* on the future of EU finances, which discussed various alternatives and presented an initial set of reform proposals (European Commission 2017b). It continued with a *Commission communication* to the European Council in February 2018 that further detailed these scenarios and proposals, while it anticipated those issues that could prove contentious (European Commission 2018b). On 2 May 2018, it culminated in the definitive proposal for the MFF (European Commission 2018a).

Overall, Juncker proposed to set the ceiling of the MFF at 1.11% of the GDP of EU27 (in the current period: 1.0% of EU28). As for specific policies, he prioritised pressing challenges affecting all member states. Thus he envisaged significant budget increases for the following items: Migration and Borders (x2.6), Youth (x2.2), Security (x1.8), Life, Climate and Environment (x1.7), Research, Innovation, Digital (x1.6) and External Action (x1.3) (European Commission 2018a: 22). Conversely, he proposed to reduce, albeit moderately, benefits for specific member states: the allocations to agricultural and cohesion policy, but also all rebates, which will be abolished after a five-year phase-out.

Together with the MFF, Juncker launched bold proposals to provide new 'own resources', that is, direct revenues, to the EU (European Commission 2018c). These new resources were targeted to amount to 12% of the budget. Added to the existing traditional 'own resources' covering 15%, the direct revenues of the Union would rise to 27%, over one-quarter of the budget (European Commission 2018c: 6–9). Clearly, the

member states are sensitive about such proposals, as they imply increasing the independence of the European level from national transfers. The member states are also apprehensive about several important proposals presented in the details of the MFF: a larger budget for the continuation of the Juncker Fund, now known as the InvestEU fund; a budget for the eurozone; and the transfer of the ESM to the legal framework of the EU, implying its integration into the regular budget.

Regarding the negotiation procedure for the MFF, Juncker envisaged both long-term innovations as well as immediate changes. For the long term, he proposed to align the duration of the MFF with the terms of the Commission and EP legislators. This would allow an incoming Commission to allocate EU finances to its prime concerns and 'strengthen the democratic debate on the EU's spending priorities' (European Commission 2017d: 25). For the pending negotiations, Juncker first sent the responsible commissioner, Günther Oettinger, to all of the member states to discuss the proposals with national leaders and listen to their reactions (interview 13). He also established a tight timetable, aiming to conclude the negotiations within a year at the European Council in May 2019. This move had multiple strategic purposes: preventing administrative delays, enabling the EP to give its consent and, most importantly, constraining the veto power of national governments (interview 4). The European Council in December 2018 committed itself to concluding negotiations by October 2019, that is, before the end of Juncker's tenure, but after the impending round of EP elections (European Council 2018). At the time, there were clear signs that at least France and Germany approved of many of Juncker's proposals (interview 6).

Defending the core values of the European polity – linking EU funding to respect for the rule of law

Juncker's presidency has been marked by an enduring problem: despite manifold attempts, the Commission did not succeed in persuading or coercing Poland and Hungary to adhere to democratic principles. When drawing up the MFF, Juncker perceived a window of opportunity to address that failure while pursuing more fundamental political goals. Together with the MFF, he submitted a proposal for a regulation that would make the allocation of EU funds to the member states conditional on adherence to the rule of law. As an issue of sound management of EU finances, the Council can adopt the regulation with a qualified majority. On the surface, this proposal appeared to have managerial motives, as 'respect for the rule of law is an essential precondition to comply with principles of sound financial management' (European Commission 2018d:

6). Yet it was obviously a strategic move, and even more so 'a political decision' (interview 13). The proposed regulation not only targeted Hungary and Poland, it was designed to send a clear signal to all member states that the Union can and will implement hard sanctions in case of violation of its basic principles. At the time of writing this, a decision by the Council was still pending, but member states as well as the EP had already signalled their support (interviews 6 and 14). The EP – though it has no formal say in the matter – even proposed expanding the regulation so that the allocation of EU funds would be made conditional on respect for the values of the EU, as laid down in the Treaty (Art. 2 TEU).

Summary

Juncker's leadership in the second half of his term was characterised by a change in direction. He no longer just launched bold proposals, but took into account more the sensitivities of and the disagreements between national governments. He carefully sequenced his proposals and initiated discussions and debates so that his target audiences could follow him step by step. He also acknowledged that his bold proposals needed a much longer time horizon for implementation. Most importantly, he presented Commission proposals not as self-evident technical matters, but as inherently political choices. In this phase, as a result, Juncker achieved more successes than before. For example, he effectively implemented the so-called Juncker Fund and ensured its continuation, now labelled InvestEU Fund, at an even larger scale beyond his term in office.

