

## Spitzenkandidaten lock horns in last debate before elections

Written by Martin Banks on 17 May 2019 in News  
News

Leading candidates for the presidency of the European Commission thrashed out the main issues affecting Europe in a lively debate in Parliament, just over one week away from the keenly-awaited EU-wide elections.



**Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual**

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Most of the main candidates from the mainstream political parties took part in the long-awaited two-hour debate on Wednesday evening, the latest in a series of such encounters in the run-up to the EU poll.

Afterwards, a spokesman for the EPP, Parliament's biggest grouping, told this website, "The debate showed to the European public why it is important to safeguard the "Spitzenkandidaten" procedure."

“It is evident [from the debate] that European voters have a difference of political options to choose from in deciding which direction the European Union could go.”

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He believes the EPP candidate, Manfred Weber, who defended claims that his group had voted against climate change measures, had presented the “most balanced option.”

Further reaction to the debate came from Denis MacShane, the UK’s former Europe Minister under Tony Blair, who told this website, “Once again despite first-rate debates and high-quality candidates, we are seeing the parliamentary elections fought as national campaigns with voters choosing between national political personalities and on domestic issues.”

“I regret this, but we need a better way of making a European political choice of real importance to voters.”

Weber, in the debate in Parliament’s main chamber, promised to appoint an EU Commissioner to oversee a new relationship with Africa to help control migration to Europe.

“The debate showed to the European public why it is important to safeguard the Spitzenkandidaten procedure” **EPP spokesman**

He also said that future trade deals with other countries should include clauses banning child labour, adding that care should be taken to preserve jobs.

He called for a greater reliance on new technologies - “I believe in innovation” - and called for tougher action against tech firms, saying the EU’s action over Apple’s low taxation rates in Ireland had made him “proud as a European.”

The 2014 elections were the first in which the various political groups in Parliament put forward so-called “Spitzenkandidaten”, meaning top candidates, and each political group represented in Parliament has again selected a candidate for Commission President for the next 5 years.

Also taking part in the debate were Nico Cué (European Left), Ska Keller (Green), Jan Zahradil (Alliance of Conservatives and Reformers), EU Commissioner Margrethe Vestager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats) and Frans Timmermans (European Socialists).

Timmermans set out what he called his “progressive vision for a European Union which prioritises the fight against climate change, tackles inequalities and injustice, and is true to its core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”

He said, "There are those who say that Europe and its citizens are best served by breaking down the EU. I don't believe in that. There are those who say to avoid breaking down the EU we have to maintain it as it is. I don't believe that either."

"To save and strengthen Europe, we need to fundamentally reform Europe. It's time big companies finally start to pay taxes. It's time we introduce minimum wages in every Member State. It's time we have equality in pay of men and women."

"Once again despite first-rate debates and high-quality candidates, we are seeing the parliamentary elections fought as national campaigns" **Denis MacShane, former UK Europe Minister**

"It's time we put an end to violence against women in Europe. It's time we enforce the rule of law in every Member State so that everybody abides by the rules. It's time we put the climate crisis and sustainability on the very, very top of the list of the next Commission. That is my proposal".

On the future of Europe, the Dutch Commissioner said, "Look at what the divisiveness of Brexit has done to the United Kingdom. Today, the UK looks like Game of Thrones on steroids. And that's because of this divisive politics."

"So, we have a collective responsibility to offer propositions to our citizens that will make them come back to the European project, will make them come back to all the parties around the table here who have constructive propositions for the future. This is the only way forward".

Vestager admitted during the debate that the Commission had alienated voters, adding, "Last year we got digital citizens' rights. That we called GDPR. How can we expect people to appreciate that?"

Zahradil, a senior MEP from the Czech Republic, quoted opinion polls from his home country which showed that 90 percent of citizens wanted to stay in the EU but 70 percent did not want to join the single currency.

"There is a clear example that people like the European Union but do not like everything that comes from the European Union," he said.

He called for much less European oversight and for "a new balance between the national level and the European level.

"Look at what the divisiveness of Brexit has done to the United Kingdom. Today, the UK looks like Game of Thrones on steroids" **Frans Timmermans**

Europe, he said, was "no state" and must be "scaled back" and decentralised.

Keller, a German MEP, demanded that future trade agreements contain better protections for human rights, adding that she wanted "another Europe" that "protects our planet."

Europeans urgently needed to "act together for change", she said, also calling for a stronger commitment to tackle carbon emissions.

Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout is also standing for the Greens.

Cué, a rank outsider, said, "EU unity is at risk because of austerity policies of unheard-of violence being applied in Southern Europe."

It was the second time that the European Broadcasting Union has organised such a debate. The first debate was ahead of the last European elections in 2014.

TV channels, including Japan's NHK, America's CNBC, BBC 1 in the UK and several international channels covered the event among the presidential candidates.

According to data collected by Parliament's monitoring services, the show was mentioned on TV in 26 countries.

According to the latest betting stats, Weber, a German MEP who led the EPP group in Parliament in the last mandate, is favourite for the presidency post followed by the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, Timmermans, fellow EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva, Vestager and Christine Lagarde, President of the IMF.

Meanwhile, Parliament is holding an open day in Strasbourg this Sunday with the focus on the elections.

A spokesman said, "The event, both informative and festive, will allow visitors to become more familiar with the work of MEPs and its impact on their daily lives. The programme will alternate debates with MEPs in the chamber and musical, artistic and choreographic activities."

## **About the author**

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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