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## WEBER RE-ELECTED EPP CHIEF AS COALITION TALKS DRAG

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The European People's Party, the EU's largest political block, re-elected its parliamentary leader, Manfred Weber, on Wednesday (5 June) - as the mainstream political parties attempt to hammer out a coalition in time for the EU leaders' meeting later in June.

MEPs from the centre-right EPP backed their Bavarian boss, Weber, who is also hoping to become president of the EU commission.

The EPP was the first group to hold its meeting to elect its leadership after the election, where its numbers decreased to 179, down from 207 in the 751-seat parliament.

The EPP remains, however, the largest party in parliament, and is seeking to build an alliance with the socialists, the liberals and the greens to form a majority. After the group meeting, Weber said his group is ready for "compromise".

"We want to deliver, [ \* ] we have to look for change," Weber said, adding that "EPP is ready for cooperation on this change agenda".

The group party leaders from the 'big four' met on Wednesday afternoon to talk about the programme for the possible coalition and working groups on issues.

However, talks are going at a snail's pace on who the European Parliament will put forward as candidate next president for the commission - as the liberals and the Socialists & Democrats will only be sorting out leadership issues later, in mid-June.

The socialists are expected to elect their group leadership on 18 June, while the liberals are holding the meeting on 19 June - with the EU summit beginning the day after.

The Greens hold their internal elections next week, and current co-leaders Philippe Lamberts and Ska Keller are expected to stay on.

For Wednesday's meeting the Socialists were represented by Udo Bullman, German group leader, and the liberals represented by veteran Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt, the liberal group leader plus Nathalie Loiseau, a newly-elected MEP representing French president Emmanuel Macron's party.

The Socialists are pushing their candidate, Dutch commissioner Frans Timmermans, while the liberals have had expressed opposition to the entire Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) system, which they think favours the EPP.

The EPP's dominance in EU politics - the party currently holds the presidency of all three major EU institutions - has abated due to the elections, as the three other big parties see an opportunity to push their agenda and candidates.

## **Green swell**

The Greens, which are currently the fourth-largest party in parliament, increased their numbers on Tuesday, adding five MEPs from the Czech Pirate Party and the German satirical Die Partei.

The Greens are in talks with others as well, and could add another four to 10 MEPs to their 74 seats, according to officials.

But talks on who will run the next EU commission are complicated by other layers of negotiations.

EU council president Donald Tusk, who has asked by EU leaders last week to draw up a list of names for the top EU positions, met with EU parliament president Antonio Tajani (both EPP).

That meeting was dismissed by Bullman.

"Political groups were not officially informed about this meeting. EP president Tajani has no mandate from the political groups to represent the parliament in the inter-institutional negotiations as of today. Therefore, the meeting between Tajani and Tusk can only be considered an internal and unofficial gathering of EPP representatives," he said in a statement.

EU leaders last week also tasked eight of their members to negotiate on who to consider for the top jobs.

The EPP's Croatian premier Andrej Plenkovic, and the Latvian PM Krisjanis Karins, the socialist Spanish prime minister Pedro Sanchez and Portugal premier Antonio Costa, plus the liberal Belgian and Dutch premiers, Charles Michel and Mark Rutte will all meet on Friday evening in Brussels for the first time.

## **Whither Fidesz?**

Meanwhile, Weber was re-elected with the votes of the EPP's Hungarian member, Fidesz, which has been a constant headache to the Bavarian politician.

The EPP and Fidesz agreed in March to suspend the Hungarian member's membership, after years of criticism on Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban's backtracking on rule of law and democratic principles.

With its 13 MEPs, Fidesz is the fourth-largest party in the EPP group after the German, Polish and Romanian delegations, but did not receive any positions in the EPP group, due to Weber's suspension decision.

"Fidesz has no right present candidates for the posts inside of the party, that was my proposal. [ \* ] We need some changes in the political approach of Fidesz at the national level. And today we agreed in the group on these principles," Weber said after the meeting - but evaded answering

whether the EPP group will support Fidesz MEPs getting positions in parliamentary committees.

Weber said it will be up to Herman Van Rompuy, former EU council president and Belgian prime minister, who was tasked in March to examine Fidesz's membership, to decide on the fate of the Hungarian member in the EPP.

Fidesz leader Orban has said previously he will not support Weber for the commission presidency.

### **Rebuffs for Salvini group**

But the far-right parties' dreams of a powerful new eurosceptic bloc in the parliament are fading.

Italy's far-right League was one of the biggest winners in last month's elections and its leader, interior minister Matteo Salvini sought to persuade Europe's nationalist parties to form one alliance.

On Wednesday, the Polish ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS)'s leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, ruled out joining due to the far-right parties' pro-Russian stance.

British MEP Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, which won 29 of the UK's 72 seats in the parliament, also said it would not join the new group.

Plus Orban's Fidesz will not join, as it seeks to remain in the EPP.

PiS, however, was able to welcome new members to its European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) on Wednesday.

Three MEPs from the Dutch pro-Nexit party Forum for Democracy were accepted as members to ECR.

However, this led to the departure of another Dutch delegation.

MEP Peter van Dalen voted against the admission of Forum for Democracy, and has said throughout the election campaign that his orthodox Christian Union party would leave ECR if Forum were accepted.

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Kaynak/Source: