The Quiet Transformation of the EU Commission Cabinet System

Abstract Although cabinets in the European Commission have attracted considerable interest, scholarly attention has mainly focused on their composition and influence. How the status of cabinets or the relations between them have changed over time, and how cabinets have been affected by changes to the wider institutional environment, has gone largely unexamined. This article takes a step towards filling that gap. It argues that, despite apparent stability in the functions that cabinets perform, the cabinet system has undergone a quiet transformation. A new differentiation has created hierarchical relations within the cabinet system, with implications for policy coordination and output. Using historical institutionalist theory, the article shows that Commission cabinets have been affected less by reforms addressed directly at them and more by internal rule change aimed at other parts of their institutional environment.

Introduction

The European Commission is a political body and a powerful bureaucracy. Decisions are taken at the political level in the college of commissioners. Technical expertise however rests with the directorates general and services (Cini, 1996; Kassim et al., 2013; Nugent & Rhinard, 2015). Traditionally, a horizontal coordination style in the college has been combined with a multi-hierarchical structure, vertically organized in ways comparable to ministries in national governments (Joana & Smith, 2004; Senninger, Finke, Blom-Hansen 2021). The political advisers working in the personal offices of individual commissioners and the president are the linchpin that connect the two domains (Spence, 2006; Wille, 2013; Nugent & Rhinard, 2015).

While much has been written about what Commission cabinets do (Wille, 2013; Kassim et al., 2013) and how their functions compare to national cabinets (Gouglas et al., 2017), less attention has been paid to how, if at all, they have changed over time. Where change of cabinets has been studied, the focus has been almost exclusively on their composition (Egeberg & Heskestad 2010; Deckarm, 2016)—an interest arising out of fascination with the apparent anomaly of national appointees working in a supranational institution.

Against this background, this article is prompted by a puzzle. The Commission as an organization has experienced substantial change over the past two decades. Several models of political leadership have been adopted with differing attendant arrangements (Kassim and Bocquillon 2021), the interaction between political and administrative levels has been recast with each new Commission, and the Kinnock reforms enacted a comprehensive administrative overhaul—not to mention the impact of several waves of enlargement, and the empowerment of the European Council and the European Parliament. Yet, despite the turbulence in their institutional environment, cabinets appear to have been unaffected in terms of the roles that they perform and

the responsibilities that they exercise—as perception data on the tasks performed by cabinet collected from three surveys of Commission officials during the 2000s and 2010s report (see online appendix for details).

This article contends that, despite the impression of stasis, the cabinet system has in fact undergone significant change over the last two decades. Although the tasks and roles of cabinets remain largely the same, the cabinet system itself functions very differently from in the past. Whereas historically cabinet interaction was a horizontal process evolving among peers who were roughly equal, it now has a strong vertical dimension, reflecting a new status differentiation between cabinets. Drawing on insights from historical institutionalism, especially those relating to gradual change, this article sheds light on this quiet transformation of Commission cabinets over the last two decades. Using these tools to uncover the processes at work, it explains how the transformation of the cabinet system has come about and how it has done so without affecting the way that cabinets work. Crucially, it shows the impact of internal rule change on the Commission cabinet system. Without explaining why internal rule change has come about, which space does not permit, it shows that the transformation of the cabinet system is the result less of change addressed directly at cabinets and more by changes directed primarily at other parts of the institutional environment.

The article thereby aims to contribute to scholarship in three ways. First, it enhances empirical understanding of the Commission cabinets as mechanisms of internal governance and how their role has changed over time. Second, it shows that institutionalist thinking about gradual change can help to recognize transformations even within an intra-organizational perspective. Third, it offers an example of how historical institutionalism can usefully be applied to European Union (EU) studies to identify how direct and indirect forces combine to bring about institutional change which otherwise escape scholarly attention. Such an approach is extremely valuable for a

system like the EU, which is characterized by organizational complexity and continuous transformation.

The discussion below proceeds in four parts. The first section provides a summary of the Commission cabinet literature in comparative perspective and details the prevailing (but misleading) perception of stability. The second section revisits historical institutionalist thinking with view to how concepts developed in this branch of theorizing can help understand gradual organizational change. It specifies the research question and the approach taken in the empirical analysis. The sections that follow show that there has been an important, if gradual, transformation of cabinet activities in three central areas: political synchrony with the commissioner's home state, horizontal coordination via multiannual policy planning and dossier prioritization, and vertical coordination through exclusive control over the services. The significance of these findings is discussed in the final section.

