

Smart, strong and safe: A Europe for the future

Written by The Parliament Magazine on 17 May 2019 in Interviews
Interviews

As EPP Spitzenkandidat, Manfred Weber believes Europe needs to become more political and more democratic if it is to rebuild trust and get closer to its citizens.



Manfred Weber | Photo credit: EPP Group

As Spitzenkandidat for the European People's Party, what do you believe are the key strengths that make you a suitable Commission president?

The next President of the European Commission will need to reconnect with people and their concerns. As Group leader of the EPP in the European Parliament, I have travelled all around Europe, learned about the different perspectives and integrated these experiences into a European narrative for the future. This is important, because Europe needs to become increasingly political, democratic and connected to its people. This has been a fundamental element in my work since I was young, and I believe that it is the only way we will regain trust of people in these times of growing fragmentation and uncertainty.

How do you respond to criticisms that, compared to previous commission presidents, you lack political experience outside of the European parliament?

We need to stop treating European democracy as something different and separate to national democracy. Nobody asks a list leader of the biggest party after a national election whether he or she has executive experience, so why do we do so on the European level? Besides, as EPP Group leader, I gained in-depth knowledge of the various political realities in Europe, something I think that the next Commission President will need more than ever.

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The elections will, of course, be fought on local/national issues. However, what key Pan-European issues will dominate and what are the EPP’s priorities?

As EPP candidate, if I am elected President of the European Commission my priority will be to build a strong and protective Europe, one that is smart and innovative but is also kind. In other words, a Europe that takes care of its citizens. It will also be a Europe that is strong, a Europe that protects its borders from illegal immigration and from smugglers and human traffickers through 10,000 new European Border and Coast Guards by 2022. It will be a Europe that fights terrorism and organised crime with a European FBI, where joint investigative teams share information to catch terrorists before they attack. It is a Europe that puts a stop to accession talks with Turkey.

“For the future of Europe, what happens in the centre of the political landscape in the European Parliament, not on the extremes, is what will be crucial”

A smart Europe means pooling all our talents, knowledge and resources to address what really makes a difference in citizens’ lives, such as launching a European masterplan to join forces in the fight against cancer. It means developing smart homes for seniors where they can continue to live close to their families while remaining independent. I will create a Europe that is kind, where a new Digital Transition Fund - financed in part by a new Digital Fair Tax that ensures that the internet giants contribute their fair share - helps protect all our workers from being left behind when digital disruptions occur in the labour market. This will be a Europe where we preserve our values and make the EU a role model for the rest of the world by enforcing a global ban on child labour; no one should be allowed to exploit children’s innocence to make a profit.

How will you counter the messages of the growing number of populist Eurosceptic parties and do you see Matteo Salvini’s new grouping as posing a serious threat?

It has a sense of déjà vu. In 2014, everyone was talking about the new right-wing groups in the Parliament; we should not make the same mistake again. For the future of Europe, what happens in the centre of the political landscape in the European Parliament, not on the extremes, is what will be

crucial. In my eyes, a political group is not only about sharing the same meeting room or being in the same part of the building, it means you share a common programme. I don't see this kind of agreement happening between the extreme right or extreme left, not on the economy, not on migration nor, for example, on relations with Russia.

As the favourite to win the presidency, what will be your key priorities as Commission chief?

This process is not about who gets which job. The elections are a chance for people to express what way they want to go with the EU - this is what we need to talk about. It is about what can we do in the next mandate of the European Commission to bring Europe back to the people, to show them that their voices and concerns are being heard.

“A smart Europe means pooling all our talents, knowledge and resources to address what really makes a difference in citizens' lives”

In what ways would a weber presidency be different to a Juncker presidency and why?

The next European elections will be historic in many ways. They will determine whether the European Union is able to act in the coming years to improve the lives of Europeans. Will it ensure Europe's security, the prosperity of its economies and the sustainability of our model of society, or will it become permanently paralysed and divided? We will build on the good work of Jean-Claude Juncker. However, it needs to be clear that we are putting the last ten years of crisis management behind us. We need a new chapter with a positive and ambitious agenda for change in Europe.

As EPP president, there has been criticism of your perceived lack of definitive action against Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. Do you regret that his party was not suspended earlier?

If there is one party that has dealt with their internal issues, it is the EPP. We haven't seen anything approaching this level of clarity from the Socialists on the issue of their sister party in Romania, for example. However, instead of politicising the rule of law in Europe, we should protect it better. It is why I have proposed a strengthened rule of law mechanism, applicable to all Member States, which gives former judges and experts the chance to rule on national developments. I am convinced that the only way for Europe to establish itself in the future as a community of law, to establish its authority and credibility, is to have more effective instruments to ensure and protect the rule of law. For me, only an independent body - one that is protected from political pressure, transparent and effective, and applicable to all countries - can fulfil this role.

“The elections are a chance for people to express what way they want to go with the EU - this is what we need to talk about”

How anxious are you about the potential influx of populist/ nationalistic MEPs and their negative impact on an effective and functioning EU? Will they make your job as commission president more difficult?

First of all, it is the voters that will decide at the European elections; that's how democracy works. Therefore, we are campaigning throughout Europe to tell voters what we plan to do to take their concerns seriously. It is clearer than ever that the next Commission President will have to be a bridge-

builder in order to find the required majorities and to make Europe better adapted to the 21st century. When we look at the fragmentation of the political landscape, as we have seen in many countries already, it is clear it is not only the result of populist parties. The phenomenon of single-issue parties, for example, is a symptom of a new way of doing politics, tailor-made for highly-specific social economic or demographic groups in society. In my view, this is a very short-term approach to politics. As Christian Democrats, we believe that - in order for societies to prosper and be successful - it should not be a fight between generations or classes, but rather a comprehensive approach that is good for all of society. The social market economy in Europe, which was developed by the EPP, has achieved greater wealth and wellbeing in Europe than we have previously seen. The European elections are about protecting those achievements, adapting them to the needs of today and passing them on to future generations.

“My position is crystal clear: I believe that what unites the countries and peoples of Europe is far stronger than what separates us”

With so many competing visions, how - as the potential Commission president - would you keep the EU unified?

That is exactly what European democracy is about; giving people the choice about what kind of Europe they want. As Chairman of the largest and most united group in the European Parliament, I have gained valuable experience in what it means to make compromises. While our continent is under threat both from inside and outside, while populists and nationalists are trying to divide us, to destroy what we have achieved with the European project in the past 70 years, my position is crystal clear: I believe that what unites the countries and peoples of Europe is far stronger than what separates us. I believe that through dialogue and listening, our differences can be overcome. I also believe that the unity of the European Union is our most precious asset in an increasingly hostile world and neighbourhood; apart from membership of the EU, there is no good future for our countries.

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