

Horse trading on EU's top jobs begins

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News

Parliament's mainstream political groups have closed ranks to stick by the so-called spitzenkandidaten process for appointing the next European Commission president.



Photo Credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

Their pledge comes just ahead of an informal summit of EU Prime ministers and heads of state in Brussels later on Tuesday where leaders are expected to outline the next steps for the allocation of the EU's top jobs and also its work programme following Sunday's European elections.

Several candidates for the post of European Commission President have already been formally declared by the main European political parties, including Manfred Weber, the EPP group leader in the previous parliamentary mandate and European Commissioner Frans Timmermans.

Other names are now being put forward, including Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator in the Brexit talks and Josep Borrell, a former president of the European Parliament and now Spanish foreign minister.

Leaders from the EPP, Socialists, Greens and GUE groups gave a short news briefing earlier today although a notable absentee was anyone from the ALDE group which is known to have reservations about the process.

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Socialist group leader Udo Bullmann told reporters that it would be a “major mistake” if the council, or member states, chose not to “respect” the agreed process for selecting the next commission president, generally seen as the EU's top post.

Describing the upcoming talks between parliament and council on the distribution of the EU's senior posts as “exciting”, the German MEP said that the spitzenkandidaten process was backed by an 'overwhelming' majority of group leaders at the meeting.

However, he noted “reservations” voiced by the ALDE group saying, “They want transnational lists which is something I also support. But this will have to be for the next European elections and is no reason to dump the spitzenkandidaten process now.”

“We are not in a position to celebrate a big victory because we lost some seats” **Manfred Weber, leader of the European People's Party**

He said, “The meeting today made it clear that parliament is passionate about being about to help define the work programme for the commission for the next five years.”

“These talks are not just about top jobs but also about the content of the commission's next work programme.”

Bullmann also said he was “encouraged” by the turnout, a 20 year high, in the elections, adding, “It means people now have expectations of us, for instance, that climate action is the number issue for them.”

“These talks are not just about top jobs but also about the content of the commission's next work programme.” **Udo Bullman, leader of the Socialists and Democrats**

His comments were partly echoed by Manfred Weber, the EPP group leader and his party's candidate for the commission presidency. The German deputy said the meeting of group leaders had given a “firm commitment” to the spitzenkandidaten process.

This comes, he said, in form of a resolution that will be presented to the summit on Tuesday evening. Referring to the EPP's performance in the elections, he said, “We are not in a position to celebrate a

big victory because we lost some seats.”

Greens co-leader Ska Keller, another German MEP, called on the council to “respect” the Spitzenkandidaten process in the upcoming discussions with parliament on the distribution of EU posts.

She described the process as an 'important step forward for European democracy, but added, “I am not happy that the liberals are ambiguous about the process. That is a problem.”

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Ska Keller, co-leader of The European Greens

She also welcomed news that European council president Donald Tusk this week stressed the importance of gender balance in deciding the distribution of posts, adding, “It is high time there were more women in these jobs. At present there is total lack of gender equality not just for the top posts but other senior EU positions. You simply cannot go on ignoring half the population.”

Speaking earlier, parliament's president Antonio Tajani also spoke of the importance of “respecting” parliament's position on the Spitzenkandidaten process for appointing the next Commission president.

The Italian member told reporters, “We have made this perfectly clear in the resolution going to the council tonight.”

He added, “The resolution was adopted by a majority at the meeting of group leaders today.”

“Talks must take place in an open and transparent way. It will be totally unacceptable for them to take place behind closed doors” **Gabi Zimmer leader of European United**

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He said the summit was “only the start” of a debate on the “future of the EU” and also called for “transparency” in the way the discussions are conducted.

He too welcomed the improved turnout, saying, “This sends a good message that citizens do want to participate in these elections. It is better for democracy to have MEPs elected by more voters.”

GUE leader Gaby Zimmer argued that the “talks must take place in an open and transparent way. It will be totally unacceptable for them to take place behind closed doors.”

The conference of presidents issued a statement after their meeting which reads:

“The May 2019 European Parliament elections open a new chapter for Europe’s political and democratic cycle. The significantly increased turnout across Europe proves that European democracy is alive. European voters gave the newly elected European Parliament a fresh and strong mandate for the next five years. As the only directly elected institution of the European Union, the European Parliament is resolutely the legitimate place for the mandate for change to be debated and defined.”

“This sends a good message that citizens do want to participate in these elections. It is better for democracy to have MEPs elected by more voters” **Antonio Tajana, president of the European parliament**

“Based on the results of the European elections, the political groups in the European Parliament will hold a strategic, transparent and democratic debate to prepare a mandate for the next European Commission. The outcome of this internal debate will serve as a basis for the dialogue towards the European Council. The mandate for change and the strategic agenda of the European Council could be consolidated to form a solid base for the renewed priorities of the European Commission.”

“Declaration Number 11 related to Art 17.6 and 17.7 TEU states that "the European Parliament and European Council are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the European Commission. Prior to the decision of the European Council, representatives of the European Parliament and of the European Council will thus conduct the necessary consultations.

About the author

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