Cabinets in comparative perspective and the perception of relative stability

Cabinets are found in many political systems (Brans et al., 2017; Di Mascio & Natalini, 2013; Dutheillet Lamothe, 1965; Walgrave et al., 2004). They help their ministers with all tasks from daily administration to strategic counselling. Cabinets have been described as "customary institutions" connecting politics and administration (Dutheillet Lamothe, 1965, p. 365). They are regarded by some as the "true political bureaucracy" and thus at the core of technocratic-political decision-making (Rouban, 2007, p. 475). From an alternative view, they are a hotbed of "partytocracy", embodying the pathological grip of party apparatchiks "on government policy and selection of public sector personnel" (Walgrave et al., 2004). Since the politically sensitive roles

played by cabinets often take place in an informal manner, cabinets are sometimes seen as anarchic institutions that "work in secrecy" (Caritey, 1997, p. 109). More recently, researchers have sought to demystify cabinets through empirical investigation of the people who work for them and what they do. According to these studies, cabinet staffers are gofers, policy experts and generalists (Connaughton, 2010, p. 347), and cabinet structures an indispensable network for vertical and horizontal coordination in relative disjointed (autonomous) executive configurations (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2013, pp. 329, 338).

Like their national equivalents, Commission cabinets were established "to increase the capacity of the executive politician at the top in his or her dealing with the various tasks assigned to his position" (Egeberg & Heskestad, 2010, p. 777). The substance of the job is much the same (Gouglas et al., 2017). The distinctiveness of the Commission cabinets arises from the particularities of their institutional context (Spence, 2006; Wille, 2013). While national cabinets are focused on vertical coordination, i.e., top-down steering of the executive, Commission cabinets work on both horizontal *and* vertical coordination (Cini, 1996, p. 112). Some observers would even say their most important tasks lie in horizontal coordination (Christiansen, 1997). In this sense Commission cabinets are "le jardinier de collegialité" (Pascal Lamy quoted in Spence, 2006, p. 61). Not all agree, however (Kassim et al., 2013, p. 183). Foremost among reported pathologies have been that "cabinets shielded Commissioners from the services, usurped Directors General responsibilities, and launched proposals without consultation of responsible officials" (Spence, 2006, p. 69).

This brief literature review suggests that, while the precise tasks performed by cabinets may vary, the general patterns are similar in national or supranational contexts. In the case of the Commission, although the requirements of multinational staffing have changed, the roles played

by cabinets are thought to have remained relatively stable (Cini, 1996; Spence, 2006; Kassim et al., 2013; Wille, 2013). The perception of relative stability is reinforced by analysis of a unique dataset collected on Commission policy officials of all ranks as well as members of cabinet working in the Commission in 2008, 2014, and 2018 (see online appendix for details). Three questions relating to the operation of cabinets were included in each survey: whether cabinets respected the technical expertise of the services, whether cabinets are representatives of their commissioner's home state, and whether coordination between cabinets and services is effective. Although there is some variation—by and large, as Figure 1 indicates, despite the ruptures following managerial reform, treaty change, enlargement, and organizational restructuring over the past fifteen years, perception of the roles that cabinets perform has remained relatively stable.

Figure 1: Perception of the role of Commission cabinets between 2008 to 2018
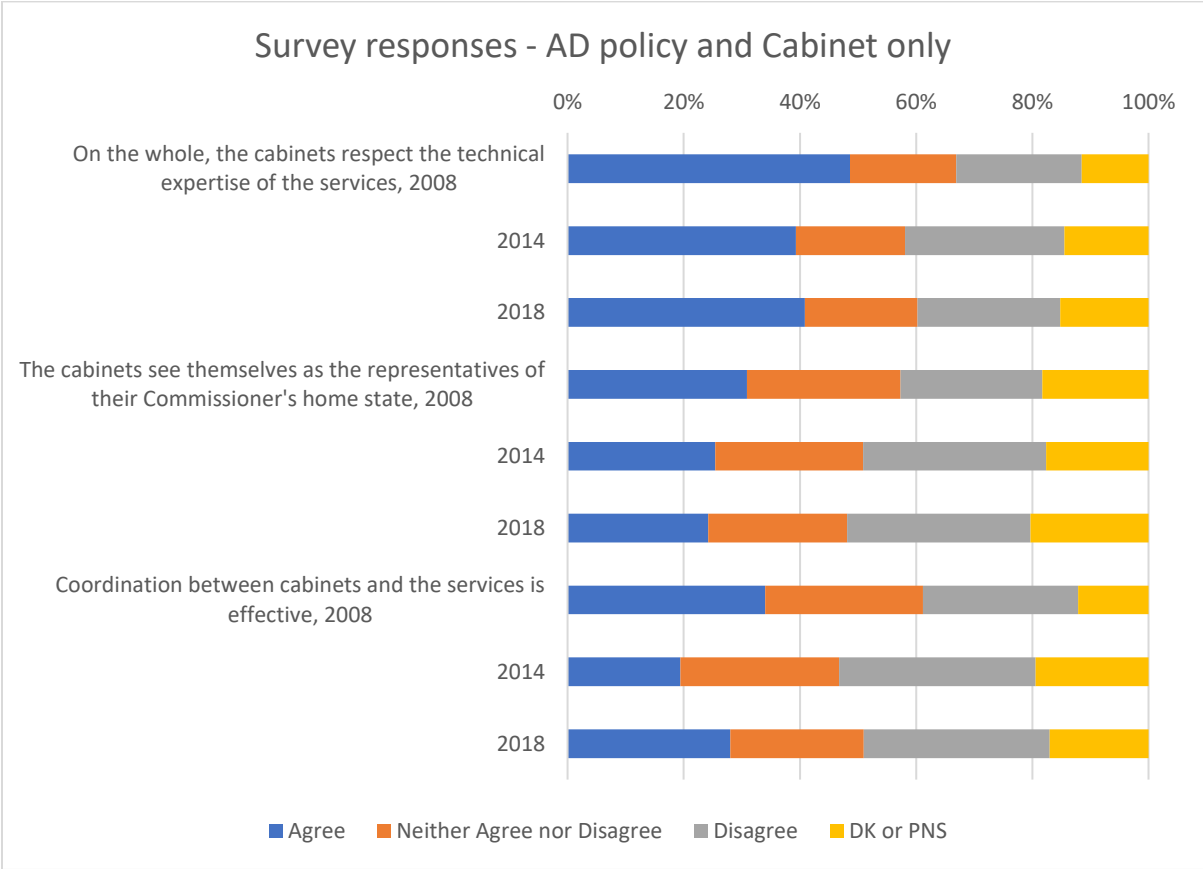
Studying gradual change in the Commission cabinet system

