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## EU LEADERS NIX TRANSNATIONAL LISTS, COOL ON 'SPITZENKANDIDAT'

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"I know that Europeans aren't too keen on institutional issues – in fact they couldn't really be bothered by them – but in the Brussels bubble these things play a major role," said Jean-Claude Juncker, the current president of the commission.

His counterpart from the European Council, president Donald Tusk, also said the debate on the EU institutions was "very much a Brussels bubble topic".

Nevertheless, it had been argued by some that the ideas on the table were essential to strengthen European democracy.

### **Spitzenkandidaten or Spitzenkandidatinnen**

Take the issue of lead candidates – known in that Brussels bubble as Spitzenkandidaten. "Or Spitzenkandidatinnen," added Tusk, referring to the feminine form of the German word.

The European Parliament earlier this month adopted a text saying that they would only accept a presidential candidate for the commission if he or she had run in the 2019 elections as a lead candidate.

But Tusk told press that the 27 EU leaders debating the issue – UK prime minister Theresa May had not been invited – were not about to give away their legal right to propose a candidate.

"There was agreement that the European council cannot guarantee in advance that it will propose one of the lead candidates for president of the European Commission. There is no automaticity [automatism] in this process," he said.

Tusk also rejected as "wrong" the notion that resorting to such automatism would be more democratic.

The Polish EU council chief referred to the EU treaty, which said that the process to choose the commission president is based on a 'double democratic legitimacy'.

"The treaty says that the president of the European Commission should be proposed by the democratically elected leaders of their member states, and that he or she should be elected by the democratically elected members of the European Parliament. \* Cutting away any of the two sources of legitimacy would make it less democratic, not more."

### **Transnational lists 'no longer relevant'**

Another topic up for discussion was the so-called transnational lists, which would allow candidates for the European parliament to be elected by voters in more than one country.

Tusk's comments on the issue were short, after a majority of MEPs last week turned against it.

"Leaders will come back to this issue in the future," said Tusk.

Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte also told press that a long debate on transnational lists was "no longer relevant" after the MEPs' rejection of it.

"We'll return to that issue after 2019 – by which I do not say anything about the desirability of it," said the centre-right liberal leader.

French president Emmanuel Macron was disappointed by the parliament's decision to snub the idea of transnational lists. Macron was one of the most vocal supporters – which can partly be explained because as a leader of a new political party he has little to lose from those elected through such lists.

"The European parliament missed an opportunity in this context," said Macron.

### **Redistribution of seats**

Leaders also debated the redistribution of the seats which will be left behind by the UK MEPs after Brexit.

"Leaders broadly supported the idea that fewer member states should mean fewer seats, which means reducing the number of MEPs from 751 to 705," said Tusk.

What Tusk did not mention, was that not all 73 seats currently occupied by British MEPs will become empty.

Following complex negotiations, MEPs have agreed on a redistribution of seats for those countries that until now have been – or felt – underrepresented.

Irish prime minister Leo Varadkar on Friday expressed his satisfaction over the fact that Ireland will have two extra seats in the EU parliament.

The Netherlands is one of the few countries which wants all 73 seats to be vacated – even though it would gain three MEPs.

Rutte acknowledged that there was a "vast, vast majority" of countries that supported the

proposed redistribution.

He said that the Netherlands would take the coming months to consider whether it can agree. The formal decision on the redistribution of seats will be taken before July.

### **Super president**

Finally, commission president Juncker also told leaders about his idea for a 'super president', by merging the posts currently occupied by him and Tusk.

"The debate on institutional issues was friendly, except when I raised the idea of merging the offices of president of the European council and president of the commission," said Juncker, without giving too much details.

Tusk said simply about the idea: "There was no appetite to take this forward."

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