

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2019

*REPORT*

## WHO IS RUNNING FOR THE BERLAYMONT?

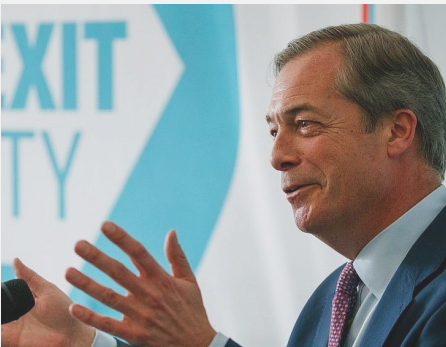
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# Background



The 2019 European elections were presented to the wider public as an unprecedented event, which would mark the history of Europe and determine the emergence of new political forces. For better or worse, these promises were not disregarded by the electoral turnout.

**The vote resulted in a fragmented assembly**, which sees a heavily diminished number of seats for the “ruling” parties. The centre-left (Socialists&Democrats, S&D) and centre-right (European People's Party, EPP) parties have both lost a considerable number of seats.

On the other hand, **new political forces have emerged**: the Liberals (former ALDE, currently "Renew Europe"- RE), strengthened by the support of Emmanuel Macron's *La République En Marche*, are now a determining group in the composition of a new majority at the European Parliament. The Greens and Matteo Salvini's “sovereigntist” alliance also gained a considerable number of seats: Matteo Salvini's party (Lega) is the second largest national party in the European Parliament, after Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

**The new Parliament, as well as the differences between the Member States in the European Council, do not ease the process of selecting a Commission President with broad political consensus.**

*This report suggests a number of candidates for the EU Executive top job, indicating their points of strength and the difficulties they might face to be appointed President of the European Commission*

## The Spitzenkandidat process

The *Spitzenkandidat* or “lead candidate” process is a procedure whereby European political parties nominate a candidate for the role of Commission President ahead of the European elections. According to this mechanism, the most voted party would be entitled to choose its *Spitzenkandidat* for the European Commission's Presidency. According to the European Parliament, this process ensures that European citizens can know who could lead the European Commission before the electoral results. This system was first used in 2014 and resulted in the election of Jean Claude Juncker. Although the European Parliament reiterated its willingness to re-use the process in a report, the European Council, the institution which nominates a President of the Commission (then voted by the Parliament), rejected an automatic application of this mechanism.

# The *Spitzenkandidat*



**Manfred Weber** was chosen by the European People's Party (EPP) as their designated candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission. Member of the European Parliament since 2004, he moved up in the parliamentary ranks without having any role in national governmental politics, eventually becoming chair of the EPP after the 2014 elections.

Although his Political group won the most seats overall in the European Parliament, Weber's appointment as President of the European Commission is not certain. Several elements could hinder his nomination, such as:

1) The **Treaties**: the Treaty on the European Union only vaguely refers to a President "elected" by the European Parliament, but there is no reference to this process. The *spitzenkandidat* process was used successfully only once and is not legitimised by the European Council, which has a determining role in the appointment of the European Commission's President.

2) **Member States, where Manfred Weber struggles most to find full support**. Considering that the EU Heads of State and Government have to propose a name to the European Parliament before the nomination, it is unlikely that this name would be the EPP Chair. Weber's nomination could get the political support of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel but could be opposed by other important Member States such as France. Other governments could oppose as well, as Mr. Weber has never served as a head of state or government (something that is quite uncommon in the EU Commission's election praxis).

3) The **European Parliament. Not all the groups gave legitimacy to the *spitzenkandidat* process**. The liberals, for instance, disavowed this Parliamentary practice and did not nominate a lead candidate ahead of the EU elections. Taking into consideration that the group's success after the recent vote, Renew Europe's say on this process could have a stronger political weight. Opposition to his nomination would come also from the left side of the Parliament, where many argued Weber failed to act against the Hungarian Fidesz party and its leader, Viktor Orban. On 20 June, an official from the liberals noted that there is no majority in the European Parliament for Weber at the moment .

**The determinism of the lead candidate process is therefore far from obvious**. The particular political situation of 2019 compared to 2014 elections, as well as the emergence of the most fragmented European Parliament ever, certainly will not help the race of the German politician for the top EU job.

# The Social-Diplomat

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*Frans Timmermans is the outgoing First Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Better Regulation, Inter-institutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Before joining the European Commission, Timmermans was a renowned diplomat, politician and Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands.*

Timmermans ran for the European Parliament elections as a lead candidate for the Socialist&Democrats. Although he had a leading role in the Juncker European Commission (EPP), he proposed a "shift to the left" during the last campaign, advocating for a new Social Contract for Europe and for a minimum wage in every EU member State. The S&D Group arrived second at the European elections, and Timmermans' national party won the most votes in the Netherlands.

At the **European Parliament**, the Dutch politician would be supported by the S&D Group. Furthermore, many environmentalists welcomed the "green" political campaign of Timmermans, who has also been in charge of the EU's commitment to the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is difficult to know, at this stage, whether this could get him the support of the Greens in the European Parliament, who have risen in numbers after the last elections.

Some **Member States at the Council could also push for his nomination**. Namely, Sanchez's Spain, where Mr. Timmermans has broad support, and Malta, who officially gave its endorsement to the S&D candidate.

However, at the **European Parliament**, being the leader of the second biggest force does not raise the probability of his appointment. Since Timmermans legitimised the *spitzenkandidat* process by being himself as a lead candidate for the S&D, his nomination could break his commitment towards this practice.

At the **Member State level**, gathering a broad consensus on a socialist candidate would be almost impossible. The broad majority of the governments composing the European Council are centre-right or far-right parties. Therefore, Timmermans remains an outside choice.