The perception data shown in Figure 1 suggesting that cabinets have remained largely unchanged is surprising given the developments—the adoption of leadership models that have led to a reconfiguration of power relations at the political level of the Commission, changes in procedure, and administrative reform—that have taken place over this time period within the Commission and its institutional environment. Our intuition is that those developments have affected the cabinets even if they have done so in ways that are not immediately perceptible in the roles that cabinets play. Since their institutional environment has been so turbulent and it seems unlikely that, in view of their strategic location, cabinets would not have been affected in some way, the suspicion arises that, if indeed the cabinet system has been altered in some way, the change will have taken place below the surface or off the radar in the form of a gradual process that attracted little or no attention. The idea of a "quiet" cabinet transformation, without the awareness of those directly involved may seem fanciful. Yet, exactly because the superficial perception is one of stability, change is unlikely to have been the result of a direct reform attempt—and more likely to have been the consequence of changes enacted or directed elsewhere within the organizational environment. In taking up this possibility, this article addresses three research questions: Has there been an empirically verifiable change in the cabinet system that has not affected the roles and responsibilities of cabinets? If so, what processes have been at work? Has the observable change resulted from a reform attempt directed at the cabinets, motivated, for example, by an internal power struggle, or is it the side effect of developments elsewhere in the Commission?

New institutionalist thinking, and specifically historical institutionalist perspectives, provide a seemingly appropriate toolkit for pursuing questions of continuity and (c)overt change within organizational systems (Thelen, 1999). The properties that make new institutionalist thinking so pertinent are its ability to conceive of institutional change in one part of the organisation as the result of institutional change in another part and of processes that lead to gradual change.

While early historical institutionalist theory conceived institutional development as a process characterized by long phases of stability and self-reinforcement, occasionally "punctuated" by external shocks (True et al., 1999), later accounts reflected on how institutions "change in subtle and gradual ways over time" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 1). Scholars interested in the *endogenous* factors leading to gradual transformations (Streeck & Thelen, 2005, p. 9; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) have identified environmental shifts, internal ambiguities, unintended consequences and gradually emerging power differentials within institutional configurations as causes of institutional change over time. Although institutions are often very broadly defined (Saurugger, 2017, p. 2; Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000), a power differential view typically dominates in political analysis of the explanations why they change (Campbell, 2004, p. 1).[1]

Thelen and her colleagues (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) suggest a number of possible modes of gradual institutional change, including: *displacement*, i.e., the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones, and, *layering*, i.e., the introduction of new rules

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[1] Historical institutionalism and its concepts of gradual institutional transformation were developed within comparative politics and used to explain stasis and change in macro-level institutions regulating relations between the state and the economy (Thelen, 1999; Immergut, 2006), but have also left their imprint on EU studies (Bulmer, 1993; Lindner & Rittberger, 2003; Christiansen & Verdun, 2020, for an overview) and the study of (international) organizations (Fioretos, 2011; Hanrieder, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2017). Scholars have used historical institutionalism to explain changing structures within national political institutions including the British House of Lords or the US Congress (Norton, 2001; Sheingate, 2010) and structural change in public administrations (Kickert & Van der Meer, 2011). It is on the intersection of these literatures that the analysis of the transformation of the Commission's cabinet system as an internal organizational feature of the EU's executive is situated (Ongaro, 2013).

on top of or alongside existing ones (Hanrieder, 2014). While most real-world changes result from a combination of the two, separating them makes it possible to investigate whether existing rules have been changed and new ones introduced, and the long-term effects. Historical institutionalist ideas concerning possible modes of change, i.e., whether change is the result of deliberate and direct actions, or of indirect and even unintended influences (Hanrieder, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2010; Lindner & Rittberger, 2003), are also relevant.

In summary, positing that cabinet change *has* involved more than a change in how cabinets are composed—which at this point still remains to be demonstrated—we expect to see a gradual transformation over the long-term in the form of displacement or layering. Moreover, the scholarly neglect of cabinets leads us to expect that change in cabinets has been the result, not of reforms targeted specifically at cabinets, but rather of measures directed elsewhere in the institution.

