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What the latest CAP reform tells us about Commission entrepreneurship

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The European Commission's role in EU policymaking is an enduring topic of debate. Stefan Becker draws new insights on the Commission's ability to act as a policy entrepreneur from the most recent negotiations on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

The European Commission is one of the most powerful executive institutions beyond the nation state. It has considerable competences in budgetary, legislative and administrative matters. Yet to what extent the Commission actually shapes EU policymaking remains an open question. Its ability to act as a policy entrepreneur that, according to [John Kingdon](#), invests political resources to push for a specific outcome attracts particular attention. Does the Commission play such a role in EU policymaking and, if so, under what conditions?

Fresh evidence is offered by the latest reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The policy was singled out by the Commission as a central field of action in its [Green Deal communication](#). It later specified that the national plans for the next CAP funding period should reflect the targets of the related [Farm to Fork](#) and [Biodiversity](#) strategies, offer more ambitious instruments (compared to the previous funding period) and be developed under close supervision of the Commission

These calls might not sound too demanding, but the CAP has had a difficult reform history, not least when it comes to [environmental policy integration](#). This latest reform was no exception, and the Commission found it difficult to align the CAP 2023-2027 with the Green Deal. The case offers four central lessons on Commission entrepreneurship.

Lessons from the CAP reform

First, the reform again underlines the importance of the Commission's right of initiative. The legislative proposal for the crucial [Strategic Plan regulation](#) was tabled by the preceding Juncker Commission, roughly 18 months before the new President, Ursula von der Leyen, unveiled the Green Deal. Bereft of a central agenda-setting opportunity, the new Commission struggled to influence the negotiation process. Frans Timmermans, then Vice-President in charge of the Green Deal, briefly threatened to withdraw the proposal if the Council and the Parliament were to veer too far from the Green Deal in their CAP negotiations; however, his President quickly took this option off the table.

This leads to a second lesson, on the consequences of the "heterotemporality" of EU policymaking that [Klaus Goetz has identified](#), with "key policies running on different cycles" (p. 52). Generally, an incoming Commission can and does scrap proposals and cite "discontinuity". It is a viable path for regulatory measures. However, when a policy is tied to the budget cycle, and many (potential) beneficiaries are waiting, an alternative proposal would have to materialise almost immediately. This is hardly realistic, especially for the CAP. Even with the given proposal, the negotiations proved so difficult that the old funding period was extended for two years.

Third, Commission entrepreneurship becomes even more difficult when it can neither find allies for its initiatives nor link the decision-making arena to parallel processes (the importance of these factors has been shown by [Buket Oztas and Amie Kreppel](#) as well as [Isabelle Garzon](#), among others). The Commission could not use its powers in other policy arenas to influence the CAP reform. And while it [had a large number of scientists on its side](#), the Council and the Parliament were not, though the latter was a bit closer to the Commission's position.

However, and this is the fourth lesson, even if the Commission fails to influence legislative decision-making, it can still make an impact on policy in the administrative arena. Almost every dossier requires further implementation measures at European and/or national level, and the CAP requires a lot of them. Notably, the member states had to draw up national plans on [how to spend the CAP 2023-2027 money](#).

As a central actor in this implementation phase, being in charge of both the delegated act on the general content of these national plans and their approval, the Commission seized the opportunity. It put special emphasis on the Green Deal in its country-specific recommendations (issued on the Commission's own initiative) and its observation letters on the member states' draft plans, seeking to frame and steer the plan development process at national level. More importantly, it made the Green Deal part of the plan approval procedure. In doing so, it pushed the boundaries of the procedure in classic entrepreneurial fashion, blending its hard law power to approve the national plans with the soft law of the Green Deal.

Implications for future research

The CAP reform thus further substantiates some conventional wisdom on Commission entrepreneurship: it depends on many factors and is rather unlikely in redistributive and contested policies, at least when it comes to the legislative arena. But the case also shows that, even under such adverse conditions, the Commission can make a difference in the administrative arena. As the EU's growing policy portfolio grants the Commission ever more implementation powers, such entrepreneurship might become more prominent.

After all, the Commission has repeatedly proven to be a "purposeful opportunist", as [Laura Cram has described it](#), pursuing its goals through various channels. And there are good reasons to believe that the Commission will face increasing obstacles in the legislative arena; it might then try to capitalise on its administrative powers even more. This raises not only empirical, but also normative questions. When the Commission uses administrative procedures to pursue its political goals, what does that mean for EU democracy?

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [maRRitch/Shutterstock.com](#)

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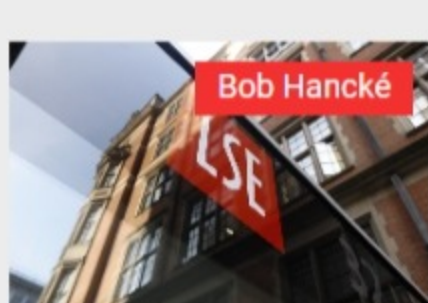
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