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The Personalization of Politics in the European Commission

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Abstract

The concept of the personalization of politics, referring to the strengthening of the roles and importance of individual actors in politics, has become increasingly popular when studying current political systems. Despite the growing scholarly interest in media and behavioural personalization at the European Union (EU) level, the institutional sphere of politics has remained rather neglected. Bearing this in mind, the aim of this article is to evaluate whether there is a personalization of politics in the EU by focusing on the institutional level of the European Commission (EC). Based on a qualitative content analysis of the primary law of the European Union/European Communities and documents that govern the functioning of the EC, this article finds that in general, it is possible to observe a tendency towards adopting more personalized reforms in the EC. Moreover, personalized reforms clearly led to enhancing the role of the EC President. The second conclusion is in line with our knowledge of the development of the EC President’s position. However, this article supplements previous findings by concluding that in many cases, the enhancement of the President’s position has taken place at the expense of the College as a whole. The findings also indicate that the primary motives behind proposals involving personalized reforms do not lie in aspirations for enhancing the quality of EU-level democracy, but in making the functioning of the Commission more effective.

Keywords: The Personalization of Politics, European Commission, EC President, Functioning of the European Commission

Introduction

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the subsequent institutional development resulted in a change in the appearance of European Union (EU) politics. When looking at a post-Lisbon era, we can identify several institutional innovations, which put – at least intuitively – greater emphasis on individual EU politicians rather than EU institutions as such.
A good example of such innovations is the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure institutionalized before the 2014 EP elections¹. The current President of the European Commission (EC) led his electoral campaign prior to the EP elections by presenting his own vision of future for the EU. At the end of the process, the leading candidate of the winning European political party was appointed as the EC President. A similar scenario is also likely to happen in the upcoming EP elections in 2019. Two additional examples relate to the European Council and the Council of the EU (CEU). In a former case, the position of the European Council’s President became permanent. This change led to a separation of the President from the rotating presidency of the Council, in order to make the position more stable while enhancing its long-term character (Delledonne, 2014, p. 133). In case of the CEU, more responsibilities were assigned to the person holding the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The High Representative presides over the Foreign Affairs Council and – at the same time – she is one of the Vice-Presidents of the EC.

The above-mentioned instances of recent institutional development illustrate the fact that politics at the European level is not only about supranational and intergovernmental institutions, but also about individual politicians holding significant responsibilities. As the following text demonstrates, the personalization of politics (i.e. the growing role and importance of individual politicians at the expense of a given collective actor) could have important consequences for democratic governance in general, and for legitimacy, accountability and political responsibility in particular. Despite the growing academic attention paid to the concept of personalization, we know little about political personalization² at the EU level, and even less when it comes to the institutional level of the European Union.

The aim of this article is to contribute to our knowledge of personalization of politics at the EU institutional level by answering four questions relating to the EC and its functioning. First, is it possible to observe tendencies towards adopting more personalized rules, mechanisms, and institutions? Second, in which fields of the Commission’s functions can personalization be observed? Third, have the adopted personalized reforms led to a strengthening of the position of the Commission President or individual Commissioners and/or Vice-Presidents? In other words, what is the direction of personalization (centralized or decentralized)? Fourth,

¹ The *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure serves here as an illustration. In fact, it is not possible to evaluate this procedure as formally institutionalized reform.
² Both terms, ‘the personalization of politics’ and ‘political personalization’, are used interchangeably in this study.
what are the reasons for proposing and adopting personalized reforms related to the Commission?

Based on a qualitative content analysis of the Union’s primary law, internal rules governing the functioning of the EC, and documents by Member States and EU institutions related to the revisions of primary law, I conclude that: a) politics at the institutional level of the EC have become more personalized when compared to the early 1990s and, speaking more generally, there are tendencies towards adopting reforms leading to personalization; b) the adoption of personalized reforms can be observed to some extent in all observed areas of EC’s activity, but above all in the spheres of nomination procedures, agenda-setting within the Commission and in its internal organization; c) in terms of the direction of personalization, centralized personalization has clearly dominated over the decentralized – the adopted reforms led to the strengthening of the position of EC President, in many cases at the expense of the College as a collective actor; and d) personalized reforms are primarily proposed in order to make the EC more effective and independent. These conclusions tend to support the view that the EC President has become a more important actor within the EC, but it supplements them with findings that the ‘price’ of this process was often paid in the form of limiting the role of the College as a whole.

