

European Council nominees for EU top jobs – A Grayling briefing

July 2019

This briefing note provides an overview of the candidates to the EU top jobs, as nominated by the European Council summit on 2 July 2019. Each part of the note looks at the professional background of the candidates / nominees, the expectations and influence of the role, and the next steps in the procedure. The candidates are:

- **Ursula von der Leyen**, President of the European Commission
- **Josep Borrell**, High Representative for Foreign Affairs
- **Christine Lagarde**, President of European Central Bank
- **Charles Michel**, President of European Council
- **Frans Timmermans**, VP of Commission (economic / industrial portfolio)
- **Margrethe Vestager**, VP of Commission (competition)
- **David Sassoli**, President of the European Parliament (elected on 3 July)

The package proposed by the European Council is likely to be viewed negatively by the European Parliament, as it blatantly rejects the recent convention of *Spitzenkandidaten*, whereby a lead candidate before the elections would automatically become President of the Commission, provided they 'win' the European elections.

Ursula von der Leyen

Nominated to be President of the European Commission



Background

- Ursula von der Leyen is currently serving as the German Federal Defence Minister, a position which she has held since 2013. She is a member of the conservative CDU (EPP), the senior partner in Germany's coalition government. Prior to this, she has served as the Minister for Labour and Social Affairs (2009-2013), Family Affairs (2005-2009) and was also a Minister at the state level in Lower Saxony. She is the only Minister to have served in all Angela Merkel's governments since she became Chancellor in 2005.
- She has been the deputy leader of the CDU party since 2010, under Angela Merkel, and since 2019, under Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. She had previously been viewed as a possible successor to Angela Merkel as Chancellor of Germany.
- As Defence Minister, she has faced criticism for her reliance on external consultants, as well as her management of a Federal Army which is perceived to have considerable gaps in military readiness.
- von der Leyen is a European federalist and is in favour of a European army in the long-term. Specifically, on Brexit, she supports the idea of a very close relationship between the EU and UK after Brexit occurs. However, she is not willing to re-open the Withdrawal Agreement, negotiated by UK Prime Minister Theresa May.

Role and influence

- The role of the President of the European Commission is the most powerful role in the European institutions: the President sets out the guidelines within which the Commission shall work, decides on the overall policy direction of the European Union, is responsible for

the most senior appointments, and provides a 'State of the EU' report to the European Parliament on an annual basis.

- While business rarely engages directly with the President of the Commission on policy issues, an EPP President is likely to be pro-business, and thus set a pro-business direction for Commission policy during the mandate.

Next steps

- During the European Council summit, Merkel consulted with her socialist coalition partners in Berlin, who were not satisfied with the proposal of von der Leyen as Commission President. As such, Germany abstained in the vote in the European Council.
- The President of the European Commission, nominated by the European Council, must now be submitted to the European Parliament for a vote. However, **it may be difficult** to have von der Leyen passed by the Parliament: her candidacy is being attacked from various angles, since it does not respect the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, and other political groups do not accept the automatic legitimacy of the EPP to have the Commission President, as they did not win the elections outright.
- With the S&D, Renew Europe, and the left-wing parties unlikely to wholeheartedly support von der Leyen, it is not an easy path from nomination to appointment as President of the European Commission. The Parliament will vote on **15 July**. If the vote does not pass, the European Council must propose another candidate within a month.
- If accepted, the President and Commissioners will take office on **1 November**.

Josep Borrell Fontelles

Nominated to be High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy



Background

- Josep Borrell is currently serving as the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, in the government of Pedro Sánchez (S&D). He has held this position since the beginning of the Sánchez administration in June 2018, and is a long-standing member of the Spanish socialist party (PSOE).
- Prior to this, Borrell has held numerous positions in national and European politics: he served as Minister of Public Works and Environment (1991-1996), and was a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 until 2009. During this time he served as President of the European Parliament (2004-2007).
- Since leaving the European Parliament, he held the position of President of the European University Institute, and has taught in the University of Lleida and the Complutense University of Madrid.
- He is seen as a statesmanlike figure in Spain, and is highly respected both in Madrid and Brussels. In Spain, he is one of the most vocal advocates for unity, speaking out strongly against Catalanian independence (he is himself from Catalonia). His nomination as High Representative has already attracted strong criticism from the pro-independence groups in Catalonia. He would be the first Catalan politician holding such an influential role in international politics.

Role and influence

- The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is responsible for conducting the EU's foreign and security policy. In this role, the High Representative

contributes to the drafting of policy in that area, as well as presides over the Foreign Affairs Council (Member States' foreign ministers).