Conclusions: assessing Juncker's leadership

This article has explored Juncker's presidency of the European Commission by addressing two questions: first, whether he has provided political leadership and, second, whether and in what sense his leadership has been explicitly political. The article first conceptualised the leadership of Commission presidents as a leader–follower relationship, with the core EU institutions constituting potential followers. It then specified that the presidents' leadership results from the interplay between institutional and situational resources and constraints and the incumbent's personal qualities. It defined agenda-setting and mediative-institutional leadership as the core tasks of the presidents. Finally, it conceptualised explicit political leadership as either partisan, in the interest of certain constituencies, or as focused on a polity as a whole, via initiation of and participation in deliberation and debate. Regarding Juncker, the article defined his institutional and situational context as extremely unfavourable, yet assessed his

personal qualities, particularly his extensive experience in European affairs, as a strong asset.

The empirical analysis showed that, from the very beginning, Juncker provided ambitious leadership, despite the unfavourable institutional and situational context. He presented a well-designed and focused agenda, expeditiously delivered the relevant legislative proposals, announced managerial and political innovations, reorganised the Commission, and reacted swiftly and forcefully to newly emerging crises. However, he did not take the steps necessary to exercise mediative-institutional leadership and mobilise member states' governments as followers. His initiatives were often too bold and not well adapted to the preferences of national leaders, let alone the divergences among them.

It seems that Juncker had learned this lesson when he changed direction around the middle of his term. He now presented his initiatives more cautiously in a sequenced form, as proposals for discussion and reflection, and as issues of long-term reform. He more explicitly took into account the deep divides among national governments by prioritising proposals that benefit all member states, by involving national governments in a process of preference-forming, and by methodically persuading them to pursue common goals and build consensus. In short, he engaged not only in bold agenda-setting, but also in mediative-institutional leadership and in mobilising and persuading his followers. This is not to say that Juncker's proposals were all suddenly ratified *tout court*; yet they were more positively received, more often adopted, and some will figure high on the European agenda far beyond his tenure.

Regarding the political profile of his presidency, it is obvious that Juncker first sought to raise it by launching bold proposals, by concentrating on 'big things', and by reacting swiftly and forcefully to unresolved and newly emerging crises. Having served as Luxembourg's prime minister in the European Council prior to taking office as Commission president, he behaved very much as 'one of them' (interview 1). However, this behaviour was not well received by national leaders, as it did not fit with their perception of the role of the Commission. It seems that around the middle of his term, Juncker not only adapted to the role of Commission president, he also transformed it through his manifest political agency. He involved the intergovernmental bodies and the EP, but also the wider public in debate, reflection and deliberation on common goals and mobilised them as followers. At the same time, he proposed using sanctions against member states that do not adhere to the fundamental principles underlying European integration. In sum, Juncker carved out a new, distinctive role for the Commission. In contrast to national governments, which attempt to depoliticise EU issues out of fear

of popular Euroscepticism, Juncker opened up new pathways to politicise those issues. His approach to politicisation did not take the form of partisan politics, as many observers feared; instead, by presenting Commission proposals as multifaceted concepts, as an array of alternative ways forward, as issues for reflection and debate, Juncker underscored that European politics is inherently about political choices, and not functional necessities or self-evident technical matters. Proceeding in this way might even, in the longer run, open up new avenues to hold the Commission accountable.

Taking a more long-term perspective, compared to his three predecessors, who performed in a relatively restrained manner, Juncker, even though it appears he achieved few concrete successes, might be the first Commission president to effect a major change in the politics of leading the Commission, and thus also in the relationship between the intergovernmental and supranational dimensions of the Union. Hence, Juncker's political presidency is as much a promise for the future as an (partial) achievement of his actual time in office.

Notes

1. See detailed list in the appendix.
2. For an overview of central concepts of political leadership in the EU, see Müller and Van Esch (2019).
3. The Commission also performs important executive functions, which are not considered here.

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Appendix

Detailed list of 1nterviews

Interview No.	Date	Institution
1	26 June 2017	European Political Strategy Centre – Think Tank of the European Commission
2	21 November 2017	Permanent Representation of a Member State
3	16 August 2017	European Central Bank
4	24 November 2017	Regional Office in Brussels
5	27 February 2018	Secretariat General of the Council
6	1 March 2018	Permanent Representation of a Member State
7	28 February 2018	European Political Strategy Centre
8	1 March 2018	Regional Office in Brussels
9	1 March 2018	Permanent Representation of a Member State
10	28 February 2018	European Commission, DG EMPL
11	2 March 2018	European Commission, DG MARE
12	2 March 2018	European Commission, DG REGIO
13	21 June 2018	European Commission, DG BUDG
14	19 March 2019	Secretariat of the European Parliament

Note: All interviewees were selected on the grounds of being in a leading position in the respective institution in order to ensure first-hand insight and not 'hearsay'.