This article proceeds as follows: the first chapter introduces the concept of the personalization of politics, and the necessity to clearly define this as well as its ultimate relevance for the EU’s political system. Part of this section presents the analytical framework of this study. The second part focuses on the current state of knowledge; the data and its collection, as well as the methods used are discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four is devoted to analysis and answering the research questions. The last part provides a summary of the main findings and offers recommendations for future research.

The personalization of politics

Various scholars (see e.g. Wattenberg, 1995; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Blondel and Thiélbault, 2010) have argued that politics is different today compared to the post-war period. The reason for this lies in changing patterns of democratic politics during the second half of the twentieth century. Such statements are supported by evidence of several interconnected trends, such as the changing roles of political parties and their transformation, the decrease in the prominence of ideology in politics, growing volatility, decrease in partisan loyalty and identification, and decreasing electoral participation (see e.g. Blais, 2007 and 2011;
McAllister, 2007; Dalton et al., 2011). In addition, in light of citizens’ more sceptical attitudes toward political parties, a more general trend of declining public trust in democratic institutions has also become clear. In other words, the citizens of many democratic societies express their reservations towards the way politics functions to a greater extent than previously (Renwick and Pilet, 2016, p. 4). Under these circumstances, the concept of political personalization, with its core assumption that individual politicians may become more important within a given system, has correspondingly grown in importance. In general, the personalization of politics can be characterized as a process during which ‘individual political actors are becoming more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities’ (Karvonen, 2010, p. 4).

Needless to say, these transformations have initiated discussions about the very legitimacy of current democratic systems and representative democracy as such. At this point, mounting evidence points to a gap between citizens on the one hand, and politicians – or in more general terms, politics itself – on the other.

When it comes to the political system of the EU, it is possible to observe similar patterns of the citizen-politics relationship. Bearing in mind discussions about the quality of democracy at the EU level, it is obvious that a lot of arguments tend to steer toward the same conclusion. It is not necessary to recapitulate all the debates on EU democracy, of which the most prominent is referred to as the ‘democratic deficit’ debate. The point here is that many scholars believe that there is also a gap between EU citizens and the politics of the European Union (see e.g. Weiler et al., 1995; Weiler 2016; Føllesdal and Hix, 2006; Hix, 2008). In this situation, the personalization of politics could be seen as one possible way to bridge the gap between the citizens of the EU and the politicians at the EU level. One example of such an attempt is the aforementioned Spitzenkandidaten system, during which, the politicians themselves attempted to react to the shortcomings of European Union democracy. Above all, the system worked to address problems of European governance stemming from a lack of political accountability and questionable legitimacy (Popa et al., 2016).

As noted above, the concept of political personalization refers to growing role of individual politicians at the expense of collective actors, whether they are political parties, cabinets, or other kinds of organizations. However, such perceptions of personalization is at first sight rather ambiguous. In this regard, Renwick and Pilet (2016, p. 5) rightly point out that there are two issues related to the personalization that must be clarified. First, it is necessary to identify
which spheres of politics the concept of personalization refers to. Second, it must be made clear who the actors of personalization are.

With respect to the first question, political personalization can become the subject of investigation in almost all politics-related dimensions/spheres. As the typology of personalization of politics developed by Rahat and Sheafer (2007) shows, personalization can be observed in institutional and behavioural spheres as well as in the media. For the purpose of this study, the first dimension is of particular importance. Rahat and Sheafer (2007, pp.67–8) conceptualize institutional personalization as ‘the adoption of rules, mechanisms, and institutions that put more emphasis on the individual politician and less on political groups, and parties.’ This conceptualization of institutional personalization provides us with the information about how the personalization could manifest itself. However, it tells us little about who the actors of personalization are.

