
TIMMERMANS: A GREEN CANDIDATE IN THE RED CORNER

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This article is part of our special report EU elections: The environmental issue.

Frans Timmermans, the Socialists leading candidate in the EU elections, has promised to champion a sustainable Europe if he is anointed to lead the next European Commission. But how sustainable are the Dutchmans green credentials?

The current First Vice-President of the European Commission has set his sights on Jean-Claude Junckers soon-to-be-vacated presidential chair, after getting the nod to be the Socialists Spitzenkandidat in November.

Over the course of the election campaign, Timmermans has fronted a green agenda in order to try and win over voters, even jokingly (or mistakenly?) urging people to go vote Green during a TV debate on 29 April.

In reaction to the laughter his remarks created in the audience, the Dutchman clarified immediately that Green is not the sole property of the Green Party and that the two political factions were not in competition here.

This is not a beauty contest. Its about your future, Timmermans said.

First Spitzenkandidaten debate falls flat

Five candidates vying to become the next European Commission president sparred and bantered in the first European election debate, which fell flat in the absence of Manfred Weber, candidate of the largest political group.

In a recent ranking of the green credentials of the European Parliaments political groups, his Socialists and Democrats (S&D) scored 61.3% and was classed as a defender along with the leftist GUE/NGL (66.5%) and the Greens/EFA (84.9%).

The centre-right European Peoples Party (EPP), for contrast, was classed as a dinosaur and only scored 14.3%, after MEP voting behaviour in the 2014-2019 term was collated.

Presidential shift

Perhaps most significantly, Timmermans has pledged to be personally responsible for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for climate change if he secures the top Commission job.

That would mean a marked increase in the political commitment granted to climate change, which is currently handled by Spanish Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete (Commission President Juncker has at times been criticised for not paying enough attention to the issue).

At a recent EU summit in Romania, Juncker insisted that current climate targets are a priority over a draft plan by his own executive that would see Europe strive for carbon neutrality by 2050.

Environmental groups have welcomed Timmermans promise to take responsibility, explaining that although it still needs a dedicated Commissioner, the challenge will need an integrated approach that encapsulates numerous policy areas, including energy, transport, regional policy, trade and employment.

Since climate change (and the environment in general) is increasingly recognised as an emergency which affects every conceivable policy area, it needs to become a flagship political commitment right at the very top, European Environmental Bureau (EEB) Sec-Gen Jeremy Wates told EURACTIV.

However, campaigners also note that Timmermans has steered clear of saying whether he backs an increase in the EUs overall 2030 emissions reduction target of 40%, although he has firmly supported plans to go carbon neutral by 2050.

Increasing the 2030 target is currently a no-go zone for EU capitals. Some like Germany think the bloc should stick to the agreed 40% goal while others like the Netherlands want a significant boost. The European Parliament earlier this year voted to bump it to 55%.

EU Parliament votes for 55% emissions cuts by 2030

Members of the European Parliament voted in favour of increasing the EUs 2030 emission cuts target to 55% and a net-zero mid-century target on Thursday (14 March), bringing an end to weeks of infighting.

Timmermans has for the last five years been responsible for the EUs commitment to the UNs 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

But, despite a concerted effort, a lack of progress has blotted his copy-book. Climate Action Network Europe told EURACTIV that more has to be done to make all the Commissions work compatible with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. According to the NGO, a lack of support from Juncker may have again limited Timmermans achievements.

The EEBs Jeremy Wates explained that there is a widespread misconception in Europe that the SDGs relate to the global south, so the EU has not been pursuing them with the kind of vigour they deserve.

If Timmermans were to follow through on his pledge to base the Commissions work around the SDG framework, it would be a step in the right direction, he added.


The nitty-gritty

Beyond the overarching promises made by the Socialist candidate, he has also to a certain extent delved into the detail of how climate change could be prioritised.

Among those policy finer points is the currently in-vogue idea of setting up a pan-European kerosene tax, in what would be a major change of approach to how the aviation sector is managed. Jet fuel is currently exempt from taxation.

