

## Weber withdraws from Maastricht debate

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News

The EPP's Spitzenkandidat will miss the Maastricht debate with his rivals for the European Commission presidency due to a "scheduling conflict".



*Photo credit: EPP Group*

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EPP leader Manfred Weber has defended his decision not to participate in a showpiece Spitzenkandidat debate on Monday.

The German MEP, and EPP choice for the Commission presidency, was invited to join other Spitzenkandidaten in a discussion taking place in Maastricht but has withdrawn, citing "other commitments".

It means the live, 90-minute showdown will go ahead without the man representing Parliament's biggest group.

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Under the Spitzenkandidaten process, the choice of Parliament's biggest group to emerge after the European elections on 23-26 May should be "taken into account" in deciding who succeeds Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President.

Juncker, in the last European-wide poll, was the EPP choice and went on to head the Commission during what have been particularly turbulent times for the EU over the last five years.

The decision by Weber not to take part in the debate has been condemned by the newly-formed Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) whose candidate, Czech MEP Jan Zahradil, will be among those lining up in a five-strong panel in the historic Dutch city.

Ahead of Monday's keenly-awaited debate, an ACRE source told this magazine the debate was "widely expected" to be one of the main events between the Commission presidency candidates, and the question as to why Weber pulled out was a "hot topic."

He said, "No one believes the official reason given for pulling out of one of the main debates – a scheduling conflict – and there are numerous theories and rumours as to the real reason.

"There are two popular theories. The first theory, called the 'coward rumour', is that he's regarded as a weak debater compared to other lead candidates and therefore he's pulling out of the debate to avoid the embarrassment of losing" **ACRE source**

"There are two popular theories. The first theory, called the 'coward rumour', is that he's regarded as a weak debater compared to other lead candidates and therefore he's pulling out of the debate to avoid the embarrassment of losing."

Another theory, he said, was that the EPP "intentionally is preparing to downgrade the Spitzenkandidaten process in order to pave the way for a non-Spitzenkandidat to replace Juncker."

The source said the event is a chance for each candidate to outline their policies and "vision for Europe."

He added, "Whatever the truth is, the largest party in the parliament will not be represented. In the main debate of the campaign – and some still wonder why voters are not eager to vote."

A spokesman for Weber, said, "Manfred Weber will not be able to take part in the debate today due to an important longstanding commitment in Germany."

"Today a big reception and symposium for the 80th birthday of Theo Waigel, former Chairman of the

CSU, prominent former Minister of Finance and a key figure in the creation of the Euro and German Unification, will be celebrated.”

He added, “It is good to stress that on Thursday, Mr Weber will take part in the Florence debate, where the other lead candidates will be present as well.”

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According to organisers of the Maastricht debate, the candidates will “focus on concerns of students and young people across Europe, many of whom will be voting for the first time.”

He added, “We invited all the political parties to send a Spitzenkandidat to take part. The decision of which Spitzenkandidat to send was made by the political parties.”

Weber, 45, was elected an MEP in 2004 and has been EPP leader since 2014, the year when the Spitzenkandidaten process was first used.

Others taking part in the Maastricht debate are Commission vice president Frans Timmermans, the Socialist candidate, Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout, one of two choices put forward by the Greens, Belgian deputy Guy Verhofstadt, from ALDE’s “Team Europe,” and Violeta Tomic, the candidate for the Party of European Left.

A third and final debate between the candidates, including Weber, will be take in Parliament on 15 May.

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