Therefore, the framework presented in this article has been supplemented by the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization, taking the two possible directions of personalization into account. Centralized personalization ‘implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party, cabinet) to a single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister, president)’, while in the case of decentralized personalization, ‘power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g. candidates, members of parliament, ministers)’ (Balmas et al., 2014, p. 37). When focusing on institutional personalization in terms of its direction, centralized institutional personalization is characterized by the enhancement of the top politician’s or leader’s position within the collective institution. In the opposite case (i.e. decentralized institutional personalization), the role of individual politicians (other than the leader) is strengthened (Balmas et al., 2014, pp. 38–9). The presented framework is summarized in Figure 1 (see below).
In this study, I am interested in institutional personalization at the EU level, specifically in the EC, while focusing on actors affected by either centralized or decentralized personalization. In other words, I trace the adoption of rules, institutions, and mechanisms that have led to the change in role or importance of individual politicians within the EC. Bearing this in mind, I then speak about the personalization of politics in the following two situations: 1) the role of an individual politician whose position is enhanced at the expense of collective actor (this scenario refers to the situation in which e.g. competences are transferred to individual politicians, and simultaneously removed from the collective actor, or lead to limiting the role of the collective actor); and 2) the role of an individual actor whose position is enhanced while at the same time the role of collective actor remains unaffected (e.g. an individual politician gained a new competence). Both situations consequently lead to the strengthening of the position and an increase in the importance of the individual politician within the institution. On the other hand, I followed the counter-scenarios as well (i.e. reforms leading to an enhancement of collective actor at the expense of individuals as signs of de-personalization). Since the concept of personalization refers to the politicians, I will focus on the most political level of EC, i.e. the level of the College of Commissioners. Hence, the President of the EC serves as an actor of centralized personalization while the other individual Commissioners and the Commission’s Vice-Presidents can be perceived as actors affected by
decentralized personalization. Both groups of actors with respect to direction of personalization (centralized and decentralized) are clearly summarized in Figure 2 (see below).

**Figure 2: Personalization of Politics in the European Commission**

The last issue that should be addressed here is the concept’s applicability for studying EU politics. It is true that the concept of political personalization has its roots in national politics. However, as demonstrated above, political personalization is not inherently tied to nation-state politics. The key feature of the concept (besides its temporal dimension) lies in the assumption that there are both individual politicians and collective actors within a political system/at a particular level of governance. Moreover, there is the assumption that a relationship between these two exists when they exercise political power, and this relationship is not unalterable.

**Literature review**

When speaking about the personalization of politics at the EU’s institutional level, and especially within the EC, two fields of research on the EU are particularly relevant for the analysis in this text. The first area focuses on the personalization of EU politics in general. In the second area, scholars focus on changes in the rules under which the EC operates and on the role of the EC President in influencing the Commission’s functioning.

To start with the first, this research area is unbalanced. Attention is predominantly given to behavioural personalization, political parties at the EU level and the media. In other words,
scholars have overwhelmingly been interested in EP elections and the role of the media in EU politics. Various topics have come under discussion, e.g. the capability of candidates to boost electoral participation in EP elections (e.g. Hobolt, 2014) or influence citizens’ perceptions of EU democracy (Popa et al., 2016); voters’ ability to form their preferences regarding candidates (Gattermann et al., 2016); determinants of voting behaviour (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017); politicians’ behaviour during EP election campaigns (Rodríguez and Madariaga, 2015); and media coverage of candidates (Schulze, 2016) as well as of EU executive representatives (Gattermann, 2018). When it comes to the institutional sphere, I am not aware of any studies explicitly stating that institutional personalization at the EU level is a primary research objective. Of course, there are some studies identifying a given particular reform at the EU level as personalized (e.g. Peñalver García and Priestley, 2015; Kassim, 2017). Nevertheless, in these cases, the authors have done so rather intuitively and without any explicit reference to the concept of political personalization.

The fact that academic attention has not been paid to the personalization of politics in the EC does not mean that research on the Commission’s institutional level has been completely neglected. Research on political leadership within the EC is of particular importance for this study. Within this area, authors have tended to scrutinize the individual EC President (Endo, 1999; Kassim, 2017), or compare them (see e.g. Tömmel, 2013; Müller, 2016 and 2017; Kassim et al., 2017, or Bürgin, 2018) while focusing on and discussing several aspects of EC President’s political leadership. In other words, the primary interest lies in Presidents’ competences, as well as their capability to shape and influence the way the EC functions. In this regard, the most investigated spheres include the internal organization of the Commission and the allocation of portfolios to Commissioners, Presidential influence on the EC’s political direction, and his agenda-setting power (see e.g. Bürgin, 2018, Kassim et al., 2017). Nomination/appointment/dismissal procedures of the EC’s members has also been reflected in studies on political leadership (e.g. Kassim, 2017; Kassim et al., 2017; Bürgin, 2018). In general, scholars have found that the person holding the position of the EC President has competences that have granted him a leading role in the Commission in general, and at the level of College in particular (Tömmel, 2013, pp. 793–4; see also Müller, 2016 and Kassim et al., 2017).

