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‘Too German, too Western European’

Uwe Optenhögel on the selection of the EU’s top brass and the consequences for the Union’s ability to act

Read this interview in German.

The EU’s heads of state and government have nominated Ursula von der Leyen as the new President of the European Commission. They also made suggestions for the other top jobs. What does this say about the state of democracy in Europe?

The European elections made the EU’s democratic image shine in new splendour. The significant increase in turnout showed that Europe matters to people. They are aware that many of the problems they face can only be resolved at European rather than national level. Yet now, the arduous candidate-selection process and its surprising outcome in the European Council threaten to overshadow this democratic ray of light, at least in the eyes of the German public. Voters in the countries where the *Spitzenkandidaten* for Commission President came from may feel ignored and overlooked because none of those candidates were proposed. However, that remains a very German perception of events.

In what way?

The *Spitzenkandidaten* process was a German-Luxembourgian invention by Martin Schulz and Jean Claude Juncker in the last EU elections. It was intended to give the Commission President, who should come from the European Parliament, additional democratic legitimacy and the Parliament greater influence in the European institutional structure. But in Germany, we often conveniently overlook that this principle had never been established in European law, and has never really been accepted by the states of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. People from these countries didn’t go to the polls in increased numbers because there were these lead candidates, but because they saw Europe as a good and important thing.

The Council didn't apply the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle when nominating people this time round. However, that certainly doesn't mean that these proposals were made undemocratically. 28 democratically elected heads of state and government agreed unanimously on a line-up – with, ironically enough, the Germans abstaining. The process not easy and it needs tough negotiations. But that's normal and has nothing to do with back rooms. It all ends up with a classic democratic outcome: a compromise.

So the question is not so much whether the European top brass were selected democratically, but rather whether the unanimously agreed compromise is politically viable enough to hold together an EU riven by internal conflicts and to meet the huge challenges that Europe faces.

To what extent could the proposed line-up deepen the rift in the continent?

Two major fault lines have emerged in the EU in the past ten years: a socio-economic one relating to austerity policy and one relating to identity politics, including the issue of migration and minority rights. It's questionable that the presented list of nominations can do much to bridge or remove these fault lines. This is already apparent from the way it came about. It's the outcome of a near-failure of the summit at which the heads of state and government only managed to find a last-minute solution. It's certainly not the outcome of long-term deliberations by skilled strategists and decision-makers. Ultimately, this gives the impression that the Council rolls the dice until the right numbers come up. With the public seeing things this way, the EU should consider whether it wants to stick with this process for selecting its top brass.

The line-up is not a viable compromise for bringing Europe back together. It's too German and Western European for that. The personnel could easily have been recruited from the EU of 12 member states back in 1986. The line-up is regionally imbalanced: there's neither someone from Northern Europe nor anyone from Central-East or South-East Europe.

What are the risks here?

There is a dual risk with regards to the Eastern member states: firstly, the social-liberal democratic movements in Central and Eastern Europe, under pressure from authoritarian governments at home, feel unrepresented. Secondly, the current proposal plays straight into the hands of the right-wing populists throughout Europe, especially in the Visegrad Group. The long-established bogeyman can remain in place:

unpopular decisions from Brussels can continue to be blamed on the fact that the key positions in the EU are held by the long-standing members from the West that don't understand developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, they lay the blame for their own mistakes at the door of the 'Brussels elite'.

We can be doubtful whether the EU can cope with this, given the as yet incomplete transformation in Central Europe. The established and enduring autocratic tendencies in some countries do express this incomplete and, in many areas, unjust and unequal transformation into a democracy and a market economy. Many people in the region are clearly struggling to buy into a shared European identity.

Yet the current line-up has a further potential that the autocrats may not like: the tendency towards a multi-speed EU – eurozone, Schengen, migration, defence – could intensify, maybe even in the direction of a 'core EU'. This is a central fear of the new members from the East, but it would also force the hand of other countries. However, several key member states would welcome a drive to more rapid integration.

If the proposals go through, the Commission and the European Central Bank would be in German and French hands. What signal would that send?

