

Iratxe García Pérez: Commission dossier title change not just ‘cosmetic exercise’

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News

Iratxe García Pérez, the leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament, has insisted that changing the controversial title of a Commission dossier was “not just merely a cosmetic exercise.”



Iratxe García Pérez | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

Speaking at a news conference in Strasbourg on Tuesday she welcomed the decision to change the name of the dossier, given to Greek Commissioner-elect Margaritis Schinas, which had provoked fury among MEPs and others.

Parliamentary groups on the left of the political spectrum - the Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals - had called on the incoming European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, to drop the title of this portfolio.

The title, “Protecting our European Way of Life” was subsequently scrapped because of what some MEPs called its “toxic” far-right connotations. The title of the portfolio will now refer to the “promotion of our European way of life.”

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Addressing reporters ahead of this week’s plenary, García Pérez said, “The name change is not cosmetic and I believe that changing the name of this portfolio was also fully supported by the public. The new title will still defend the EU’s fundamental values and agreeing to change the name was excellent news.”

She also said her group, the second biggest in Parliament, will back the new Commission in today’s key plenary vote. The vote comes after the last remaining commissioners-elect won the approval of MEPs at their confirmation hearings last week.

García Pérez, a Spanish MEP, told reporters, “This Commission can count on the full support of our group. I accept that not all the commissioners are perfect, but we believe this team can put into place the changes we need.”

She added, “It is now up to this Commission to show its worth. It is a more progressive Commission now and it’s important for it to now roll up its sleeves and get to work.”

“The name change is not cosmetic and I believe that changing the name of this portfolio was also fully supported by the public” **Iratxe García Pérez, S&D leader**

Speaking at a separate news briefing on Tuesday, Philippe Lamberts, a Belgian MEP and Greens co-leader, outlined his party’s voting intentions on the new Commission, saying, “Unlike Jean-Claude Juncker, with von der Leyen we have someone who says she will make climate one of her main priorities. So if we said no to her and her team we would be saying we are not on board and that she is just pretending.”

“Individually, people are entitled to vote as they like but we will probably abstain in the vote on Wednesday, not because we cannot decide what to do but because we are saying to the Commission: ‘come forward with your reforms and we will meet you half way.’ Let us see if any drastic measures will be taken.”

He added, “This does not mean that we will hold up the Commission’s work but, rather, that we will just hold off. This should not be misinterpreted as a negative vote. We are not giving any assurances and need to be a bit sceptical,” he added.

However, Ska Keller, the Greens joint leader, again voiced concern about the Hungarian nominee, Olivér Várhelyi as commissioner for neighbourhood and enlargement.

Várhelyi received the green light at his parliamentary hearing last week despite renewed concern from several MEPs.

Keller, a German deputy, said, "We are not happy about him getting this approval and we have been very clear and vocal on this. Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister, has called him a proper patriot and our view is that someone who is so closely aligned to Orban and the Orban government is not in a position to tell other countries about the rule of law."

"That is why we do not think this is a good fit."

Speaking separately, the S&D vice-president for foreign affairs, Kati Piri, said, "While Várhelyi in his written answers took a clear distance from Hungarian government's foreign policy, he did not go as far as speaking out against Viktor Orban and his government's domestic actions, which led to the Article 7 procedure against Hungary by the European Parliament."

"Unlike Jean-Claude Juncker, with von der Leyen we have someone who says she will make climate one of her main priorities. So if we said no to her and her team we would be saying we are not on board" **Philippe Lamberts, Greens co-leader**

"Várhelyi has not taken away our concerns that he is a risk as commissioner responsible for enlargement, whereby rule of law will be a key component of his tasks."

Asked about the absence of a UK commissioner in the new von der Leyen team, Manfred Weber, the EPP leader, told a separate news conference, "This is an ongoing issue."

"There is an election campaign in the UK so for the moment there is a common understanding that Brexit will still take place. We are now awaiting the outcome of the election. But the Brits cannot expect for us in the EU to wait for them to clarify things. We have lost too much time to these talks in the last few years."

With the COP25 conference looming, he said his group was also "clearly committed" to climate action targets, saying, "We want to reach a 50 percent cut in emissions and also want to improve the emissions trading system. We are clear on this and want to give a clear signal to COP25 in Madrid that the EU is ambitious on tackling climate change. But the ways in which we will do this [achieve the climate targets] are still under discussion."

He also spoke about current events on the fight against corruption in Malta which he described as "worrying."

His comments come as Maltese police continued their investigation into the 2017 murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. On Tuesday, it emerged that the Maltese government's chief of staff Keith Schembri had resigned. Police sources said Schembri was assisting them in the case.

Caruana Galizia, one of Malta's best-known investigative journalists, was killed as she left her home on October 16, 2017 in a murder that shocked Europe and raised questions about rule of law on the small Mediterranean island.

Opposition politicians have denounced Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat and called on him to

step down. But the Prime Minister has said he had no intention of resigning at present.

“There are a lot of questions the Maltese Prime Minister should be facing on this,” said Weber, adding, “He has to accept his responsibilities and the Maltese authorities have to clarify what is happening and tell the truth.”

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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