If we turning our attention to the motives behind reforming the Commission and its functioning, three main categories emerge. The first of them reflects the alleged need for a more democratic EU. This category includes motives such as the intention to reduce the EU’s
democratic deficit or the goal of enhancing the legitimacy of the EU and its institutions (e.g. Kassim et al., 2013; Popa et al., 2016). The second category highlights efficiency and more effective functioning of the institution as reasons for adopting institutional reforms (e.g. Kassim et al., 2013; Kassim, 2017). The last group includes motives regarding the enhancement of a given actor’s own position within the political system of the EU or within an institutional branch (e.g. Bürgin, 2018). It is necessary to examine these three groups of motives behind the proposing personalized reforms related to the EC separately (see below).

The presented scholarship shows us that: first, it is reasonable to investigate the personalization of politics in the EC, as there are clearly identifiable changes in the position of and the relations among the various relevant political actors within the EC. Nevertheless, despite the attention dedicated to the aforementioned research areas, there has been no explicit attempt to focus on the personalization of politics at the institutional level in general, and at the institutional level of the EC in particular. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by connecting the two fields of research by examining all the relevant actors at the level of the College of Commissioners. Secondly, in order to understand how the functioning of the EC and the positions of individual actors have changed, it is not sufficient to focus solely on the primary law, because the development of internal rules also needs to be taken into account. As Kassim et al. (2017, p. 659) rightly point out, the Rules of Procedures are both a source of and a map of presidential authority. Therefore, I will follow a change in the rules leading to the personalization of politics within the EC as indicated in the EU’s primary law. At the same time, the relevant changes reflected in the Commission’s Rules of Procedure and Working Methods will be evaluated as well. The appropriateness of such an approach lies in the fact that it allows us to follow (a) the formal rules determining the occupation of top positions within EU institutions and defining their representatives’ most important responsibilities and competences, as well as (b) the rules governing the Commission’s day-to-day functioning in the context of the personalization of politics.

Data and Methods

This study is based on Qualitative Content Analysis of EU primary law, internal rules of the EC, and documents published over the course of treaty revisions. To answer the first three research questions, the research included conducting an analysis of the primary law, as well as the Commission’s Rules of Procedure and Working Methods. To identify the motives supporting the adoption of personalized rules (the fourth research question), three groups of data were used: a) preliminary and final positions of the EU Member States and the EU
institutions related to the individual rounds of treaty revisions; b) documents adopted by EU institutions containing an evaluation of the changes made in treaty provisions related to the EC President and the Commissioners; c) documents adopted during these periods that cannot be considered IGC-related, but that nevertheless created the impetus for discussion about the institutional reform of the EU (i.e. documents published during the realization of Convention).

The analysis covers the period between 1993 (the entry of the Maastricht Treaty into force) and 2014 (the year when the most recent Working Methods of the EC were adopted). In this regard, the Treaty on the EU is considered a reference treaty and the Rules of Procedure of the Commission of 1993 as a reference document.

The search for documents concerning the EC employed two tools: the Register of Commission Documents, and the DORIE database, which provides the possibility to search for documents related to institutional issues of the EU according to topic. First, when using the Register, it was necessary to limit the search to the final versions of documents. Next, in the ‘Word(s) in the title:’ section, I entered ‘rules of procedure’, and did not search for the exact phrase, but for words contained in the description of documents (‘all words’). In the second case, I looked for ‘working methods’, however, this time it was ‘the exact phrase’ search. Second, when using DORIE, I entered ‘Commission’ as the ‘Author(s)’, and from the topic point of view, the search was narrowed down to the topic of ‘Commission’, subtopic ‘Functioning of the Commission’, and subsequently to other subsections ‘General’ and ‘Rules of Procedure’.

The documents related to the individual treaty revision rounds were searched primarily by using DORIE. In this case, I filled in the ‘Arena’ field instead of the ‘Author(s)’ field, specifically ‘IGC/Amsterdam; IGC/Nice; IGC/Constitution/2003-2004; IGC/Lisbon’. To double-check the completeness of the dataset, I also employed the University of Zaragoza’s website ‘The European Union Constitution’ (Universidad Zaragoza, 2003), which provides references to relevant documents, and the official website of the European Convention, which contains documents adopted during this occasion (European Convention, 2003).

In order to answer the first three questions (related to the investigation of personalization and its direction), the analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the articles containing information about the role/competences/responsibilities of the EC President and/or the Commissioners were identified in all relevant documents. In the second step, all the articles were assigned

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3 DOCumentation et Recherche sur les questions Institutionnelles Européennes.
into four categories, some of which also include sub-categories. The categories of content analysis were:

1. Mandate – this category includes following sub-categories: a) nomination/election/appointment of the EC President, Vice-Presidents, and Commissioners; b) performance of mandate – issues related to meetings (e.g. scheduling and holding meetings, attendance of EC members and deputizing); c) termination of the mandate;
2. Internal organization – i.e. allocation of fields of responsibilities within the Commission;
3. Agenda-setting – i.e. developing the longer-term political direction of the EC, preparation of the agenda for the meetings; the inclusion and/or withdrawal of items onto the agenda of a given meeting;
4. Internal decision-making procedures – including the sub-categories: a) Oral procedure; b) Written procedure; c) Delegation; d) Empowerment.