It's somewhat ironic that the oft-cited Franco-German axis, having almost ground to a halt after the ill-considered German response to President Macron's reform proposals, is now back in the driving seat with the Council's nominations. However, the two governments failed to deliver in the European elections, suffering heavy defeats. But this didn't impress the heads of state and government in the Council, their decision showed an astonishing degree of realism: for them, France and Germany should be seen to take responsibility for the decisions they take anyways. Hence the willingness to propose Ursula von der Leyen and Christine Lagarde for the EU's two top jobs.

It has long been clear in Brussels that nothing happens without the Germans. And the French are needed in key policy areas such as the reform of the eurozone and defence. Although it may not go down well in Berlin, Germany is regarded as the hegemon on account of its economic strength – and not necessarily as a benevolent one like the Americans after World War II. Rather, in recent years the Germans have increasingly been perceived as committed to their own interests. Many feel that the EU is turning into a German Europe rather than a European Germany.

What does this development mean for France?

If the Council's proposal gets the nod, the biggest winner is likely to be the French president, who constructed the deal. Ms von der Leyen would be a weak candidate, at least at the start of her term. She owes her surprise nomination to the Council – and Macron – and will have to make far-reaching concessions to the European Parliament if she wants to be confirmed at all. And backing from home is likely to be limited even in the ranks of her own party – many will be happy when she's gone. On top of that, this week's hearings with von der Leyen and the different political groups in the European Parliament already showed that it will be difficult for her to secure enough support.

By contrast, Christine Lagarde is a successful IMF reformer, an institution long hated in Europe. She is an international economist who should run the ECB well, and may be more willing to bear financial and currency-related risks jointly. So it may be that the new constellation at the top of the EU gives President Macron some of the things that German politicians have hitherto refused him in their self-referential and ordoliberal economic approach.

The European Parliament has to approve the nomination. Ms von der Leyen is already canvassing support. Can this decision still be thwarted?

The Parliament has lost its battle with the Council. It should admit that this defeat is largely self-inflicted. At an early stage, the Parliament stipulated that it would elect only one of the lead candidates as Commission President. But none of the lead candidates got a majority in the Parliament, and efforts to build one have failed. If the parties had agreed on a joint candidate after the elections and before the summit, it would have been hard for the Council to refuse. The Parliament's difficulty in presenting a joint candidate is a reflection of the delicate new power situation. In 2014, all it took was an agreement between the EPP and the S&D group. Before the elections, lead candidates Schulz and Juncker each pledged to support the other in the event of a victory. In the new Parliament, it would take a broader coalition of parties, including Liberals and Greens, to create a majority.

However, this was a long way from becoming reality, largely due to the EPP's nomination of Manfred Weber. They nominated a candidate regarded as too lightweight even in his own ranks: they overestimated the group's power and underestimated the role of the heads of state and government. Even many of the conservative ones declined to support Weber. Although the social democrats put forward an outstanding candidate, Frans Timmermans, they failed to secure a majority in the Parliament for him, too.

What else can the Parliament do now?

Ursula von der Leyen has already set up a lobby office in Brussels because she knows she's by no means certain of a majority in Parliament. The EU's representation of the people could still counter the Council's proposal with a candidate of its own. However, this would require two of the three biggest groups to change their current position, which is unlikely to happen.

The Parliament can also reject the Council's proposal on grounds of principle. Then the candidate merry-go-round would start all over again. But doing this without its own candidate could be interpreted as irresponsible and destructive. The smartest thing the Parliament can do in this situation: not to choose the sullen path of rejection, but to use the short time until mid-July to extract as many concessions as possible from a weak candidate like von der Leyen.

This is about more than procedural issues. The Parliament could secure a firm grip on the EU's agenda on topics such as climate policy, digital issues and tax policy. After all, what's currently on the table is meagre fare. It's time to take the opportunity to give the Parliament's rights a long-term boost. The Council's candidate could be asked to grant the Parliament the right of initiative. That would enable the European Parliament finally to initiate legislation itself.

In addition, an agreement could be reached to establish the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle for the next elections. And this should be supplemented by transnational party lists, which would complete the process. This would also require the member states to make concessions that they were previously unwilling to accept. But now, it's their responsibility to help von der Leyen to achieve a majority in the Parliament. That's why the recent defeat has by no means killed off the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle. It could rise again, even stronger, at the next election on the basis of transnational lists.

This interview was conducted by Michael Bröning.



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