Timmermans also backs a wider carbon tax, in contrast to his EPP rival Manfred Weber, but has not elaborated on how either levies would be implemented. His homeland, the Netherlands, recently said it would start taxing air travel itself in 2021 if an EU-wide solution is not agreed.

Netherlands ready to start taxing air travel

The Dutch government will introduce a  levy per air passenger in 2021 if the EU does not manage to set up a pan-European tax, as momentum builds behind calls to crack down on aviation's environmental impact.

The Commission recently registered an official petition, lodged under the Citizens Initiative scheme, that urges policy- and lawmakers to focus on a kerosene tax. If it gets over a million signatures from enough member states within a year the EU executive will be obligated to respond.

Policies based on Citizens Initiatives have already started to see the light of day. In early 2018, Timmermans unveiled an update to the bloc's drinking water rules, which was prompted by a petition that gathered 1.6 million signatures.

Citizens have made their voice loud and clear through the European Citizens Initiative, calling for action to have a guaranteed access to safe drinking water. We have heard and heeded their call and carried out a thorough analysis, the Dutchman said at the time.

Leaky drinking water rules tightened by EU

The European Commission revealed on Thursday (1 February) how it plans to update drinking water rules, with the goal of improving human health, reducing emissions and tackling plastic waste high on the list of priorities.

Better Regulation 2.0?

Timmermans' responsibilities in helming the Commission's Better Regulation drive have already linked him closely with several of the EU's landmark environmental laws, most notably January 2018's Plastics Strategy.

Like the drinking water directive revision, which aims to cut red-tape and bureaucracy, new EU rules on plastic have the fingerprints of Better Regulation principles all over them.

A directive meant to bring single-use plastic consumption to heel, recently given the final green light by the Council, was drafted, negotiated and finalised in record time. EU officials say that Timmermans personal involvement was a big factor in bringing it over the finish line.

EU nails rapid-fire deal on single-use plastics

Negotiators of the European Parliament, Council and Commission struck a provisional agreement early Wednesday morning (19 December) on banning single-use plastic products like cutlery and food containers, in what is one of the most quickly finalised proposals in recent EU memory.

In a recent video interview with EURACTIV, the Spitzenkandidat said that connecting peoples idealism with very concrete measures [such as the single-use plastic directive] is the way forward for the Commission.

Shaky start

But his drive to streamline how the EU executive does its business has not met with universal acclaim, especially not at the beginning of his mandate.

Proposed measures on the circular economy and air quality found themselves in the firing line when Junckers Commission started its mandate in late 2014. The files were eventually revised but the amount of time the process took was heavily criticised.

Timmermans also faced criticism when he labelled a proposed deal on curbing plastic bag use overregulation and was forced to backtrack when the Council and Parliament made it clear that they did not want to scrap the legislation completely.

Timmermans overruled on plastic bags deal

The Commission was overruled on how to implement the new targets for plastic bag reduction by the Parliament and Council, Frans Timmermans confirmed on Wednesday (19 October), even though the Commissions First Vice-President had previously labeled the proposal overregulation.

His shaky start aside, the Dutchman has gradually won over many of the EUs top green champions and his team actively sought the input of NGOs during the drafting of the S&D manifesto.

Greenpeace EUs Ariadna Rodrigo said that Timmermans seems to have evolved greatly on environmental issues over the last five years.

Hes making all the right noises on climate and environment now, but given that he wanted to scrap air quality and waste-management laws five years ago, it remains to be seen if he will follow through if he gets the chance, she warned.

Whether Timmermans will indeed even get the chance to sit in the big chair remains to be seen, as his drive to build what he calls a progressive majority of Socialists, Liberals, Greens and leftists, still risks falling short in numbers to drive out the centre-right EPP.

Even if the numbers do add up after the end-of-week EU elections, the final say will remain with member state leaders in the European Council, who are only obligated to take note of the European Parliament result.

*Frans Timmermans was contacted by EURACTIV but, at time of publishing, had not responded to questions.

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