Once the relevant articles were assigned to the individual categories, I evaluated whether there were changes in particular aspects, and if so, whether the changes affected the position/role/competences of individual actors (EP President, Vice-Presidents, Commissioners), and whether the amendments in question influenced the relationship between individual actors and the collective body (the College as such). If there was a change that resulted in strengthening the position of an individual actor within the EC, I was interested in whether such a change led to enhancing the President’s power (centralized personalization), or other political actors under study (decentralized institutional personalization).

The first three questions were focused on changes in the rules governing the functioning of the Commission, which were in fact institutionalized. In contrast, when attempting to answer the last question, it was not crucial for a particular reform to actually enter into force. If e.g. a Member State or EU’s institution was of the opinion that the EC President should have more competences or his/her position within the institution should be augmented, it was not relevant for this research question whether the change occurred. The main intention was to find out why the actors involved in the treaty revision process (Member States and EU institutions) were proposing/supporting the adoption of personalized reforms/rules/mechanisms related to the EC.
In order to identify the motives for the personalization of politics, I began with identifying proposals for and discussions about institutional amendments that would potentially affect the position of the individual actors in inter- and intra-institutional relations. Only thereafter was it possible to identify a given actor’s motives for proposing or supporting a particular personalized reform. In this regard, it had to be clear that the argumentation was tied to a specific proposal in question. In the end, the motives were assigned to the following categories:

1. EU democracy – an actor’s motivation is driven, for instance, by a perceived need for greater legitimacy of the EU, its institutions or its decision-making process, a more transparent EU, and so on. It is evident that motives assigned to this category relate to the debates about the quality of democracy in the EU as such.

2. Efficiency and functioning in EU institutions – changes in the rules/mechanisms/procedures are driven by the need to enhance the functioning and efficiency of the institutions. From this point of view, such motives are pragmatic rather than normative (as in the case of the first category). Moreover, these motives are not driven by the actor’s self-interest, as they would be in the case of the third category below.

3. Self-interest and power – an actor perceives a particular change as a tool for strengthening his own position vis-à-vis another actor within intra- or inter-institutional relations.

Having presented the data, the method used for its analysis, and the focus of this study, the following section elaborates on an analysis of the personalization of politics at the institutional level of the EC.

**Analysis**

Is it possible to observe a trend toward adopting more personalized rules, mechanisms, and institutions in the EC? In which spheres of Commission’s functioning is the personalization evident? Do the adopted reforms tend to enhance the importance/position of the Commission President or of individual Commissioners? What are the motives for supporting and adopting such reforms?

To answer these questions, the analysis proceeds in three steps. I begin with the analysis of the EU primary law with respect to the personalization. Next, I turn my attention to the
Commission’s internal rules (Rules of Procedure and Working Methods). Third, I identify the motives of institutional personalization.

**Institutional personalization in the EC as indicated in the primary law**

When analysing the EU’s primary law, three of the categories under review proved to be relevant in the context of personalization: mandate, agenda-setting, and internal organization. In all of them, it is possible to observe a process of centralized personalization leading to a significant increase in the role of EC President, in most cases at the expense of collective actors.

To begin with the mandate-related issues, the findings indicate that there are clear signs of centralized institutional personalization in the EC. Over the course of the treaty revision rounds included in the period under study, the EC President gained significant competences, providing him greater influence over the nomination of Commissioners and EC Vice-Presidents, as well as in deciding on the termination of EC members’ mandates. Nevertheless, the more important finding is that such a transfer of powers was in most cases accompanied by reducing the role of the College itself as a collective actor in these procedures.

