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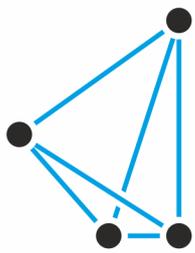
POLICY BRIEF

2018/December

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Another successful Spitzenkandidat?

Melchior Szczepanik



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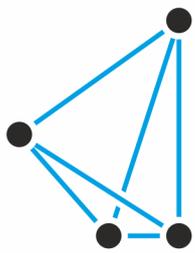
Introduction

In May 2019, European Union citizens will go to the polls to elect a new European Parliament (EP). The election result will have an important impact on the selection of the next European Commission (EC) president. Several politicians are already official candidates for the post, others are commonly seen as serious contenders. A complex competition is in store – not only between political parties and member states, but also EU institutions: the European Parliament and the European Council. This policy brief offers three possible scenarios of how the rivalry may unfold, each discussing a different candidate – Manfred Weber, Margrethe Vestager and Michel Barnier – and major factors in their success.

The Spitzenkandidaten process: an inter-institutional rivalry

In the run-up to the 2014 European elections, the EP attempted to boost its influence over the designation of the Commission president. A process of lead candidates (often referred to with the German term ‘Spitzenkandidaten’) was proposed by the major political groups in the EP: European People’s Party (EPP), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). According to the proposal, each of European political parties would nominate its candidate for the post of EC president. The candidate of the winning party would then be endorsed by the European Council (provided that s/he were able to ensure the backing of a parliamentary majority). Proponents of the process argued that it made the selection procedure more democratic by giving voters greater influence over it. In addition, by raising up the stakes of the elections, it could also encourage more people to participate. The initiative was criticized by the European Council, loath to see its freedom to choose a candidate constrained. The heads of state and government pointed out that the Treaty on European Union granted them the right to designate a candidate and only obliged them to take the result of European elections into account. The EP could then accept or reject that candidate. Eventually, however, Jean-Claude Juncker, EPP Spitzenkandidat, was accepted by the European Council. The EP has thus won a set but not a match in the struggle for influence, as the European Council decision was not equivalent to accepting the lead candidate process.

In 2018, the two largest political groups – EPP and S&D – reiterated their support for the process and nominated their candidates: Manfred Weber, chairman of the EPP group in the EP, and Frans Timmermans, Vice-President of the EC. They also sponsored a resolution in which the EP claimed that it would reject any candidate for Commission president who was not a Spitzenkandidat. Apart from the largest groups, the Greens and the United Left (GUE) have also voiced support for the method. The Liberals, vocal advocates for the system in 2014, nuanced their approach; they



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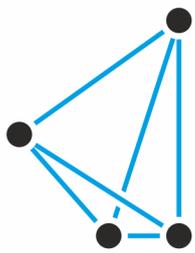
abstained from nominating one lead candidate, claiming they would put forward a Campaign Team instead. The latter is to consist of leading politicians from the Liberal family, who would constitute a pool of candidates for top EU posts. It was a tactical move rather than a genuine change of heart. ALDE has been trying to create an electoral alliance with the French president Emmanuel Macron, who rejected the Spitzenkandidaten process. Therefore, the Liberals opted for a solution that would not antagonize their prospective ally, while leaving them the capacity to engage with the lead candidates of other parties. Finally, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), who shunned the initiative in 2014, decided to put forward a Spitzenkandidat for the upcoming elections: a long-time Czech MEP Jan Zahradil. However, their stance differs from that of the largest groups; although they are participating in the exercise, they remain of the opinion that the European Council should have complete freedom to choose a candidate. Even with that caveat, the ECR's decision provides a boost to the Spitzenkandidaten process. Should Matteo Salvini also enter the fray on the part of the EU-sceptic forces, the debates between lead candidates could become more combative and thus attract more public attention than in 2014, when they were dominated by three pro-integrationists. This would strengthen the advocates of the Spitzenkandidaten process in the post-election negotiations with the European Council. The latter, in the meantime, has maintained its position and refused to be bound to designate a Spitzenkandidat as EC President.

A modified balance of power in the next European Parliament

The analyses looking at the balance of power in the new EP forecast a weakening of the major forces.¹ The EPP and S&D will remain two largest political groups but are expected to have smaller representations (see Table 1). In the meantime, the EU-sceptic contingent will most probably grow. The Liberals may gain some seats and, especially if they succeed at striking a deal with Macron, strengthen their position. One important consequence of these shifts is that the two largest groups will most probably lose the absolute majority that they currently control. The new EC president will therefore need the support of at least three political groups in the chamber. Looking at possible coalitions, it seems that a successful candidate would have to secure the backing of a coalition spanning from the centre-left to the centre-right (S&D-ALDE²-EPP) that could control around 58% of mandates. Neither a right-of-

¹ Cf V. Kreilinger, Looking ahead to the 2019 European elections, Jacques Delors Institute Policy Paper; M. Szczepanik, Potential changes in the European Parliament after the 2019 Elections, PISM Bulletin

² Including Emmanuel Macron's political party La République en Marche.



centre coalition of ALDE-EPP-ECR (45%), nor a left-leaning one including ALDE-S&D-Greens (39%) could muster a necessary majority. The latter falls short even with the support of GUE. A centrist grand bargain is virtually the only option. A similar agreement would have to materialise in the European Council where the position of EPP or S&D has declined since 2014. Four years ago, these parties dominated among the heads of state and government (21 members). Today, the European Council composition is much more balanced with 7 members representing ALDE, 7 – EPP and 5 – S&D.

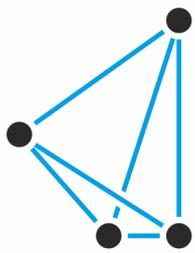
Table 1. Balance of power in the 8th and 9th European Parliament

Political groups	8 th EP 2014-19 (751 members)		9 th EP 2019-24 (705 members)	
	Number of MEPs	%	Number of MEPs	%
EPP	219	29	180	25,6
S&D	187	24,9	142	20,7
ECR	73	9,7	49	6,9
ALDE	68	9	74	10
ENF	34	4,5	60	8,5
GUE	52	7	55	7,8
EFDD	43	5,7	46	6,5
Greens	52	7	43	6,1
New Parties	--	--	30	4
En Marche	--	--	18	2,5

Source: Own calculations based upon data from the EP website and Politico's poll of polls (as of 5 December 2018).

The Spitzenkandidat scenario

The EPP is all but certain to win the elections. Even though it will control fewer seats, it is expected to remain significantly stronger than other groups. Therefore, its Spitzenkandidat, Manfred Weber, is a front-runner in the contest. By soundly beating Alexander Stubb, the charismatic former prime minister of Finland, in the intra-party primary, Weber has proven that he enjoys a strong backing within the EPP. He has also won support of all EPP-affiliated heads of government, most importantly chancellor Angela Merkel. This can be seen as concession on the part of the European Council members that while there is no automaticity in designating a Spitzenkandidat, the latter will be an important contender. Weber's reputation as a bridge-builder focused on



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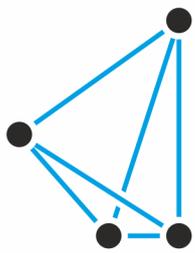
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orchestrating large compromises should work to his advantage, especially given important differences of opinion between member states about the future of the Union. Nevertheless, Weber – a relatively young politician (46) with no executive experience – would be an unorthodox choice. Four of the last five Commission Presidents were former prime ministers. As an EP member since 2004, Weber will try to present himself as a seasoned and able player in EU politics. Moreover, many heads of state and government may appreciate the prospect of a cautious and predictable presidency that Weber seems to offer. His attachment to conservative values will be welcome at a time when a large number of voters seem frightened by the consequences of globalisation. Yet for the very same reasons, Weber is viewed with little enthusiasm by the Liberals and the Social Democrats. Emmanuel Macron will not be keen on accepting a Spitzenkandidat but may eventually back Weber in the hope that it will help to mobilise greater German support for his reform proposals.

The quasi-Spitzenkandidat scenario

While the EPP will be the largest participant in the most likely tripartite coalition, S&D and ALDE together will be stronger both in the chamber and in the European Council. Thus, they may consider teaming up to promote another candidate. The Social Democrats will probably have a larger contingent in the chamber, but they are also likely to suffer considerable losses in the elections. Conversely, the Liberals are hoping to boost their position, above all thanks to creating an alliance with Emmanuel Macron. This would bring not only numerical gains in the EP, but also an influential figure in the European Council. Consequently, if an “anti-Weber” coalition emerges, it is more likely to try to convince the EPP to support not the S&D Spitzenkandidat, but someone from the Liberal camp. The latter could be the current Danish Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager. As former minister and party leader, she has adequate credentials. Several high-profile cases concerning tax avoidance, which she filed against Amazon and Apple, made her one of the most prominent Commissioners. As a representative of a state outside the euro area, she could pass as a guarantor of a stronger internal cohesion of the Union. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she enjoys the support of president Macron. Vestager is all but certain to make it to the Liberal Campaign Team, thus gaining a status of an undeclared Spitzenkandidat. From the point of view of the interinstitutional competition, she would be a perfect compromise. The EP would perceive her as a de facto lead candidate, while the European Council could nominate her with conviction that, to a certain extent, it has managed to bypass the Spitzenkandidaten process. Macron’s electoral success and a consequent strengthening of the liberal group are a necessary condition for this scenario. Should the president of France be defeated by the EU-sceptic National Rally, he will hardly be able to have a decisive impact on the selection procedure.



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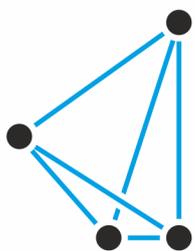
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The favourite waiting in the wings scenario

If the EPP does not manage to convince its coalition partners to support Manfred Weber, it may decide to promote another candidate from within its ranks, rather than settling for someone from a different political family. An opportunity would thus present itself for Michel Barnier. This seasoned politician (former minister and commissioner) has won praise for his handling of Brexit negotiations. He is deemed more acceptable to the Liberals and Social Democrats than Weber, who is predominantly identified with the conservative wing of the group. As a non-Spitzenkandidat, he could be a convenient choice for the European Council, which would thus deal a blow to EP's ambitions of dominating the selection of EC President. Yet, for the same reason, his candidature will be difficult to push through in the chamber. The decision would be especially problematic for the EPP. The Christian Democrats would have to not only give up on the lead candidate process, but also perform a somewhat embarrassing u-turn in foregoing its Spitzenkandidat in favour of another party member. But the pull of EU's most important post may prove too strong to resist.

Outlook

Manfred Weber is well placed to become the next Commission president. As lead candidate of the winning party, he will have a strong mandate to claim the post, particularly if the Spitzenkandidaten manage to attract more attention of the public and thus boost their democratic credentials. Weber offers a predictable presidency of continuation and can be considered by many as a safe choice. He is, however, far from being a shoo-in for the job. Despite his consensual approach, he is hardly an ideal choice as standard-bearer for a centrist coalition. The Social Democrats and Liberals may succeed at convincing the EPP to make a compromise around a different candidate with a more "progressive" allure. Complex negotiations are in store that will have to reconcile diverging ambitions not only of three European political parties, but also representatives of those parties in competing institutions. The European Council may be reluctant to select a Spitzenkandidat for the second time in a row, fearing that it would elevate the lead candidate process to the status of a constitutional custom. Several important questions remain, the future of Emmanuel Macron being the most important. Given the current political crisis in France, Macron – widely seen as the potential kingmaker – may end up among the losers of the election. A worst-case scenario would consist of a protracted negotiation process involving conflicts both within and between the European Council and the EP. This would postpone the creation of a new Commission and tarnish the image of the EU in the eyes of the citizens.



