

# Despite Luxembourg heading for snap elections, long term political change seems unlikely.

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*Earlier this month, Luxembourg's centre right Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker ended a debate on the parliamentary inquiry on the dysfunctions of the Luxembourgish secret service by calling snap elections, after it became clear that he no longer had the support of his coalition partner, the social democratic party. [Martine Huberty](#) presents the background to this extraordinary event and argues that a deeply ingrained fear of uncertainty and change in the population will probably lead to Juncker becoming his own successor.*



In November 2012, the radio station RTL Luxembourg revealed that Marco Mille, the former Director of the Service de Renseignement de l'Etat (SREL), the Secret Service, had recorded a conversation between himself and the Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker with a watch in January 2007, and that a conversation between the Prime Minister and the Grand Duke had been recorded and burnt onto an encrypted CD during late 2005 or early 2006. This conversation allegedly touched on a series of unresolved bomb attacks in the 1980s and contacts between the Grand Duke and MI6- which would constitute high treason. The SREL, when asked to produce said recordings, argued it did not have any copies. However, a few days later the newspaper *Lëtzebuurger Land* produced a transcript of the conversation between Mille and Juncker. In it, Mille stated that there were around 300 000 individual files in the archives of the SREL, a result of the spying activities during the Cold War – which later was found to be a gross exaggeration. The Press Office of the Grand Duke issued a statement last December that the Grand Duke denied having had any relations with the British Secret Service.

In December 2012, Parliament decided that a parliamentary inquiry should be established, and in January its mandate was enlarged to investigate the missions, organisation and functioning of the SREL. On 10 July 2013, the debate on the report and its implications led to the resignation of Juncker and his government. The structural and other dysfunctions in the SREL that were uncovered have led or may still lead to several criminal investigations. Amongst other things, it was found that the former Director of the Court of Auditors Gérard Reuter had been living in a flat where the rent was paid by the SREL; that there were illegal recordings of conversations between the Prime Minister and Mille and of a meeting between Juncker, then Justice Minister Frieden, and a SREL agent; there were corruption allegations comprising the sale of five SREL cars for private gains and that illegal phone tapping had occurred. Furthermore, it was found that several witnesses contradicted themselves and this may also still have legal consequences. Two disciplinary actions, one against the former SREL Director Mille, and the former chauffeur of Juncker and subsequent SREL agent Roger Mandé, were also recommended by the report.



Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean Claude-Juncker, Credit: EU Council Eurozone(Creative Commons BY NC ND)

The report stated that Juncker knew very well about the world of espionage and the extent of the spying activities of political opponents before he was Prime Minister. It also found that the internal functioning of the SREL was partly defective (there were no clear recruitment procedures, internal regulations were incomplete and not respected, and that the information related to the parliamentary control commission of the SREL was insufficient. A number of SREL operations were also found to have taken place outside the legal framework, and there was a non-communication of facts which may have constituted a crime. Finally, there were serious operational dysfunctions within the SREL which were left without disciplinary actions.

The report concluded that Juncker was politically responsible for these failings. The Greens (déi Gréng), the Liberal Party (DP) and the right wing ADR put forward a motion of no confidence, and the coalition partner (LSAP) also asked the Prime Minister at the end of its intervention to take the political responsibility for the severe dysfunctions within the SREL, and called for anticipated elections.

Juncker's defence was half hearted, and while he conceded to have made a few mistakes he could not recognise any personal responsibility for the failings. He argued that he may not have checked whether his instructions were followed and transposed effectively, as that was not his working method. He further admitted that "the Secret Service was not my priority". Juncker defended himself by saying that suspending the SREL Director and the Director of Operations would have led to a decrease in the levels of information and cooperation with other secret services and that he had not been prepared to take that risk. While his party had voted against the report and stood firmly behind him, in the end he stopped the parliamentary debate by stating he would ask the Grand Duke for anticipated elections the next day.

The last time snap elections were called in Luxembourg was in the late 1960s. Political stability has been the country's trademark and is often used as an argument to attract potential investors. Indeed, since the end of the Second World War the centre right party CSV (Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollékspartei- Christian Social People's Party) has been the major coalition partner bar one brief legislative period in the 1970s. The LSAP and the DP alternated as the smaller coalition partner, resulting often in grand coalitions. The presidentialisation of party politics that has been observed in many countries is combined in Luxembourg with a paternalistic leadership style of the CSV and hence the government (the unofficial motto for the upcoming elections is "We together with the Prime Minister"; in 2009 one of their slogans was "CSV: the secure way" and they organised 8 "Juncker on Tour" events across the country).