What then are the components of the cabinet system that need to be traced over time to address these questions? Put differently, since the "cabinet system" cannot be observed in its entirety, how can the choice of an empirical focus be justified? Although historical institutionalism contends that political phenomena are complex and difficult to observe directly, it does not provide any answers to this question. Relevant indicators and dimensions amenable to empirical analysis need to be found at lower levels of abstraction. Since institutionalist analysis is built on the notion of "historical inefficiencies", it needs to leave open the choice of empirical focus since these "inefficiencies" cannot neatly be derived from prior theoretical assumptions (Campbell, 2004, p. 40). Taking a pragmatic approach, it is however possible to highlight (at least) three areas in the case of Commission cabinets that *would necessarily be affected* if transformation were suspected. All three areas feature in the daily work of cabinets.

The first is political synchrony with the commissioner's home state for which cabinets have traditionally been responsible. The power position of a commissioner within the college depends *inter alia* on the quality of the relationship with the national government that appointed him or her. Cabinets can act as informal coordination devices, providing an external governmental power source for their political masters. Second, cabinets are the arenas of horizontal agenda coordination within the college—as guardians of the agenda of the college's weekly meetings. Third, the cabinets watch closely over the portfolio services (directorates general) of their commissioner. The vertical exclusivity of this relationship is an important power source, since in their interaction with the services cabinets can directly influence the content of policy proposals by parts of the Commission's administrative machinery that they directly supervise.

Although these three features may not exhaust *all* the important functions that Commission cabinets perform, *any* meaningful change to the cabinet system is *unlikely* to leave them untouched. Accordingly, the relationship with the home state, the horizontal coordination in the college, and the vertical relationship with the services are the focus of the following investigation, presented in the form of three case studies (Van Evera, 1997, p. 64; Yin 2003). The first examines whether change can be detected and, if so, whether it constitutes a transformation of the cabinet system. The second is what modes of change have been at work (e.g. displacement, layering). And the third is determination of whether the measures that resulted in change were targeted at cabinets or whether they were directed elsewhere and any impact on the cabinets was unintended.[2]

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[2] The empirical analysis is based on 38 long interviews conducted with cabinet staff. The interview templates are found in part B of the online annex. The interview code identifies the position held by the interviewee and the date when the interview was conducted: 'HOC' refers to head or deputy head of cabinet, and 'MOC' for members of cabinet. The digit following 'HOC' or 'MOC' gives the order in which holders of the post were interviewed that day. Thus, 'HOC01_21092018' is the first head of cabinet interviewed on 21 September 2018. All interviews were professionally transcribed.

The home state and the multinational staffing

The composition of cabinets is highly visible. Traditionally most cabinet staff came from the same member state as the commissioner, who typically appointed trusted aides who had served them at national level to accompany them to Brussels, but the Prodi presidency introduced rules to guarantee a greater mix of nationalities and a minimum intake of experienced aides from within the Commission services (Deckarm, 2016). Cabinet composition was, thereby, "denationalized" (Egeberg & Heskestad, 2010; Kassim et al., 2013, p. 183).

The problem posed by nationalized cabinets for the Commission' internal governance had long been recognized. Commissioners are both formal agents of the Commission's supranational mission and a channel of communication for the governments of their home states (Michelmann, 1978, p. 482; Spence, 2006). The concern that cabinets were more attentive to the latter -- "Trojan horses" for national interests or, as Jacques Delors thought, "shadow cabinets" for their national governments (Ross, 1995, p. 161)—was reinforced by their composition. Romano Prodi became the first president to impose nationality limits, though some measures were prefigured by the Santer Commission (Wille, 2013, p. 101; Commission, 1999a). The new rules required cabinets to include nationals from at least three member states and the head of cabinet to come from a different member state to the commissioner (Deckarm, 2016; Egeberg & Heskestad, 2010; Gouglas et al., 2017; Wille, 2013). Although communicating the mood in the national capitals is still part of the job, "the game has changed", as one head of cabinet put it (HOC02_20092018). Another noted that "[O]bviously cabinets are supposed to be a link to the national government, the national member states" (HOC01_09072018), but there are now "quite strong limitations" (HOC01_21062018) on how this is done.

How to interpret the denationalization of cabinet composition through the lens of the analytical approach outlined above? While the rule change can be seen as a key milestone in addressing an institutional pathology that was widely recognised, it did not come as a surprise and its effects on the wider cabinet system remain unclear. However, the element of power struggle is self-evident. By insisting that cabinets are multinational, a limit was imposed on the commissioner's capacity to exploit the relationship with the national capital as power resource, while emphasis on the Commission's supranational mission strengthened the presidential grip on the institution.

In this sense, the change of composition rules fits the "displacement logic" identified by historical institutionalism (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Restricting staffing by nationals was a conscious attempt by the Commission presidency to gain advantage in the power struggle with the cabinets. But was it effective? Egeberg and Heskestad found no observable behavioral consequences (2010, p. 776). Kassim et al (2013), however, found evidence of 'functional denationalization' where cabinet members reported that they did not see maintaining relations with the national capital of the Commissioner's home state as an important task, nor did they see it as their responsibility to lobby for the appointment of the Commissioner's compatriots to senior positions in the administration.