When speaking about the nomination of the Commissioners, it is indisputable that the European Council remains the decisive actor. Despite that, there are two identifiable changes that have affected the relationship in question. On the one hand, there has been an amendment enhancing a nominee for the Commission Presidency. On the other and simultaneously with the first, the independence of the European Council in the procedure has become more limited. At the beginning of the period under review, the nominee for President was consulted prior to the official nominations for the positions of Commissioners were made. The Treaty of Amsterdam significantly amended this system, replacing this consultation. After that, it is necessary to gain support from the nominee for President for subsequent nominations, as the decision about Commissioner(s) is made by consensus. Furthermore, the subsequent treaty revision also strengthened the influence of the nominee for President by introducing qualified majority voting for the nomination of Commissioners. This change is favourable to the (presumptive) President, because his preferred composition of the Commission cannot be blocked by the individual vote of a single Member State in the European Council (Official Journal 1992, Art. 157; 1997, Art. 214; 2002, Art. 214). At this point, I conclude that this transformation must therefore be perceived as centralized personalization, which has occurred at the expense of the European Council.
The appointment of EC Vice-Presidents has also been affected. As the primary law changed, procedures concerning the number of the Vice-Presidents, which actors are involved, and the level of their independence in that process changed as well. The actors’ competences in appointing Vice-Presidents has followed a clear trajectory, which has led to centralized personalization. More specifically, the appointment procedures shifted from the College’s responsibility, to a presidential right of appointments after obtaining the consent of the College, to the complete independence of the EC President, who no longer needs the College’s approval whatsoever. In addition, since the Treaty of Nice, the President has not been limited to a maximum of two Vice-Presidents, as was the case before (Official Journal 1992, Art. 161; 2002, Art. 217(3); 2008, Art. 17(6c)).

The last relevant issue related to the mandate is the individual responsibility of the Commissioners to the EC President in terms of mandate termination. In this regard, it is well known that a Commissioner must resign if the President requests him or her to do so. From this point of view, the Treaty of Nice led to centralized personalization; i.e. the treaty enhanced the position of the President within the Commission. However, in the post-Lisbon period, the President does not even need the College’s consent to ask an individual Commissioner to resign (Official Journal 2002, Art. 215; 2008, Art. 17(6c)). Hence, the President acquired full independence in this regard at the expense of College.

With respect to the internal organization of the Commission, it may be concluded that the President has become a decisive actor in this regard. Apart from the possibility of appointment of the EC’s Vice-Presidents, the pre-Nice revisions did not mention how the EC could have been organized or who was responsible for that. With the Treaty of Nice, the right to decide on the internal organization in the Commission became the President’s prerogative. The President also took on responsibility for the structuring of responsibilities and their allocation to the Commissioners, as well as possible changes in their responsibilities during the term of office (Official Journal 2002, Art. 217(2)).

Finally, the treaty provisions related to agenda-setting within the Commission also reveal that the EC President’s position has been reinforced. Since the Amsterdam Treaty, the President has gained the ability to lay down the political guidance under which the Commission operates. Furthermore, the post-Lisbon Presidents likely have more agenda-setting powers, as the treaties in force refer to laying down guidance in general, and thus without reference to its

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4 I discuss only amendments in which the position of individual actors under study has actually been affected.
political character (Official Journal 1997, Art. 219; 2008, Art. 17(6a)). This could provide the President with even higher flexibility in how to steer the work of Commission.

At this point, it is evident that there are clear signs of centralized institutional personalization in the Union’s primary law. However, this is only a part of the story, as it tells us nothing or at best a little about other important aspects of the EC’s functioning (see e.g. the evaluation of internal organization and agenda-setting above). For that reason, the analysis needs to proceed to the analysis of Commission’s internal rules.

**Institutional personalization in the EC’s internal rules**

Having analysed the primary law in terms of personalization, it is now time to turn attention to the more mundane issues of the Commission’s daily functioning. From the personalization point of view, two out of four followed categories are of primary importance. The process of personalization (above all centralized personalization) is most evident in the EC’s internal organization and in agenda-setting within the EC.

In the previous sub-section, I argued that with respect to the EC’s internal organization, there is centralized personalization, as the President has been granted the power to decide on the internal organization and allocation of responsibilities. Nonetheless, treaty provisions in and of themselves do not make it clear whether or not such change took place at the expense of a collective actor – in this case, the College of Commissioners.

By looking at the EC’s internal rules, it becomes evident that the President gained the power to allocate portfolios at the expense of the Commission as a whole. From that point of view, Article 217(2) of the Treaty of Nice should be perceived as the institutionalization of personalized reforms that had been part of the EC’s political practice since 1999 (Official Journal 2002, Art. 217(2); European Commission, 1993 and 1999).

Apart from that, the internal rules also provide information about other aspects related to internal organization, such as working groups, the organization of cabinets, and working agreements between Commissioners and the departments. Changes in the rules governing the EC’s internal organization demonstrate that politics in this regard have become more personalized. More specifically, at the level of College, there is an observable trend of centralized institutional personalization.

