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European Parliament vs Macron

Macron's quarrel with the European Parliament is just the symptom of a bigger power play about Europe's future

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This summer, the scramble for the EU's top jobs was already underway in Brussels when, all of a sudden, someone who was not a *Spitzenkandidat* became President of the European Commission. And Ursula von der Leyen could count on the help of French President Emmanuel Macron to achieve that.

Later on, the Legal Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (EP) rejected Hungary's and Romania's Commissioner candidates – citing conflict of interest. That was new: the EP's committees only have this kind of authority since a rule change in 2016. Next, Sylvie Goulard, a long-standing high-ranking Member of European Parliament (MEP) herself, didn't pass muster for the new Parliament either – on ethical grounds.

Shortly after his candidate was rejected, French President Macron made a strange comment: Would Ursula von der Leyen be kind enough to secure a parliamentary majority with EP President David Sassoli *before* the nomination of another French candidate? Macron appears to make the new Commission's weal and woe dependent on a manipulated Parliament: an interesting interpretation – to put it mildly – of the role of the elected chamber of citizens in staffing the Commission.

At the most recent EU summit, France then vetoed opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania – a move which was heavily criticised throughout Europe. The local partners are extremely disappointed. After all, the EP has been calling for negotiations to begin for years. But saying 'No' seems to be in vogue: Is a showdown in Brussels approaching? It looks as if the future of Europe will also be decided along the line European Parliament vs Macron. And we'll soon witness the contest's second round, as von der Leyen approved Macron's new Commissioner-designate Thierry Breton this week, who will then have to be confirmed again by Parliament.

A healthy democracy

For the first time since it was directly elected in 1979, something resembling 'coalition talks' were held in the EP. Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens conducted intensive talks about a possible common working programme. Such cross-faction discussion hasn't really happened before.

As we know, however, those talks did not suffice to get Manfred Weber or Frans Timmermanns elected Commission President. Yet breaking with the principle of choosing a *Spitzenkandidat* to head the Commission doesn't leave the EP as a weak institution with a bunch of hurt egos. In fact, it rather shows a collection of self-confident factions who recognise their strength when they all pull together.

Without understanding this dynamic, the blatant rejection of Macron's candidate Sylvie Goulard makes no sense. According to widepread spin, insulted puppet masters in the EP attacked the French President for personal reasons. However, that overlooks a crucial aspect: *Every French opposition* party strenuously argued against Sylvie Goulard too. While framing the rejection as a top-down decision by powerful MEPs may look good to the media, 61 per cent of the factions are newcomers who are strengthening their internal opinion-forming processes and acting with increasing self-assurance. French voices were of course heard and respected.

The potential for conflict between the European Council and the European Parliament is growing. Therefore, great tact is needed.

The EP has always been a consensus-seeking body. Every day, cross-party negotiations are conducted between more than 180 national parties. What is depicted as an extraordinary showdown in the Council of Europe is part of daily life in Brussels and Strasbourg. The main difference: the Parliament generally finds an agreement – in the interest of Europe. It's no surprise that many MEPs like Delara Burkhardt are increasingly pillorying the Council as an institution and pointing to its obvious dysfunctionality.

The real reason for MEPs' growing antipathy toward Macron, who started out as a pro-European Messiah, is due to diametrically opposed views of the institutional framework. Whether it concerns the eurozone budget, EU enlargement or the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, Macron considers the Council – and not the EP – in charge of everything. So he's busy concentrating power and competences there.

This is normal for the leader of a strong, centralist presidential democracy. It is also perfectly legitimate to try to use the European arena for national successes. Macron is not the only one who cloaks his national interests in harmonious pro-European rhetoric. The current French government appears to feel very much at home with heads of state and government and indeed, negotiations among 27 partners give Macron a strong position without any national veto players crossing his way. Pragmatic solutions first, parliamentary democracy second.

A new wind in Brussels

Macron's approach, however, clashes with the self-perception of most MEPs who have fought long and hard to gain influence and positions of authority. They claim to represent European – not national – interests. The increased voter turnout in 2019 primarily strengthened the EP as an institution – and resulted in the youngest, most female peoples' representation to date. A glance at German representatives reveals no grandfathers. Instead, there are many ambitious, eager newcomers and some experienced veterans who still want to make their mark in politics.

So where else is friction more likely than with the Council, which for years has provoked lots of disputes between member states – and developed few solutions? Anyone for whom EU politics has become too technocratic can't fail to see that it is reviving debate about basic democratic issues. Of course, in order to gain general acceptance, both European and national perspectives are needed. The next five years are likely to see greater efforts to find the right balance between intergovernmentalism and parliamentarisation. How will the growing politicisation play out for the EP in competition with the Council? This is an open question and the centrepiece of the institutional conflicts to come.

The recent record numbers of voters in the European elections will be celebrated in soapbox speeches for years to come. It definitely boosted the EP's confidence. So it's entirely possible that neither 'Mr Green Deal' Frans Timmermanns nor the guardian of competition Margarete Vestager will be key commissioner in Ursula von der Leyen's new 'college'. Instead, it could well be Maros Sefkovic, her right hand for institutional relations.

The potential for conflict between the European Council and the European Parliament is growing. Therefore, great tact is needed. The EP is sure it has a strong role. So is Macron. In this respect, nothing is likely to change. A new – rawer – wind is blowing in Brussels and Strasbourg.

That's why it is high time to air out the Council's intergovernmental corridors and let one or two presidential delusions be blown out.



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