Horizontal coordination in retreat: from the "Kinnock reforms" to Juncker's "new Ways of Working"

Individual responsibility for a specific portfolio among Commissioners, combined with joint decision taking among equals at the top of the organization, encouraged a disjointed coordination style (Kassim, 2004; Senninger, Finke, Blom-Hansen 2021, p. 711), especially when portfolio

allocation was decided by the member states. Members of the Commission, especially strong personalities such as Leon Brittan, Karel van Miert, or Lord Cockfield, had considerable autonomy to develop policies in their portfolio areas (Ross, 1995). If a commissioner had clearly defined objectives, determination, and a talented cabinet, he or she could steer proposals through the organization overcoming even bold resistance. Policy adoption became an important metric of success (Hooghe, 2001). Since beyond the Commission's personal authority, there were few resources to keep commissioners in check, a culture of "turf wars" between departmental "fiefdoms" and weak coordination across dossiers prevailed (Coombes, 1970; Cini, 1996). Cabinet power blossomed under these conditions.

A turning point was reached at the end of the Delors presidency. The Maastricht treaty entrusted the Commission with a broad range of new policy responsibilities, notably in supervising implementation of EU rules in the member states (Laffan, 1997). But since the Commission's organizational ethos was still geared towards agenda setting and policy initiation, a gap in policy management opened up (Metcalfe, 2000). Although the Santer Commission was well aware of the problem (Wille, 2013, p. 101; Commission, 1999a), it was—again—not until the Prodi presidency that it was addressed (Commission, 1999b). Prodi sought to increase policy coordination capacity at the top political level, strengthening the support function that enabled the commissioners to be informed of developments across all portfolios, while limiting the direct political involvement in the services (Wille, 2013, p. 116).

This change was part of a comprehensive managerial overhaul. Neil Kinnock was appointed vice-president to lead the reform. The measures introduced created an infrastructure designed to improve horizontal coordination. With the Strategic Planning and Programming (SPP) cycle as a cornerstone of the reform project, the Commission' policy programme had to be justified in the

light of targeted objectives. The processes begin with the Annual Policy Strategy (APS), which is developed following extensive communication and coordination among the services, then translated into mission statements and annual work programmes, with specific objectives for each Commission service (Kassim, 2004, p. 48; Goetz & Patz, 2016).

A new management culture, generated by a programming cycle overseen by the secretariat general, required a level of horizontal coordination and collaboration in planning, implementing and monitoring—hitherto unknown in the Commission. "Steering by objective" was enhanced by Prodi's introduction of "better regulation" as part of a commitment to improving quality control in the development of legislative proposals by the Commission. Prodi's successors, Barroso and Juncker, were both concerned to better control and target policy activism on the part of the Commission. In particular, they strengthened the secretariat general as a central coordinating body (Bürgin 2018). The secretariat general ensured that the development of new policies was in accordance with the president's preferences, and through its administrative responsibility for the SPP and "better regulation", including impact assessments and simplification, sought to improve quality control. This new management style encouraged an iterative, more top-down coordination culture, at a time when constitutional changes were increasing the formal power of the Commission presidency (Kassim et al., 2013; Müller, 2020).

Jean-Claude Juncker added a new element to the streamlining of internal coordination. His vision of a "political Commission" was implemented through the so-called "new ways of working" (Kassim & Laffan, 2019; Bürgin 2018). Based on the belief that priorities outlined in the president's political guidelines should form the source of the Commission's work programme, new ways of working subordinated the work of members of the Commission and their cabinets to the delivery of the president's programme through a tier of vice-presidents. Together with a

strengthening of the procedural and monitoring capacities of the secretariat general, and the new hierarchy in external political communication via the Single Spokesperson's Service[3], commissioners and their cabinets found themselves bound into an increasingly tighter executive pyramid.

In 2018 virtually all our interviewees underlined the impact of changes introduced by the new ways of working. One head of a vice president's cabinet observed, "What you have seen in the previous Commission and even more in Prodi's, that certain commissioners were running their own path, being it with certain proposals, being it with certain decisions. That is now much more under control" (HOC01_21092018). Clearly, "those days are gone". S/he continued: "the system works pretty well, but of course the space, the liberty for the individual commissioners, is limited. So, if I were a commissioner <laughs> I would do it differently! But if I was to be the president, I would do it in the same way". Obviously, in the line cabinets the assessment is different:

> "I think it was easier before. I have been around for quite some time in cabinets. I think it was a different spirit before. You would try to solve things between yourselves, usually in a spirit of compromise. If another cabinet wanted to make amendments to your text, you would try to take on board what you could without denaturing the proposal. If you were really stuck, you could ask for the president's cabinet as a primus inter pares to come in and sort out the crisis. Now you can go to a vice-president to try to sort it out, but even if you do, Timmermans may come in and put in a veto. Anyway, whatever you have agreed with the help of your vice-president, the president's cabinet can come in and change things. The vice-presidents have not been really empowered