- The High Representative is one of the Vice-Presidents of the European Commission, and oversees the work of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The role was established in the Amsterdam Treaty, and held recently by Baroness Catherine Ashton (UK) and Federica Mogherini (Italy).
- The role is highly influential, as the High Representative is the outward-facing representative of the EU. On diplomatic missions, the High Representative either travels alone, or accompanied by other high-ranking Commissioners, including the Commission President or the Commissioner for Trade. While the High Representative is not directly influential for business, their diplomacy contributes to the health of the EU's foreign policy and trade relations in an indirect manner.

Next steps

- The High Representative is appointed by the European Council (EU heads of government), with the agreement of the President of the European Commission. Once the Commission President is confirmed by the Parliament, she will be able to give her consent to the proposal of Borrell as High Representative. This will then be put to a vote (qualified majority) in the European Council to confirm the nomination.
- There are **unlikely to be any obstacles** to the nomination of Josep Borrell, as he is known and respected in Madrid and Brussels. However, if the European Parliament rejects the proposal of Ursula von der Leyen, a new 'package' of candidates may need to be proposed by the European Council, which could see Borrell replaced as candidate.
- The next High Representative will likely face major challenging issues in global diplomacy, including the Iran nuclear deal and Kosovo.

Christine Lagarde

Nominated to be President of the European Central Bank (ECB)

Background

- Christine Lagarde is currently serving as the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), based in Washington DC. Prior to this, she has held influential roles in French politics, including Minister of the Economy (2007-2011), Minister of Agriculture (2007) and Minister of Commerce (2005-2007).
- Prior to her career in politics, she worked as a lawyer for the US law firm Baker & McKenzie, where she specialised in competition cases.



Role and influence

- The President of the European Central Bank – currently held by Mario Draghi (Italy) – is an appointment for 8 years, which is non-renewable. The President (and the other members of the 6-person Executive Board) is voted by the European Council, upon recommendation of the Council of the EU (Member States). The role is based in Frankfurt, where the ECB has its seat.
- The role is highly influential in setting the monetary policy of the Eurozone, but in terms of direct impact on policymaking and impact on business, there is less influence. The President of the European Central Bank is not a policymaker with whom stakeholders can engage, as with MEPs or Commission officials. Nevertheless, directing the monetary policy

of the Eurozone is highly influential in setting the general business and economic environment for the European Union.

Next steps

- The President of the European Central Bank will be appointed by the European Council in a qualified majority vote. It is unlikely that Christine Lagarde will face opposition at this stage, since she has been approved provisionally as part of the package agreed by the European Council. The President should take office on 1 November 2019, as the term of Mario Draghi will expire on 31 October 2019.

Charles Michel

Appointed as President of the European Council

Background

- Charles Michel is currently serving as the Prime Minister of Belgium, a position which he has held since 2014. However, since the collapse of the Belgian government in late 2018, and in expectation of a government being appointed following elections in May 2019, Michel has been Prime Minister in a caretaker capacity.
- He is from the Belgian Liberal party (*Mouvement Réformateur*) and is the son of former Belgian Prime Minister Louis Michel (who also served as a European Commissioner and MEP). He has also served as the Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation.



Role and influence

- The role of President of the European Council is a fairly new role in the European institutions. The European Council brings together the heads of government of the EU Member States to set the general political direction of the European Union. The President chairs summits and drives the work of the European Council, and is tasked with building consensus among the heads of government. The President also has a role in foreign and security policy, in cooperation with the High Representative.
- This is a highly influential role, and has grown in influence in recent years, with President Donald Tusk being seen as a credible and trustworthy broker of compromises in the European Council. The President does not have any direct policy influence, as the European Council only sets the strategic direction, and is not in itself part of the legislative process (this is only the Commission, Parliament and Council of the EU).
- The President is elected for a term of two and a half years, which is renewable once. Both previous holders of the office – Herman van Rompuy (Belgium, 2009-2014) and Donald Tusk (Poland, 2014-2019) both served for two terms.

Next steps

- He was chosen for the role as he has the support of both Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, and is seen as a good broker of compromises (an essential part of Belgian national and regional politics).
- This role is one of the only positions in the list of nominees which is **already confirmed**, as it was voted by the European heads of government in the summit on 2 July. Charles Michel will take up his office as President on 1 December 2019.

