

Speculation mounts over future of top EU civil servant Martin Selmayr

Written by Martin Banks on 9 July 2019 in News
News

European Commission's influential Secretary General could be set to leave office following the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as new president of the executive.



Martyn Selmayr | *Photo credit: European Commission Audiovisual*

Speculation is mounting that Martin Selmayr, the Commission's influential secretary general, could be set to leave office assuming Ursula von der Leyen becomes the new president of the executive.

The unwritten convention within the European Commission is that the President and its Secretary General should not be from the same member state.

Von der Leyen, the German defence minister, is slated to replace Jean-Claude Juncker in the autumn

and, if ratified by the European Parliament in Strasbourg later this month, her appointment could signal the end of Selmayr's stint as effective head of the 30,000-strong EU civil service.

Selmayr was, according to the Financial Times, the "power behind the throne" of the Juncker Commission, masterminding the former Luxembourg prime minister's accession to the job and becoming the institution's top civil servant.

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"But," says the paper, "his days in the role might be numbered: it would go against unwritten convention for a German Commission president to have a secretary-general of their own nationality. Some senior EU diplomats already see Selmayr's departure as part of the package".

The possibility of his departure has also sparked speculation among MEPs, with UK Socialist deputy Richard Corbett pointing out, "Actually, there's no rule about this but it's long standing practice not to have both of the same nationality."

Another member who did not wish to be named said, "His removal would allow von der Leyen to assert her authority to the full."

One experienced EU commentator told this site, "The tradition is that you don't have a Commission Secretary General of the same nationality as the president. But it's not a formal rule. Beyond that, I have no inside track on whether Selmayr is glued to his chair or looking towards other pastures."

"There have been rumours that he might want the EU representative job in London but I suspect that would be below his power threshold."

On his potential next job, he said, "Maybe he could be the Director General for Competition if that comes up."

"There's no rule about this but it's long standing practice not to have both of the same nationality" Richard Corbett MEP

Selmayr, a German lawyer, has been a somewhat controversial figure since his appointment in March 2018, with some saying he was "parachuted" into the role having been a member of Juncker's cabinet.

In a report published last September, EU ombudsman Emily O'Reilly concluded that the EU executive had failed to follow internal procedures in promoting Juncker's chief aide, and by doing so had

undermined public trust in the EU civil service.

MEPs, in a debate earlier this year, also slammed the Commission for lack of transparency in the appointment procedure of 48-year-old Selmayr.

Reacting at the time UK Tory MEP Syed Kamall said, “How does the Commission expect people to believe that the EU is capable of change and listening to the voters when the process for appointing to top positions is so opaque.”

“The Commission should be looking at ways to make Brussels more transparent and democratic, yet this appointment resembles nothing more than jobs for the boys. Perhaps the most worrying thing is that the Commission doesn't seem to even realise why this is a problem.”

Meanwhile, MEPs have warned that new European Parliament President David Sassoli “will have to work hard” to gain the confidence of his colleagues.

Last week, Sassoli an Italian Socialist MEP, was elected to Parliament’s top job. Sassoli admitted he was “taken aback” when his group nominated him for the position on the eve of the vote.

Reacting to his election, the European Green party co-chairs Reinhard Bütikofer and Monica Frassoni congratulated Sassoli and wished him “every realistic success in fulfilling his duty.”

“It is worth noting that the S&D candidate only managed to secure a very slender majority and lost approximately 100 votes from supporting factions.”

“Sassoli will now need to work hard to gain and trust of the full house. We are prepared to cooperate with the new president but expect him to be constructive and even-handed in his approach across the political spectrum.”

About the author

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