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[3] As part of the 2014 reform of external communications, the communication adviser in each cabinet can now only be selected from the staff of the Spokesperson's Service, thereby extending central control over Commission interaction with the press at political level.

to do their work, which means that it has been rather messy. Sometimes we have to go to two vice-presidents to ask for a green light, then we have to go to Timmermans, then there is still the president's cabinet anyway. For me it is a lot of loops to jump through. I think it was easier earlier." (HOC01_18122018)

Our interviewees testify to the creation of a new hierarchy driven by the vice-presidents, the secretariat general and, in particular, the Single Spokesperson's Service (HOC01_21092018; HOC01_18122018; HOC02_20092018; MOC02_10072018; see also Bürgin 2018, p. 844). The latter in particular was unpopular. "I hate it", one deputy head of cabinet declared. S/he continued, perhaps affirming the efficacy of the system: "So difficult to get the approval for the simplest thing" (DHC01_27062018).

As much as the new centralism evokes complaints, heads of cabinet also acknowledge the improvement it has brought to coordination: "Before there was more deliberation among the cabinets. That changed now to better up-stream coordination" (HOC01_19062018). Along the same lines another head of cabinet sees among the cabinets "a better cooperation, a *forced* better cooperation" (HOC01_21092018). All in all, "control goes ever more upstream" (HOC01_28012019). While members of line cabinets highlight the limitations on the room for manoeuvre, those working in vice-presidents' cabinets stress the benefits of tighter coordination and increased "upstream" control, or its. However, the relationship among the cabinets remains competitive. Limited access to the president, combined with the "co-lead" of a first vice-president, and the distinction drawn between "line" cabinets and coordinating vice-presidents, have displaced the collegial style of coordination, where horizontal cabinet management was an essential feature.

As a result of the new hierarchy, procedural centralization and "forced" horizontal coordination, working in a cabinet is seen as "less fun than five years ago, if you are a cabinet member working for a line commissioner" (MOC01_09072018). The transformation is not only due to the introduction of the "political Commission" but results from a process at work over the longer term. The "political Commission" did not change the way cabinets are run (HOC01_21092018). Rather, there are structural forces behind the recent changes: "I am not sure that the 'political Commission' has changed the role of the cabinets, the restructuring of the system has" (DHC01_27062018).

In sum, the Kinnock reforms were a learning exercise that transformed internal planning and coordination over a matter of years (Kassim 2008). However, they significantly changed the organizational context in which cabinets operated. By contrast, Juncker's organizational change was a one-off change—with consequences for the work of the cabinets that were expected. Neither qualifies as a 'big bang' reform, and neither was *directly* aimed at cabinets. Nevertheless, the new management cycle, the new working method of the political Commission, and the restructuring the college altered the working environment. While the intention behind the new working method was indeed to enshrine presidential pre-eminence vis-à-vis the commissioners and the college vis-à-vis the services, the effects of the Kinnock planning cycle ran broader and deeper throughout the organization. In institutionalist terms, the mode of change observable in horizontal coordination is best described as *layering*. New rules were introduced, and gradually these new rules redefined relations between the cabinets—without however formally and directly being targeted at cabinet practices.

The end of exclusive vertical command over the services

The relationship between the services and the cabinets is highly sensitive (Spence, 2006, p. 71). Members of a cabinet work closely with staff from the departments for which they are responsible. Although a cabinet might have been in charge of several directorates general, a directorate general would be responsible to only *one* cabinet. With the Juncker Commission, this vertical exclusivity was replaced by more complex relationships. Vice-presidents, acting on the part of the president, were given policy leadership responsibilities over line commissioners. Supported by the secretariat general, whose resources were reinforced, the vice-presidents manage the procedural flow of policymaking. As a result, directorate generals now work with more than one commissioner. For example, under the Juncker Commission, EMU was overseen by vice-president Valdis Dombrovskis and involved the seven line commissioners responsible for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, Regional Policy, Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxation and Customs, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, and Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility. Cabinet-service relationships become more complex. For the services these "overlapping responsibilities" (DHC01_17122018) created uncertainty as the policy strategy meetings convened by vice presidential cabinets were open to cabinet members only.

The single line of vertical control has therefore become blurred. "Before we always had our service. So, it's a clear line here, it's a commissioner and a service. And now we don't have a service immediately working with us […]." (MOC01_11072018). Many cabinets lost their gate-keeping function over their respective directorate generals as the services go to the vice-presidents for "arbitration" (DHC01_27062018), leading to "funny dialectics" in terms of competition between line commissioners and vice-presidents (HOC01_28012019) and the emergence of a new type of internal politics emerged:

"So, when the cabinet members of the vice-president are preparing something for the vice-president related to our portfolio, do they go via my colleagues here? Do they go directly to the DG? If they go directly to the DG, do they fear that they are offending us, or does it look like they are trying to circumvent us? Will the DG be quite honest and comprehensive in responding to them, or would they get better and more honest input from the DG if the request is coming through us? If they go directly to the DG, are they able to cut through the Bieńkowska [then commissioner for internal market and services] agenda and get the real thinking of the department? Or does the department try to instrumentalize them to do something where they don't have the full support of the Bieńkowska cabinet? So, you have all this. So, for that, and this is early days in a large institution which for 60 years was working in a certain way and now has this layer, […] so that's a fundamental change […] it's a new dimension in our work. (HOC02_26062018)

Decisional authority has moved up the hierarchy. The secretariat general and the vice-presidents increasingly take decisions on substance and process concerning matters that previously were made at a lower level, i.e., between a line cabinet and the services for which they are responsible (HOC01_28012019).

