

**POLICY POSITION** 04.07.2019

## European Parliament: Time to move on

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With their package for the EU top jobs, member states asserted control of the process on Tuesday evening: If they have their way, the European Parliament should elect Ursula von der Leyen as President of the Commission. The European Council has thus submitted a proposal to Parliament which the latter wanted to avoid at all costs: The Strasbourg MEPs had committed themselves to voting only for a Spitzenkandidat who had campaigned before the election. But von der Leyen was not a Spitzenkandidat of a European party. Indeed, her name never appeared in the election campaign as an option for Europe's most important office.

### Parliament did not deliver

A significant amount of the blame for this situation lies with Parliament. Both large groups, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, have in recent weeks been parading the Spitzenkandidaten principle around like a monstrosity. But the process does not work in the abstract - it would have required Parliament to agree on both a programme and a suitable candidate in order to present the European Council with a fait accompli. This was the case in 2014, when then-Spitzenkandidaten Martin Schulz and Jean-Claude Juncker made clear before the election that they would support each other in the event of victory.

Everyone in Brussels knew that the governments of member states would do everything they could to prevent precisely that, in order to divide Parliament and regain control over the nomination of the Commission presidency. Everyone knew about the July 2 deadline - the date of the first session of the new Parliament and the election of its President. And yet Parliament did not manage to rally behind one person before then. Instead, Social Democrats and Liberals quickly made clear that the conservative Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber was simply not a suitable candidate for them. This is a perfectly valid opinion to hold – but this kind of apodictic statement made it much easier for the Council to get its way. The fact that the EPP group also sent no signals of being open to a candidate other than Weber did the rest. As a result, the member states felt strong enough to pull Ursula von der Leyen out of their hat and formally propose her to Parliament.

## Take control of the policy agenda

The European Parliament now has only three options:

First, Parliament could try to defy the Council and oppose von der Leyen with a candidate of its own. That would require a broad majority for one of the Spitzenkandidaten – for example for Margrethe Vestager, who is arguably the least damaged candidate at this point. But two of the three largest groups would have to jump and abandon their own candidate to form such a majority. The experience of recent weeks gives little cause for hope.

Second, Parliament could simply reject von der Leyen on principle and insist on the Spitzenkandidaten process. But then what comes next? The rejection in principle would also apply to all other potential candidates, from Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier to World Bank CEO Kristalina Georgieva. Without an own candidate, this would be a purely destructive approach without a clear way out.

But there is a third possibility: Parliament has lost the battle over the Spitzenkandidaten – but it can still secure control over the EU's policy agenda. It should use the next two weeks to negotiate with Ursula von der Leyen as hard as it can. The strategic agenda adopted by the member states last week is so anaemic that Parliament can now set the real course.

These negotiations should not only revolve around content such as climate change and the EU budget, but also around how the rights of the Parliament can be strengthened in the future. A first important step would be for the new Commission President to give Parliament a real right of initiative from day one of her term in office. In addition, it should be clearly agreed that in the future, the results of the European elections must be decisive for the selection of the Commission President. Otherwise, the next time around, we will once again be talking about decreasing rather than increasing voter turnout. The Member States must also be prepared to make far-reaching concessions for this - it is now also their responsibility to help von der Leyen achieve a majority.

## A sensible way forward

If von der Leyen does not make meaningful concessions to Parliament in the negotiations, Parliament can still reject her. As in any negotiation, the credible threat of terminating talks if necessary is now of critical importance – but not for reasons of principle, but for reasons of substance. But anyone who announces now that they will not vote for von der Leyen under any circumstances loses the opportunity to commit her to an ambitious agenda.

What's more, the overall personnel package as it stands is not bad. Europe would certainly have no reason to hide with a team of von der Leyen, Frans Timmermans, Margrethe Vestager and Josep Borell at the head of the Commission. Christine Lagarde as President of the European Central Bank would ensure that the ECB lives up to its responsibility for the stability and integrity of the euro area. To put it mildly, it could have been worse.

The past few days have not been a good look for Europe. The impression that the European Council rolls the dice until things fit, sometimes burning very good candidates, was as bad as it was avoidable. That does not mean, however, that we cannot move on in a sensible way now. Parliament should counter the poor image of the Council with a show of responsibility and foresight. It is a sign of maturity and not of weakness to occasionally admit defeat.