Frans Timmermans

Nominated to be Vice-President of the European Commission



Background

- Frans Timmermans is one of the most influential politicians in the European Union, having served most recently as the First Vice-President of the European Commission, responsible for Better Regulation and the Rule of Law. He has held this position since 2014, under President Jean-Claude Juncker.
- Prior to this, he served as the Netherland's Minister for Foreign Affairs (2012-2014), and a Dutch Member of the House of Representatives. Before entering politics, Timmermans worked in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is known for being fluent in French, English, German, Italian and Russian, in addition to Dutch.
- A socialist, Timmermans is respected across the political spectrum, and while the EPP rejected his candidacy for European Commission President, this was primarily because they believe they have the right to the Commission President position, as they won the largest number of seats in the European Parliament.

Role and influence

- Frans Timmermans has been nominated to be a Vice-President of the European Commission, and it is likely that his portfolio would be economic or industrial in nature. While he may not hold the title of First Vice-President in the next Commission (as now), his portfolio is likely to be more policy-focused than before.
- On the basis of his experience, Timmermans is likely to be a respected and influential Commissioner, however he is viewed with scepticism from certain Eastern European countries, including Poland and Hungary, as he has led the charge against them for abuses of the rule of law.

Next steps

- The nomination of Timmermans – as with the other Commissioners – happens in several stages. The Netherlands' government will formally propose him as a candidate to the Commission President-elect (once voted by the European Parliament).
- The President-elect will then establish her college of Commissioners, which will be subject to hearings in the European Parliament in September and October. While Timmermans is **likely to pass the hearings**, MEPs accept or reject the proposed Commission as a *body*, and not on an individual basis.
- If accepted, the Commissioners will take office on **1 November**.

Margrethe Vestager

Nominated to be Vice-President of the European Commission



Background

- Margrethe Vestager, from the Danish liberal party (ALDE), has served as the European Commissioner for Competition since 2014, under President Jean-Claude Juncker. Prior to this, she served as the Danish

Minister for Economic and Interior Affairs (2011-2014), Minister for Education (1998-2001), and a Member of the Danish Parliament (2001-2014).

- She has been a highly influential actor in the European Commission, having strengthened the perception of EU competition policy by imposing record high fines on Google and Apple for breaching competition laws.
- She has had a particularly hard stance on US tech multinationals, for which she has received much criticism. She also blocked a landmark merger between Siemens and Alstom (railway companies), which was severely criticised by the French and German governments. As a result, the French and German governments have proposed a revision of EU competition law and the establishment of an EU industrial policy.

Role and influence

- Vestager is likely to be given the same portfolio again, due to her demonstrated expertise on the issue. The role could be strengthened by being 'upgraded' to a Vice-President position.
- If approved, Vestager will continue to have considerable influence over the competition policy of the EU, and will likely be responsible for overseeing – in collaboration with the President and other Commissioners – a possible revision / tweaking of EU competition policy, and the establishment of an EU industrial policy.

Next steps

- The nomination of Vestager – as with the other Commissioners – happens in several stages. The Danish government will formally propose her as a candidate to the Commission President-elect (once voted by the European Parliament).
- The President-elect will then establish her college of Commissioners, which will be subject to hearings in the European Parliament in September and October. While Vestager is **likely to pass the hearings**, MEPs accept or reject the proposed Commission as a *body*, and not on an individual basis.
- If accepted, the Commissioners will take office on **1 November**.

David Sassoli

President of the European Parliament

Background

- David Sassoli is an Italian MEP from the Democratic Party (S&D), who has served since 2009. He was elected to be Vice-President at the beginning of the 2009 mandate.
- He previously worked as a journalist, and was one of Italy's most well-known journalists between the 1970s and 2009.
- At the beginning of this mandate, he proposed the motion to elect Iratxe García Pérez (Spain) to lead the S&D delegation in the European Parliament.



Role and influence

- The President of the European Parliament ensures that parliamentary procedures are properly followed, oversees Parliament's activities and committees, and represents the Parliament in all legal matters and its international relations.

- While it is a very visible position, it is not as influential as the President of the European Commission, and the Parliament President does not have a particularly substantive role in the legislative process, as the job is procedural rather than policy-focused.
- David Sassoli has previously served on the Committee for Transport and Tourism (TRAN) and the Committee on Fisheries (PECH). He was also a Vice-President of the European Parliament during the last Parliamentary mandate.

Next steps

- David Sassoli has been elected as President of the European Parliament. He takes office immediately.
- The European Parliament will also elect its Vice-Presidents and Quaestors (administrative and financial officials) in the first plenary session.
- David Sassoli will serve as the President of the European Parliament for two and a half years, and will be succeeded by a candidate from the European People's Party (EPP), who has not yet been elected.