Although the new ways of vertical coordination were beneficial "in terms of quality of technical soundness of the proposal" (HOC01_28122019), success depended "70% or 80% on the preparation between secretariat general and the services" (HOC02_20092018) creating "jealousy and an antagonism between vice-president and the commissioner" (HOC02_20092018). The "fundamental impact" (MOC01_09072018) was far-reaching:

"In the previous way of working, the line of command, if you want to call it, was very simple, it was cabinet—president. And there was almost nothing in between, which means that each cabinet just needed to convince the president cabinet, that's it. Now, in a way we have a filter, and this filter is very important because, first of all, we need to convince our vice-president. So, certainly, that had an impact, and then an impact let's say upwards, so vis-à-vis the president cabinet, but there's also an impact downwards, vis-à-vis the DG, because DG, the services know pretty well that, yes, whatever they do, what they will be asked to do, will depend not just on us, but also on the vice-president. […] It depends very much on the way you built your relation with the vice-president, the level of trust, the level of involvement and interest that the vice-president or his or her cabinet, have in a certain file." (MOC01_25062018)

The secretariat general has increased in size and supports the vice-presidents in carrying out their coordination responsibilities. The new lines of vertical coordination have become more complex, and especially in the college, responsibilities are pooled rather than separated. The line of responsibility that used to link directorate generals and their cabinets has lost its exclusivity. Services often report to more than one commissioner, and, in addition, to their respective vice-president—a powerful and interventionist secretariat general.

Although the single line of vertical control, historically a central element structuring relationships between the two worlds of politics and expertise within the Commission, was not intentionally targeted, the new management style and new ways of working transformed not only cabinet-service relations, but coordination among line cabinets, and relations between line cabinets and vice-presidential and presidential cabinets. Whereas cabinets were historically gatekeepers for

their services, they are now caretakers for policy dossiers. While the creation of vice-presidents was intended to bring hierarchy into the work and organization of the college, it also affected the cabinet system. Yet there is no evidence that the impact of the introduction of vice-presidents on the working relationships between cabinets and services was intended. In historical institutionalist terms, the change of the cabinet system combines a strong element of *layering* with a modest degree of *displacement*. The loss of the cabinets' vertical control over the services was an indirect by-product of the Juncker Commission's new ways of working.

Uncovering gradual cabinet change

The above analysis adds to our understanding of the transformation of the Commission cabinet system in three ways: it demonstrates that the system has changed far beyond composition alone and shows the effects of that change for three constitutive features of the Cabinet system; it applies concepts of gradual change taken from historical institutionalism thus exemplifying how insights from this approach can be applied to the transformation of EU institutions; and it identifies the processes which brought about the changes to the cabinet system—thereby paving the way for a debate about the driving forces behind intra organizational change. This is important, since in terms of their core responsibilities, functions and working routines, Commission cabinets remained largely unchanged. Beneath that surface, however, the cabinet system has undergone a deep and far-reaching transformation.

The empirical analysis has shown evidence of change in three areas: a loosening of relations with the commissioner's home state through a change in staffing rules; stricter procedures for horizontal coordination through multiannual policy planning and dossier prioritization; and greater top-down

powers in vertical coordination, which ended the cabinets exclusive line control over "their" services. Taken together, these changes have transformed Commission cabinets. Yet, other than the rules concerning their composition, the impact of these developments has not attracted significant scholarly attention. The quietness of the transformation also explains why it is not detected even in the survey data of Commission officials (see Figure 1). Moreover, the very rule change directly aimed at cabinet composition, with immediately observable effects, has been the least significant of the changes studied in this article.

In the two other areas, the impact of change has been less visible but more far-reaching. By redistributing the resources for influence potential in internal Commission governance, changes in horizontal and vertical coordination have fundamentally transformed the rules of the game. Informal power differentials linked to the political weight and portfolio of individual commissioners have been institutionalized de facto in a hierarchical re-organization of the cabinet system. The collegiality principle, historically the prevailing institutional norm, is now purely formal. Moreover, a hierarchy has emerged among cabinets that restricts—or "tames"—the line cabinets and their members. The cabinets of the president and the vice presidents have been empowered, but constraints have been placed on all other cabinets.