First, the President replaced the Commission in establishing the working groups of Commissioners. Through a series of revisions, the President’s competences developed from
setting up working groups, to deciding on their mandate, membership and bylaws, to full control of their operation. Nowadays, the President sets the bylaws of working groups (instead of approving them) and decides on the term of those groups. Moreover, he has the possibility to establish specific structures and functions dealing with particular matters, and to decide on their responsibilities and bylaws. Second, the President has become the actor responsible for laying down the principles governing the composition of cabinets. Third, individual Commissioners have been grant the ability to adopt working agreements with the departments within their field of responsibility. This could be considered a sign of decentralized institutional personalization. However, their independence to do so was later limited, as these agreements need to be compliant with the principles laid down by the President (European Commission, 2005; 2010a and 2010b).

Similarly to internal organization, the same pattern of centralized personalization can also be observed in issues related to agenda-setting in the Commission. Nevertheless, recent developments in the EC’s functioning tends bolster the conclusion, that besides the enhanced role of the President, there are also signs of decentralized personalization. As demonstrated below, the working methods of the current Commission have led to a strengthening of the role of the EC’s Vice-Presidents. This means looking at how the relationships among various actors have developed in terms of personalization. In this regard, I focus on the EC’s work programme, the inclusion of a given agenda item, its withdrawal and the possibility of circumventing discussion of an item placed on the agenda.

When speaking about centralized personalization, the President’s influence has increased in many aspects. First, he prepares the agenda for each meeting according to his policy priorities as stated in his Political Guidelines. Previously, when proposing an agenda, the President had to consider the EC’s annual programme; this has since been reversed, and now the EC’s annual programme and political priorities must be in line with the guidelines laid down by President. Second, once the agenda has been adopted, the President gained the power to decide whether a particular item can be withdrawn or not. The President’s ability to keep the agenda fixed has been further enhanced by the removal of the EC’s ability to omit agenda items. Last, the President has become a gatekeeper with respect to the inclusion of items onto the agenda. In other words, it has become the President’s decision if proposals for item inclusion are desirable and reasonable. Nevertheless, the current President transferred part of his competences in this matter to the Vice-Presidents. Individual Commissioners have retained their position as actors allowed to propose new initiatives for the agenda. However,
such proposals can only succeed if recommended to the President by the Vice-Presidents, after evaluating whether they correspond to the EC’s Political Guidelines (European Commission, 1993; 1999; 2010a; 2010b and 2014).

For sake of completeness, it is worth mentioning that there were few personalized reforms in the last two categories (i.e. mandate with respect to scheduling and holding meetings and internal decision-making procedures). Nevertheless, the identified changes cannot be considered sufficient for concluding that the EC’s politics in these areas became clearly personalized. With respect to the first category, the President gained the right to decide: a) who would serve as his deputy if he is not able to convene a meeting of College, and b) whether an individual Commissioner could be released from the obligation of attending meetings. As far as internal decision-making procedures are concerned, the only change in terms of personalization was a slight amendment to a written procedure. The President decides on any reservations and proposals for amendments made by the EC’s members over the course of the procedure. That means the reservations are not automatically placed on the agenda of the next meeting, as it was the case at the beginning of the period under study (European Commission, 1993; 1999 and 2005). Obviously, this change reflects the President’s growing influence and control in agenda-setting as demonstrated above.

So far, this analysis has focused on personalized reforms, in terms of their emergence in the Commission’s internal politics. Based on this, it is clear that politics within the EC is more personalized than it was in the early 1990s. In addition, every subsequent revision of the primary law as well as of the Commission’s internal rules has led to a stronger position of individual actor(s).

However, when looking at the individual areas under review in this study, the overall picture is rather mixed, as personalization did not occur in all areas to the same extent. When speaking about personalization in primary law, institutional personalization could be found in mandate-related issues (in terms of nominations for Commissioners, the appointment of Vice-Presidents, and termination of mandates), the EC’s internal organization and agenda-setting within the Commission. In case of EC’s internal rules, institutional personalization is evident in agenda-setting and internal organization-related competences. In other investigated areas of the Commission’s activities, it is not possible to talk about a significant trend towards adopting more personalized reforms. Despite that, personalized reforms can be identified there as well. In terms of the direction of personalization, the analysis clearly demonstrates that the reforms that have been adopted have enhanced the position of the President. In other
words, centralized personalization dominated over decentralized. At this point, it should be noted that despite following also a trend of de-personalization, I was unable to identify such reforms (de-personalized reforms) in this analysis. This leads to the final question: why the personalized reforms were proposed?

