
PARIS PUSHES ITS PAWNS IN RACE FOR KEY EU COMMISSION JOBS

18.07.2019

EurActiv (18 July 2019)

France is eager to claim the position of Secretary-General at the European Commission that will be left vacant after the departure of Martin Selmayr at the end of July. But Emmanuel Macrons quest for control in Brussels could be met with opposition. EURACTIV France reports.

France and other member states imposed a number of conditions to nominate Ursula von der Leyen as the new President of the European Commission.

One of them was that other German officials had to leave influential positions at the EU executive. This meant that Martin Selmayr, the current Secretary-General of the European Commission, had to leave.

The commitment was confirmed by Ursula von der Leyen herself on the evening of 15 July in front of lawmakers from the European Peoples Party (EPP) group.

Some members of the German government, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, were rather hostile towards Selmayr because he had helped strengthen the European Commissions independence from member states.

Independence is not highly appreciated in Berlin or Paris, with both capitals facing arbitration cases, including the prohibition of the Alstom/Siemens merger, which was decided against the advice of both governments.

MEPs ask next Commission chief to oust Selmayr

After European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker ignored their previous calls, MEPs called on Tuesday (26 March) on the next Commission to review the controversial appointment of Martin Selmayr as secretary-general of the EU executive.

France now wishes to take its turn in occupying this influential position, which will be available at the end of July.

But Selmayrs suggestion to name Frenchman Olivier Guersent for the role is not to the liking of the French, even though the current head of the Directorate General for Financial Stability is a fairly natural candidate.

The fact that Selmayr mentioned him is to his disadvantage, said François-Xavier Bellamy, head of

the French EPP delegation in the European Parliament.

However, there is no shortage of candidates. And the idea that the position should go to an Eastern EU member state has strong supporters as well.

In any event, France is keeping other candidates up its sleeve, including the head of DG Research, Jean-Eric Paquet.

On the German side of the EPP, the fear of a loss of influence is real. Until recently, the Secretaries General of the European Parliament and the European Commission – Klaus Welle and Selmayr respectively – were both from the German Christian Democrats (CDU), an important member of the EPP.

But suspicion prevails in Berlin since French President Emmanuel Macron blocked the EPPs Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber from taking the top Commission role.

Around 30 EPP lawmakers reportedly voted against Ursula von der Leyen in protest against the sidelining of their lead candidate.

EPP set to lose influence in von der Leyen Commission

If Ursula von der Leyen is approved as European Commission president this week, her own centre-right European Peoples Party (EPP) may actually lose influence in the next EU executive, given the political affiliation of the candidates likely to form the bulk of her senior staff.

Commissioner job up for grabs

France also needs to decide between having a Commissioner placed alongside von der Leyen or a secretary-general of the European Commission. If Paris claims both positions, it might end up with none.

The withdrawal of Jean-François Bonhert from the race to claim the European Public Prosecutors office was probably a strategic move in this context.

Announced on 16 July, the withdrawal of Bonherts candidacy shows that France is at least trying to give its partners some of the top jobs in Europe, in this case by leaving room for Romanian candidate Laura Kodruta Kövesi.

MEPs support Kövesi for chief EU prosecutor, defying member states

The European Parliament chose Romanias former anti-corruption chief Laura Codruța Kövesi as its top pick for the EUs first-ever chief prosecutor on Wednesday (27 February), setting itself on a collision course with the member states, which had opted for Kövesis French rival.

[Edited by Frédéric Simon]