Insights from historical institutionalism, particular the attention paid to gradual change, made it possible both to detect change beneath the surface of continuity and to decode whether change was intentional or unintended, and whether it took the form of a "big bang" or occurred gradually as the result of the removal of existing rules (displacement) or the creation of new ones (layering). The analysis shows that, in the case of Commission cabinets, where a displacement logic was prominent (as with the reform of rules governing composition), the impact was lowest, while in the fields of horizontal and vertical coordination, where impact was greatest, layering processes

were dominant. The most important effects derived from measures that were not intended to alter the core functions, roles, or routines of cabinets themselves. The measure that had the most wide-ranging impact, namely the management planning cycle introduced by the Kinnock reforms, was not targeted at cabinets at all. The picture that emerges is therefore one of a *layered*, *indirect* and *unintended* change, unfolding gradually over time, but still generating comprehensive institutional transformation. A head of unit captured the processes at work: "It took time until really. We invented this system. Not invented, it was a natural evolution" (HOC01_21062018).

The transformation of the cabinets fits the presidentialisation hypothesis applied to the Commission as an institution-wide development (Hay, 1999, p. 327; Wille 2013; Kassim et al. 2013). However, correlation should not be equated with causation. While cabinet transformation might be interpreted as a dimension of presidentialisation, presidentialisation itself is a meta concept that cannot per se explain the changes traced in this article. It is a background development where the Commission president is empowered vis-à-vis other commissioners compared with the traditional collegial model, where further powers granted to the Commission president deprive individual commissioners of their customary prerogatives (Joana & Smith, 2004). In other words, although there is a potential linkage between cabinet transformation and Commission presidentialisation,[4] only one of the three developments—multinational staffing—is a direct consequence of the power struggle accompanying presidentialisation. The other more important components are at most unintended side effects of that struggle, either the consequence of the

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[4] Indeed, the strengthening of the presidency under the treaty has been limited in nature and has taken place stepwise constituting precisely the kind of configuration of functional pressures and institutional stickiness in which rule change below constitutional thresholds emerges incrementally and endogenously rather than in major leaps forward imposed by outside principals (Hanrieder, 2014). In this sense changes in the Commission's cabinet system have intensified presidentialisation, and are also the result of an ongoing power struggle between president and commissioners over the last say in political leadership within the Commission (Tömmel, 2020). As regards the incremental character of change, Wille (2013: 200), describes presidentialisation within the Commission as a "slow-motion transformation".

centralizing streamlining of general managerial culture (by the Kinnock reforms) or the political priority setting exercise (following the new ways of working).

Conclusion

This article has shown that perceived stability of the Commission cabinets is more apparent than real. Changes that are largely invisible at the level of individual cabinets emerge when the focus is shifted to the cabinet system as an institutional arrangement of intra-organizational decision coordination. Cabinets have been denationalized, but the analysis above shows that the most consequential changes derive from a new managerial hierarchy which promotes top-down coordination and reduces traditional horizontal "collegiality" to little more than a formality.

The article thereby makes a threefold contribution to the scholarship on the European Commission and the study of the EU system more broadly. First, by demonstrating how the role of Commission cabinets has diminished over time, it enhances empirical understanding of cabinets as mechanisms of internal governance within the Commission. Second, the application of historical institutionalist theory makes this transformation visible as a consequence of smaller scale, procedural changes in the areas of horizontal and vertical intra-organizational coordination. It shows further how by identifying layered, indirect and more often than not unintended modes of change, institutionalist theory is able to decode so far undetected stepwise institutional change and thereby make it possible to assess the impact of these processes that unfold over longer time. Third, the article demonstrates how historical institutionalism can be usefully applied in EU studies to explain forms of intra-organizational change which might otherwise escape scholarly attention.

Commission cabinets remain important transmission mechanisms between the worlds of politics and policy expertise, but their influence has been diminished. Their transformation is the outcome of an attempt to resolve core problems of the Commission as a collective body needing to produce coherent policy programs, in an ever more complex organizational and fluid political environment (Laffan, 1997; Metcalfe, 2000). With view to the Commission as an actor in the EU, the cabinet system transformation is thus best understood as a process towards an ever more top-down managed organization (Kassim et al, 2013; Wille, 2013, p. 191). A new differential hierarchical reality now restricts most cabinets and their members. While this outcome empowers some cabinets, it weakens others. The taming of line commissioners and their cabinets is likely to be welcomed by the critics of the Commission that highlighted weak coordination as major deficiency. However, the emergence of a more hierarchical cabinet system carries perils as well as benefits. As well as confirming and reinforcing the decline of collegiality, a tiered cabinet system is likely to further lower morale among line cabinets (and some directors general). To the extent that debate and deliberation between cabinets, and bottom-up trial-and-error entrepreneurship has been a motor of creativity, it could also harm the Commission's capacity to innovate, since command-and-control does not lend itself to a similar degree of experimentalism (Bauer, 2008).

These findings suggest several avenues for future enquiry. Investigation of the impact of changes in the cabinet system on interactions at the political level, especially in the college, is a first. A second is an examination of the effect on the quality of Commission output. The consequences of greater specialization combined with declining horizontal interaction and the strengthening of the centre on the substance of policy are important to assess. Third, the extent to which debates that historically took place between cabinets have now been displaced or not is a further potential area for investigation.

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