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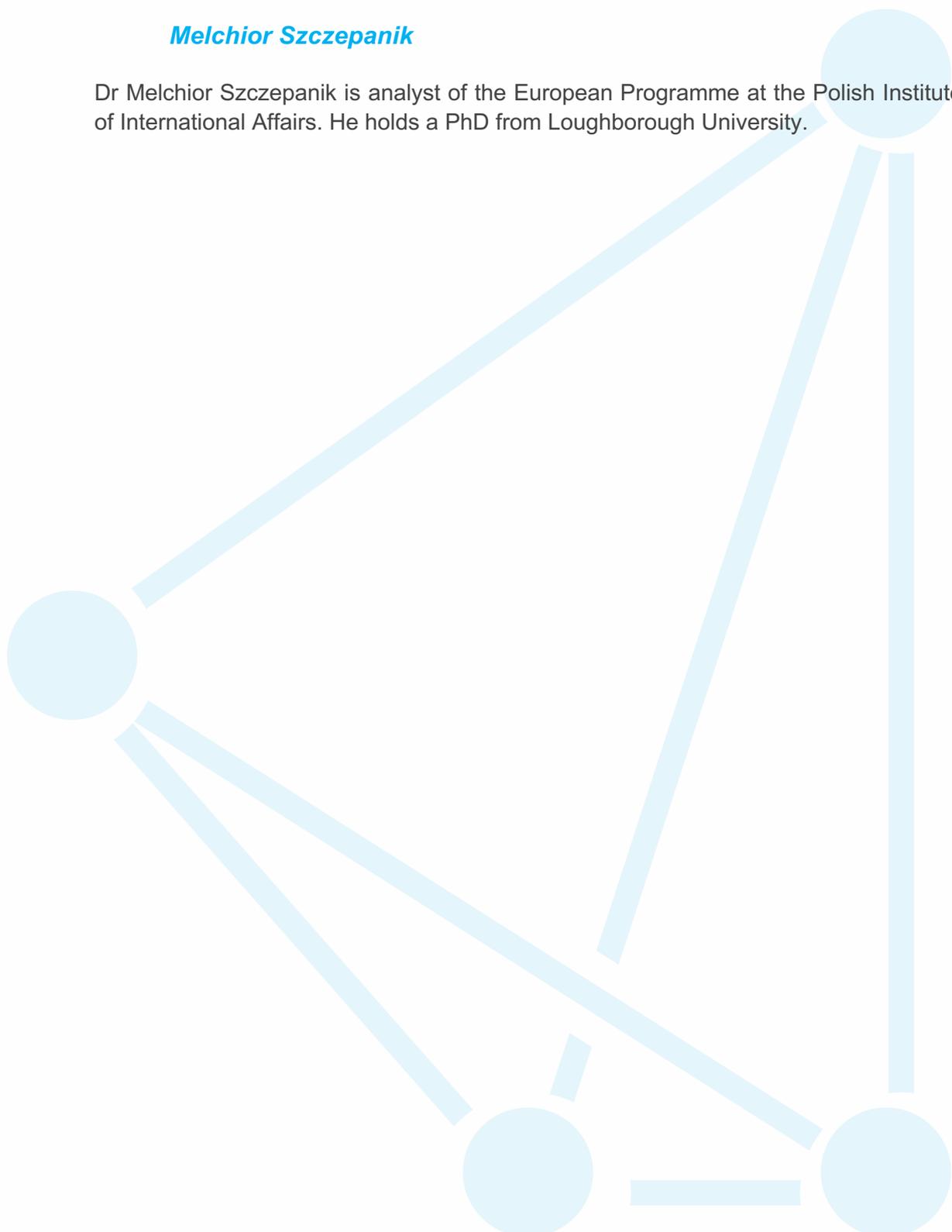
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