While Juncker argues he is "not a martyr", his parliamentary colleagues are now claiming to have been stabbed in

the back by the LSAP. The parties are currently working overtime to set up their election manifestos. The LSAP may start the election campaign with the slogan “a new start”, trying to portray itself as a modernised party with a new leader, Etienne Schneider, who became Minister for the Economy earlier this year. The LSAP may advocate several institutional changes, such as putting a limit on the number of political mandates one person can have (currently MPs are often mayors as well, ministers typically are responsible for more than one department) and limiting the Prime Minister to two terms in office. The Greens’ campaign will be based on “More green, more responsibility”, broadly based on traditional “green” topics such as sustainable economic development, protecting the environment and social policies, while the DP has so far concentrated on the failings of the coalition government. All the parties proclaim it should not be an election campaign based on the qualities and deficiencies of Juncker- however this is doubtful at the moment.

The consequences of this debacle are threefold: first, trust in politicians has decreased but not nearly as much as could be expected; second, it has shown that the CSV has not managed to find and “train” potential successors to Juncker and that the personnel question is more acute than ever; thirdly it has shown that the accusations of a “CSV State” may be partly justified. What is remarkable is the relative calm and tolerance among the population when discussing Juncker’s responsibility. While a majority thinks he is responsible for the failings, they do not want him to leave. This raises serious questions of the understandings of ministerial responsibilities. Juncker is seen as a capable politician who can represent and defend Luxembourg’s national interests in the world. This concern for “capable” politicians overrides the fact that Juncker was not in control of the SREL and despite the failings within the secret service, an organisation who is at least in the perception of many people by its nature shady and operating on the borders of legality at the best of times. Therefore, Juncker should not and cannot be held accountable, according to many people. Furthermore, a whole generation has grown up knowing only him as PM. He has been in government since 1982 and PM since 1995. Luxembourg’s political culture can therefore be described as predominantly subject rather than participant.

Another reason for being so “understanding” is that the CSV has built for so long on Juncker’s charisma that no one is imaginable as his successor. Finance Minister Frieden has been discredited as he just survived a vote of no confidence on the question of hindering judiciary proceedings in the bomb attacks court case a few weeks earlier. The other high profile candidates within the CSV are loyal followers and none has the charisma or expertise to take over. Therefore, it was without a second’s hesitation that the CSV announced on 11 July that Juncker would lead the election campaign. Thirdly, the whole affair has exposed what has been described as the “CSV State”- an administration in which party affiliates have been strategically placed to ensure the interests and preferences of the CSV. This can be evidenced through the revelations of large scale espionage of civil society movements, such as the Greens, the ecological movement, the women’s liberation movement, the human rights league and many others before 1990. On the other hand, the way Juncker gave preferential treatment to his chauffeur and did not act on the substantial evidence of illegal activities that were brought to his attention also show that there are serious failings in the control and supervision of the civil service under his and previous CSV Prime Ministers.

The campaign will start officially a month before the elections on 20 October. Luxembourg operates under the system of obligatory voting; therefore turnout will be high (previously around 90 per cent) and cannot be used as an indication of the salience of the elections. It is highly probable that the CSV will lose a few votes after the extraordinary 2009 results (26 seats out of 60), and that the LSAP will gain a few (13 out of 60 in 2009). Two possibilities exist: 1) the CSV gets the most votes and can choose a coalition partner, either the LSAP again or the DP – none of which will be easy after the debacle 2) LSAP, DP and the Greens form a rainbow coalition against the CSV with the LSAP candidate as Prime Minister – considering the differences between the parties, it is clear that any coalition negotiations will be long and protracted, that the government will be unstable and decisions reduced to the smallest common denominator. The first scenario is the most likely, but it has been argued that the LSAP had wanted to get out of the coalition for a year because of disagreements on structural and social reforms and the speed of certain reforms, making neither of these two outcomes particularly desirable. This is the reason why the question “Was it worth it?” was asked by political commentators the day Juncker presented his resignation to the Grand Duke.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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