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Jean-Claude JUNCKER

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Abstract:	Jean-Claude Juncker (born 1954) spent more than three decades in government in Luxembourg and served as Prime Minister for 18 years, becoming the EU's longest-serving Head of Government and one of the world's longest-serving democratically elected political leaders. He had a major influence on his country's development and made employment an area of expertise for Luxembourg at European level. Juncker was an architect of the Maastricht Treaty, a consensus builder for EMU who became known as 'Mr Euro' and helped steer the response to the 2008 sovereign debt crisis. As President of the European Commission at a time of geopolitical upheaval, he introduced the 'Juncker Plan' and oversaw the Brexit process.

Jean-Claude Juncker was born on 9 December 1954 in Redange-sur-Attert (Luxembourg) and grew up in a working-class family. His parents, Marguerite Hecker (1928-2015) and Jos Juncker (1924-2016) – a steel worker and forced conscript to the German army in WWII –, instilled an awareness in Jean-Claude and his sister of the impact of war and the importance of social engagement.¹

After secondary school studies in Clairefontaine (Belgium) and at Lycée Michel Rodange (Luxembourg), Juncker attended the University of Strasbourg, graduating with a law degree in 1979. It was there that he met his future wife, Christiane Frising. He joined the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) in 1974, was appointed as CSV parliamentary secretary in 1979 and served as party leader from 1990 to 1995.

The dawn of an outstanding political career

Juncker was admitted to the bar in 1980, but he never actually practised law, as in December 1982 Prime Minister Pierre Werner co-opted him into the government, aged just 28, as Junior Minister for Labour and Social Security.

Juncker entered the Chamber of Deputies on 17 June 1984. He was appointed as Minister for Labour and Minister in charge of the Budget in the cabinet of Jacques Santer. In 1985, when Luxembourg held the Presidency of the Council of the European Communities and led the negotiations for the Single Act, Juncker, as chair of the Social Affairs and Budget Councils, demonstrated his firm commitment to Europe.

He was re-elected on 18 June 1989 and became Minister for Finance and Labour in the new Santer government. As the Finance portfolio was considered a rite of passage for the future Luxembourg Prime Minister, Juncker appeared well placed to become Santer's natural successor.

A Luxembourg statesman committed to Europe

During the 1989-1994 parliamentary term, Juncker became a key

European player. In 1991, he was one of the main architects of the Treaty of Maastricht, especially the part on Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In May 1991, he saved the EMU negotiations by proposing an 'opt-out' for the United Kingdom. And yet Juncker's career might have come to a dramatic end in November 1989, when a serious traffic accident left him with critical injuries and in a coma for two weeks.

On 12 June 1994, Juncker was re-elected to Parliament and reappointed as Minister for Finance and Labour in Santer's cabinet. When Santer was chosen as President of the European Commission (1995-1999), Juncker succeeded him on 20 January 1995 as Prime Minister and also Minister for Finance, Labour, Employment and the Treasury.

During the first Juncker government (1995-1999), Luxembourg experienced strong economic growth as it pursued an ambitious policy of diversification and investment, with the development of the satellite project and the audiovisual sector, infrastructure consolidation and the extension of the Kirchberg European district.

At European level, priority was given to employment, tax harmonisation and the introduction of EMU on 1 January 1999. At the Dublin European Council on 13-14 December 1996, Juncker successfully handled a tricky mediation process between German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President Jacques Chirac over the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), illustrating his skills as a negotiator and consensus builder.

Juncker placed the idea of a social Europe at the centre of Luxembourg's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 1997. He called an Extraordinary European Council Meeting on Employment (20-21 November 1997), which led to the 'Luxembourg process', in which Member States were required to submit an annual National Action Plan for employment.² The presidency also saw significant progress in the creation of the euro.

At the Luxembourg European Council on 12-13 December 1997, the 'Euro-11' – an informal group of Finance Ministers from the countries

participating in EMU – was established. It later became the Eurogroup, of which Juncker was elected the first permanent president.

The CSV won the elections in 1999, 2004 (when Juncker personally obtained a record number of votes) and 2009. Juncker continued as Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, then Minister for the Treasury (2009-2013), at the helm of successive coalition governments. During this period, European issues were central to government policy. In his Declaration on the State of the Nation on 9 May 2007, Juncker affirmed that ‘only the European Union gives Luxembourg the means to exercise influence on events abroad; it is important for Luxembourg to influence the development of Europe’.

‘Mr Euro’

From 2005 to 2013, Juncker served as President of the Eurogroup. As the first person to hold this title (the position was previously given to the Head of State or Government in the country holding the Council presidency), he ‘literally gave substance to this mechanism aimed at coordinating the economic and monetary policies of the 17 EMU member countries’ and was referred to as ‘Mr Euro’. The Eurogroup was enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon, although it remained an informal body and its president has no real power. The ‘soft power’ skills required were perfectly in line with Jean-Claude Juncker’s diplomatic strengths.³ He forged a long-term vision of EMU, steered the response to the sovereign debt crisis and worked to secure a single seat for the eurozone in major international bodies including the IMF and the G20.⁴