**Despite his reputation in the EU and national institutional environment, the possible lack of support both at the European Parliament and at the European Council does not lend support to his chances for the Presidency of the European Commission.** This is why many think that **he could be the next EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**. On the other hand, his experience and his personal influence in the EU decision-making system should not be underestimated .

# The Iron Lady



***Margerethe Vestager** is the European Commissioner for Competition since 2014, after 13 years as a Member of the Danish Parliament and Danish Minister of Economy and Interior. During the European elections, she was appointed by her party as one of the seven members of the "team Europe", a group of lead candidates chosen by the ALDE group. As EU Commissioner for Competition, Vestager was appreciated for her temperament throughout various antitrust and competition battles, which made her popular inside and outside the EU institutions.*

**There are many factors in favour of the election of Margarethe Vestager as a President of the European Commission.** The first is political. "Renew Europe", her political Group, has now a greater bargaining power than in 2014, as the votes of the EPP and S&D, alone, cannot compose a majority anymore. The second reason is related to national politics. Despite not being from the same party as Vestager, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the current Danish Prime Minister, has pushed for the Competition Commissioner to succeed Juncker in the European Commission's Presidency. The third reason is related to many elements of novelty behind her nomination. Vestager would be the first woman ever leading the European Commission, coming from a party that does not belong to the former EPP-S&D coalition (even though she should seek the endorsement of the two parties to get a majority vote).

**The path for the Presidency of the European Commission is full of pitfalls even for Ms. Vestager. Many issues might impede the success of her appointment, such as:**

- 1) The peculiar **role of Denmark** in the European Union *acquis*. Despite being a Member State, Denmark enjoys a certain degree of autonomy in many policy areas given by some sensitive opt-out clauses. Some examples include the adoption of the euro and the participation to the EU foreign policy when defence is concerned. Therefore, giving the role of President of the Commission to a Danish candidate would not be easy for some EU member states.
- 2) The **role of Emmanuel Macron** in the appointment of a liberal leader for the Presidency of the European Commission. The relationship between the Competition Commissioner and the French President is not as good as in the last years. The main issue would concern Vestager's decision to block a merger between France's Alstom and Germany's Siemens.
- 3) The **spitzenkandidat process** itself. The EPP, in this regard, have declared that her nomination is "out of the question". Convincing the former EPP-S&D coalition to forego the European Commission's Presidency would require significant political manoeuvring.

# The Outsider

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*Michel Barnier is serving as the European Chief Negotiator for the United Kingdom Exiting the European Union since the 2016 referendum results. He has been Minister in France and member of the French National Assembly many times before being appointed special adviser to the former President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso. His European career continued under the following mandate under Barroso's Commission, as he was appointed Commissioner for Internal Market and Services.*

**As a Chief Brexit Negotiator, Barnier managed to successfully unify the position of the 27 EU Member States.** Nonetheless, it is worth reminding that despite mutual efforts from both sides, a post-Brexit deal has not been reached yet.

Although Barnier did not campaign for the EPP nomination as a *spitzenkandidat*, some argue that the French politician has conducted his personal “shadow campaign” to eventually position himself as a compromise solution. Most importantly, Barnier had the semi-official endorsement of Emmanuel Macron, who openly contested the legitimacy of the *spitzenkandidat* process. Some suggest France could endorse Barnier in order to bargain the Presidency of the European Commission with the Presidency of the European Central Bank, which would be left to a German candidate. Other EU member states, such as Ireland, might also back the nomination of the Brexit Chief Negotiator to support their post-Brexit interests.

**Even though Barnier has some allies inside and outside the European Union's political system, his nomination would not be welcomed smoothly in the main EU institutions:**

At the **European Parliament**, he could meet the opposition from the EPP and the S&D, the two major parties conducting the electoral campaign with a *spitzenkandidat*. Even some of the Liberals in "Renew Europe" might oppose his nomination. Although the political group did not designate one lead candidate, ALDE opted for a different endorsement towards a group of prominent political personalities ahead of the European Elections. The so-called RE/ALDE's “team Europe” include, among others, Guy Verofstadt, Emma Bonino and Margarethe Vestager.

At the **Council of the European Union**, an agreement on Barnier would also be very difficult for many Member States, including Angela Merkel's Germany.

Considering the above, obtaining the Presidency of the European Commission will not be easy for the French politician.

# Conclusions

*This report discusses the main reasons behind the possible choice or rejection of the main candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission. At this stage, both Member States and the European Parliament are negotiating internally to find the broadest agreement on a nomination. Conclusions thus far include:*

- Fragmentation in the European Parliament will not ease the job of finding a broad consensus, nor help the Parliament's claims for the respect of the *spitzenkandidat* process. Moreover, it seems this procedure is being disregarded even in the Parliament, as the winner *spitzenkandidat* is not supported by the other main political parties at the moment;
- In the European Council, the task of finding a suitable name could be equally difficult. Even though a consensus on the appointment of the President of the European Commission has been usually found by unanimity, new eurosceptic governments might not agree on the choices of most Member States. The 20 June European Council emphasised the lack of agreement on the main candidates. Even though the main options are still on the table, this situation might lead to the proposal of alternative candidates by the end of June.

Moreover, the incumbent exit of the UK from the European Union, which is scheduled for 31 October at the latest, might also slow down the process. All these factors might impact on the next Commission's legislative agenda and on the equilibrium between the institutions. Not to mention that uncertainty might lead to the discarding of the most probable nominations, leaving room for other outside political candidates.

## About Lighthouse Europe

*Lighthouse Europe, LHE, is a consultancy that specialises in European strategies and public affairs. LHE helps clients to understand and react to the impact of European and national legislation on their businesses, and allows them to participate in decision-making processes.*

## About Rosario Parise

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