**What are the motives for supporting institutional personalization in the EC?**

At the beginning of this section, two general remarks are worth emphasizing. First, personalized reforms – i.e. reforms which could enhance the role of individual actor(s) – did not seem to be the most important issues on the agenda of the revision rounds of the treaties under study. As far as an overall number is concerned, there were only a few dozen cases, in which an actor proposed a personalized reform related to individual actors of the Commission. Moreover, personalized reforms were sometimes proposed without the possibility of identifying the actor’s motives. Second, when an actor proposed a personalized reform, in most cases it happened as a reaction to current political developments within the EU (especially EU enlargement and institutional crisis after the resignation of the Santer Commission).

In terms of the three categories of motives (see above), the motivation to improve the Commission’s efficiency and functioning clearly dominated over the other two. The reason for that lies primarily in the fact that the proposals reflected current problems and challenges. In this regard, personalized reforms were in the vast majority of cases proposed in order to strengthen the EC President’s position. This was seen as a way to achieve better functioning of the Commission – particularly as the number of its members increased – as well as how to enhance collegiality, and individual and collective accountability. This category includes a variety of proposals, such as the increased role of the President in the appointment of Commissioners, the ‘presidentialization’ of working methods, the procedure of dismissal of a Commissioner by the President and the allocation of portfolios within the EC (see e.g. Official Journal, 1995; European Commission, 2002; European Parliament, 2008).

With respect to the third category (Self-interest and power), it can be concluded that the proposals for personalization of EC’s internal rules were based on efforts to guarantee the EC’s independence within the political system of the EU. Policymakers believed that this could be done e.g. by giving the President greater influence in determining the Commission’s policies (European Parliament, 2000).
The motives based on discussions about the quality of democracy in the EU were only rarely presented. In those cases, advocates emphasized the need for the enhanced legitimacy of the Commission or its President. This implies the conclusion that with respect to the EC as such, personalization is not primarily seen as a tool for enhancing the democratic character of the EU in general, or of the Commission in particular.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The study presented here represents an attempt to look at the institutional level of Commission-related politics through the lens of political personalization. In this regard, the purpose of analysis was to investigate whether a personalization of politics in the EC has occurred, and if so in which spheres of its activities, in what direction this personalization has occurred, and why it has been happening.

From the overall point of view, politics at the EC’s institutional level has become more personalized. The analysis of primary law and the EC’s internal rules has shown that the balance of power between individual and collective actors has shifted – to the benefit of the former. Furthermore, instances of the personalizing process can be identified in every revision round. In other words, the process of institutional personalization in the EC is also characterized by a temporal dimension (see e.g. Karvonen, 2010). This is fully in accordance with expectations posed by the concept of political personalization. Nevertheless, it must be noted that there are differences between instances of institutional personalization at the level of individual areas included in this study. Overall, the Commission is more personalized at its institutional level, but it is not possible to observe a clear personalizing trend in all areas of its activity.

Who are the winners of institutional personalization at the level of the College? Research on the (not exclusively) political leadership in the EC has led to the conclusion that the EC President became at least a more important and influential player in town (e.g. Kassim et al., 2017; Müller, 2016 Tömmel, 2013). My study clearly tends to support that view. For that reason, it is possible to talk about centralized institutional personalization in the EC. However, the more important finding is that in many cases, the President gained new powers and competences at the expense of College as a collective actor. Furthermore, I argued that the EC-related personalized reforms were proposed with the intention of making the Commission function better and more effectively. Nevertheless, the ambition to enhance the EC’s independence by strengthening the role of its President has been present as well.
To sum up, despite the collegial nature of the Commission, it is the EC President who has gained significant responsibilities that have allowed him to influence the EC’s composition, functioning and performance. Moreover, the President himself often replaced the College in performing the functions analysed in this study.

However, much more needs to be done in order to understand the institutional personalization of politics in the EU. In this regard, it would be interesting to look at the institutional level of other EU institutions (especially the EP, the CEU and the European Council). Bearing in mind the limitation of this study in terms of its focusing on formal rules, further analysis of informal rules would provide valuable insight into the functioning of EC in terms of political personalization. From this point of view, a focus on personal experiences of the relevant actors and their perception of personalized reforms would be an appropriate way how to understand the phenomena of personalization in the European Union.  

References


5 For examples of studies employing data from interviews conducted with representatives from the EC and other institutions, see e.g. Tömmel (2013) and Bürgin (2018).