In January 2013, looking back over his time in the role, Juncker said ‘We have taken far-reaching decisions. (...) We have stabilised the eurozone, after many people thought in January 2012 that it was heading for collapse. After introducing the European Stability Mechanism and establishing a rescue package for Greece, after adopting the fiscal compact, after finding solutions for the Spanish banking sector, we are now (in January 2013) in a much better situation than we were at the beginning of last year. (...) My method for managing the work of the Eurogroup has been (...) a combination of the inclusive

method, which I particularly value, and the Community method, which does not really exist in the eurozone. Keeping all the eurozone Member States on board takes time; it requires successive reflection adjusted to the expectations of each party, and application of the Community method, because I always wanted to make sure that those that are not in the eurozone do not feel like the “lost children” of Europe. So my method was always inclusive.’⁵

The 2005 Luxembourg Presidency of the Council was an opportunity for Juncker to demonstrate his political prowess: he secured agreement on the reform of the SGP and successfully relaunched the Lisbon Strategy in a drive to strengthen the social and environmental dimensions of European integration. The EU’s eastward enlargement entered a new phase with the official signing of the Treaties of Accession of Romania and Bulgaria on 25 April 2005. Later that year, Luxembourg held a referendum to ratify the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. Following the ‘no’ votes in France and the Netherlands, Juncker lent his active support to the ‘yes’ campaign, which won a majority of votes (56.26%) in the referendum on 10 July 2005.⁶

***Spitzenkandidat* for the European Commission**

Juncker announced his resignation from the Luxembourg government with effect from 11 July 2013, following a scandal in which the national intelligence agency (SREL) was alleged to have illegally maintained files on thousands of citizens. In the parliamentary election on 20 October 2013, although the CSV gained the most votes, a coalition of liberal, socialist and green parties was formed, headed by Xavier Bettel, leader of the Democratic Party (DP).

Juncker subsequently launched his campaign to become President of the European Commission. On 7 March 2014, at the Congress of the European People’s Party (EPP), he became the EPP’s official candidate (*Spitzenkandidat*). When the EPP won the elections (22-25 May 2014), the European Council duly appointed Juncker as the future President of the Commission, and his appointment was confirmed on 15 July 2014 by the European Parliament.

President of the European Commission

The Juncker Commission was in office from 1 November 2014 to 30 November 2019. Juncker's priorities were the digital single market, the development of an Energy Union, negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade Agreement, socially oriented EMU reform, and the 2015-2016 renegotiation of the UK's EU membership.⁷

Notable achievements include the Investment Plan for Europe (the 'Juncker Plan'), which mobilised €500 billion for industrial growth in the EU from 2015 to 2020 following the 2008 crisis. The plan reassured private investors by lowering financial risk through the injection of public capital, boosted the involvement of major corporations in large-scale projects, and provided support for innovative small and medium-sized companies. In 2019, the Juncker Plan was renamed 'InvestEU' and incorporated into the EU's 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework.

Having become Commission President in the midst of the LuxLeaks scandal, Juncker led a reform to end banking secrecy in Europe, which took effect in 2017. He launched the concept of a 'Europe that protects', as detailed in 2016 in his State of the Union address.⁸ Juncker's working style and priorities stimulated more active and open participation in debates, as seen in the 2015 Five Presidents' Report and the 2017 White Paper.

The Juncker Commission came up against several difficulties. The first was the 2015-2016 migration crisis. Despite an agreement with Turkey to curb the influx of migrants to Europe, the Commission was unable to coordinate Member States' policies.⁹ Then there was the historic milestone of Brexit, which took effect in 2020 following the 2016 referendum. Juncker, who described this episode as a 'tragic moment for Europe which goes against our sense of history',¹⁰ was able to harness the unity of the 27 Member States and lay the foundations of a strong agreement for the UK's orderly withdrawal from the EU.

Political historians and analysts consider that ‘the legacy of President Juncker’s mandate remains positive: throughout the numerous crises and geopolitical changes that have taken place since 2014, Europe has continued to make progress and to adopt difficult texts on important subjects. One observes that, over the years, the Commission’s proposals have gained in ingenuity (...): remember the proposals concerning migrant quotas, the creation of a European “Minister” for the economy and finances, or the skill with which it dealt with defence matters, extending to the limits of its powers.’¹¹

European and international recognition

In recognition of his commitment to the European cause, Jean-Claude Juncker has received various international awards, including the Robert Schuman Medal (1991), the Vision for Europe Award from the Fondation du Mérite Européen (1998), the prestigious International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen (2006), the Coudenhove-Kalergi Badge of the Europa-Union Münster (2007), the Gold Medal of the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe (2008), the Collier of the Fondation du Mérite Européen (2010), the Sigillum Magnum from the University of Bologna (2012) and the Innovation in Politics Award from the Innovation in Politics Institute in Vienna (2018).

He is an Honorary Senator of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (2009), an Honorary Member of the Grand Ducal Institute, in the Moral and Political Sciences Section (2007), and an Associate Foreign Member of the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques at the Institut de France. He holds several honorary doctorates from universities around the world. In November 2021, Juncker was elected as President of the Governing Board of the Academy of European Law (ERA), taking over from Jacques Santer, who characterised Juncker as ‘A pure Christian Democrat, inspired by the French personalism of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier, for his humanity and spirit of solidarity.’¹²

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