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## **SCHULZ, THE FEARED FORMER FOOTBALL DEFENDER, NOW GOES ON THE ATTACK**

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EurActiv

Martin Schulz, a one-time football player feared for his defensive tackles, made up his mind in the last week of November to leave the European Parliaments helm, considering it the right time to fight for the leadership of his party, and Germany.

I will not run for a third term as President of the European Parliament, Schulz told reporters yesterday (24 November).

Next year, I will run for the German Bundestag as the head of the SPD list in North Rhine-Westphalia, he announced, ending months of speculation.

After a long reflection, and growing rumours about his future, Schulz finally decided to return to German politics once he finishes his mandate as Parliament President in January, an aide explained.

The step surprised many that expected that the Social democrat would run for another term.

According to his team, Schulz thought it was the right time to come forward, not too early, not too late. He also perceived that the political context both in Germany and in Europe called for a decision now.

His party, the Social Democratic Partys (SPD), will pick its candidate for the 2017 General Elections in January. That month, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will also nominate a new Foreign Affairs Minister.

Schulzs decision comes at a difficult time for Europe. On 4 December, Italy will hold a Constitutional referendum that threatens Matteo Renzis premiership, just as Rome is struggling to maintain its ailing banking system. On the same day, Austrians will go to the ballot box and could pick the extremist candidate Norbert Hofer as his new president, according to the polls.

I stick to Brussels

Schulz, 60, always played down his ambitions before he finally took the decision.

I achieved in my political life more than what I dreamed about, so what should I think about future? I stick to the duties of my post here, he admitted on the eve of the Brexit referendum.

<http://soundcloud.com/jorge-valero-570519463/schulz-future2>

But rumours kept growing over the last months about the likelihood of his return to Germany as the Socialist candidate for Chancellor in the elections to be held in autumn 2017.

The SDPs chances of winning the Chancellery are slim, but as the candidate of the countrys second largest political party, Schulz could get a top job in a new coalition government – the same strategy that propelled him to the Presidency of the EU Parliament after the European elections.

A window of opportunity opened after his party colleague and Foreign Affairs Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was picked by Merkel to become President of Germany.

#### CDU AND CSU BACK STEINMEIER FOR PRESIDENT

Chancellor Angela Merkels Christian Democrats (CDU) have agreed to back Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a Social Democrat, as the ruling coalitions candidate to replace Joachim Gauck as president next year, a conservative source said.

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The vacancy for Germanys top diplomatic job served as a stepping stone for Schulzs return to German politics. A ministerial post would offer him the platform he needs to gain visibility at home.

But Schulz was hesitant to leave Brussels until the very last minute.

I think he will stay for a third term, German Socialist MEP Udo Bullmann predicted, following a chat he had with Schulz after the news broke about Steinmeier.

It remains to be seen if Schulz will become a minister or whether he will succeed in getting the SPD leadership.

According to his aides, Schulz has a very close and friendly relationship with Germanys Vice-Chancellor and SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel.

Gabriel won kudos after he convinced Merkel to nominate Steinmeier for the Presidency of the Federal Republic.

Too much consensus?

Schulz, a former bookseller, gained a reputation as a consensus builder over the years, developing a close relationship with his former rival in the European elections, and todays European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker.

#### JUNCKER BACKS SCHULZ BID FOR PARLIAMENT CHAIR

EXCLUSIVE / Martin Schulz has launched a discreet campaign to remain President of the European Parliament for a third consecutive term. One of his most fervent supporters is Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission President.

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Martin Schulz is – in the best sense of the word – a combative European, Juncker said.

He is a model European: determined and tireless, serious, but with a sense of humour, full of inner strength and, above all, total conviction, said the European Commission President.

Schulz was indeed an essential pillar of the Grand Coalition in the European Parliament between the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the European Peoples Party (EPP), a almost exact replica of the Grand Coalition in Berlin between his own SPD party, and Merkels Christian Democrats.

The European Parliament has enormously benefitted from his leadership and his commitment both in terms of recognition by public opinion and as regards the Parliaments influence on European law-making, said EPP leader Manfred Weber in a statement.

While Juncker and Schulz described these close working ties as positive for the European project, others pointed out that the cosy relationship between the largest political parties undermined the political accountability and ultimately the EU project itself.

One of the most recent examples was Schulzs decision not to expose EU Commissioner Günter Oettinger to a Parliament hearing before taking on his new budget portfolio. The Parliaments Conference of Presidents instead followed his proposal to organise an exchange of views on budget-related issues.

#### PARLIAMENT LEANING TOWARDS EXEMPTING OETTINGER FROM HEARING

EXCLUSIVE/ Parliament President Martin Schulz proposed on Thursday (17 November) bypassing the hearing process by which Gunther Oettinger will have his new Commission portfolio confirmed, despite new concerns about his trip to Budapest with a lobbyist.

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Oettinger was also protected from recent controversies, the latest involving a Budapest trip in a private jet owned by a German lobbyist working for the Kremlin.

Lets imagine for a second, that something like this happened for instance in Germany: the minister would already have had to resign for such conduct, said Benedek Jávor, a Hungarian Green MEP who lead the complaint in the Parliament.

This is exactly the kind of behaviour that undermines trust in the EU institutions and fuels euroscepticism. They seem not to have learned anything from the recent political scandals, Jávor lamented.

#### Big ambitions

Schulz eyes Germanys chancellery as the culmination of a political career that he started as Mayor of Würselen when he was 31.

In 1994 he became MEP. Those who met the hot-headed young Socialist in that period knew that his career would go beyond the EU chamber.

Since he joined the Parliament, he had big ambitions, said former parliament president during those years, the Socialist Enrique Barón Crespo.

Only a few years before he embarked on his political career, he experienced the worst moment of his life. A drunk and impulsive 24 year old Schulz cut ties with his family, his friends and even felt suicidal, people close to him during that period recalled.

I had this moment in my life where I knew either you change your life entirely or you are lost, he confessed.

<https://soundcloud.com/jorge-valero-570519463/schulzs-existential-crisis>

Six years later, he was the youngest Mayor of Würselen, the city where he grew up. He stopped drinking alcohol and now only takes apple juice.

In July 2003, his heated exchange with Silvio Berlusconi during a Parliament plenary session, in which the Italian mogul compared Schulz to a Nazi concentration camp guard, gave him unprecedented Europe-wide media exposure.

But he never dreamed about the most powerful positions in Europe when he was a teenager. He dreamed of becoming a professional football player.

He was a defender with low technical skills, said his childhood friend Cornelis Simons, who was also a football player.

He was rather one of those players you dont want to play against, he recalls with laughter.

Schulzs father was a policeman regularly assigned to protect dignitaries at the award ceremony of the International Charlemagne Prize in Aachen. The officers son was awarded one in 2015.

#### SCHULZ, NATIVE SON OF AACHEN, GETS CHARLEMAGNE PRIZE

European Parliament President Martin Schulzs father was a policeman regularly assigned to protect dignitaries at the award ceremony of the International Charlemagne Prize in Aachen. The officers son was awarded one yesterday (14 May).

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Looking back, Schulz considers himself lucky, saying I had the privilege of living a fascinating life.

But his struggles are not over. The no-nonsense defender is now about to play his toughest match against Angela Merkel, who is currently portrayed as the last standing champion of Western ideals following the election victory of Donald Trump in the US.