



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

# 25 Years of *Spitzenkandidaten*

What Does the Future Hold?

Steven Van Hecke, Wouter Wolfs  
and Victor De Groof



## Policy Brief

November 2018

This paper critically reflects on the development and implications of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. It makes three claims. First, it argues that, despite the assertions of many commentators, this system did not appear out of the blue in 2014 but has a much longer history. Since the Maastricht Treaty, a series of steps have been taken that have clearly led the way to this outcome and, in fact, may even lead beyond it. These steps, including the role of the European People's Party, are explained here as they cast a different light on the whole process, without which the success of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system cannot be properly understood. Second, the paper claims that, from a political–institutional point of view, the system implicitly promotes the parliamentarisation of the EU architecture and might eventually lead to a stronger EU executive and a weaker European Parliament, as is the case in most national parliamentary systems. This would be the opposite of what many of its supporters would like to see. Third, the paper concludes that, in order to avoid this unintended consequence and fulfil the democratic potential of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, the current procedure must be understood as an intermediate step on the road to the direct election of the president of the EU. This, however, requires its success and consolidation in 2019. The paper thus ends with some recommendations that will help to make this happen.

**Keywords** European Parliament – *Spitzenkandidaten* – European Commission president – European political parties – European Council – Member states



# Introduction

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system was created in the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, so everyone reiterates, and will again be the main characteristic of the 2019 elections, so everyone assumes. The system basically entails that each European political party selects a candidate to become president of the European Commission. Consequently, the candidate becomes the leading figure in the Europarty's electoral campaign. It is a rather complicated and indirect system, as it links European political parties with EU institutions through elections that take place within national political arenas, and it serves various purposes at the national and the European levels. It was relatively successfully applied in 2014, but also has its critics and non-believers.

This paper takes a closer look at the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and focuses on three main aspects. First, it discusses the issue of where this system comes from and whether it is true that it was invented in the run-up to the 2014 EP elections based on a creative reading of Article 17(7) of the Lisbon Treaty.<sup>1</sup> The second aspect concerns the kind of political model—the type of (transnational) democracy—that lies behind the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, as every system has its, often implicit, advantages and disadvantages in terms of political actors as well as types of governance. Third, we will examine how European parties have reacted to this system and what is to be expected in the run-up to the 2019 elections, particularly with regard to the European People's Party (EPP).

## The long road to a *Spitzenkandidaten* system

Without the direct election of the EP (which has been happening since 1979), the existence of the presidency of the European Commission (as the top job in the EU executive) and the gradual development of European political parties (of which the traditional ones were established in the 1970s), there could never have been a *Spitzenkandidaten* system. How did these three actors—the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members . . .'



Parliament, the Commission and European political parties—come to organise their relationship in such a way that all three could support and implement this system?<sup>2</sup>

## The Maastricht Treaty

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system did not appear from out of the blue in 2014. It was the result of many incremental institutional and political steps taken in the years and decades before. First, the Maastricht Treaty was crucial, as it extended the term of office of the European Commission from four to five years and thus brought it in line with the legislative term of the EP.<sup>3</sup> This meant that a new Commission would be appointed after the European elections and for the same duration as the Parliament. This alignment considerably strengthened the link between the European elections on the one hand, and the Commission and the office of its president on the other. It was applied for the first time in 1994, as the third and last Commission led by Jacques Delors only served from 1993 to 1994. Since 1995 every Commission has been appointed after the EP elections for a period of (in principle) five years. This was even the case in 1999 when the Santer Commission stepped down before voters went to the polls. From March a caretaker Commission was installed until the new Commission began its mandate in September 1999, in alignment with the five-year term of the EP.

## The EPP and the Prodi Commission

The 1999 EP elections triggered the taking of another step towards the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. For the first time since the introduction of elections in 1979, the EPP became the largest group in the Parliament. However, the former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi was appointed as Commission president, based on a deal between German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (a Social Democrat) and French President Jacques Chirac. Prodi, a left-wing Christian Democrat, had for a long time been affiliated with the EPP but had left after Forza Italia and its leader Silvio Berlusconi became the Europarty's new stronghold in Italy.<sup>4</sup> At that time, the German Christian Democrats were in

---

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the European Commission, see for instance, J. M. Barroso, 'State of the Union 2012 Address', speech at the plenary session of the EP, Strasbourg, 12 September 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Art. 158 of the Maastricht Treaty.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Jansen and S. Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), 63–4; W. Martens, *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2009), 145–6.



opposition at the national level. The fact that a Social Democratic Chancellor had helped to install a non-EPP Commission president even though the EPP had won the elections was unacceptable to many within the party, especially the German Christian Democrats. This led the new EPP Group chairman in the Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering from Germany, to claim that a situation where a clear electoral victory is not reflected in the choice of the Commission president should not be permitted to happen again.

## The EPP and the Barroso Commission

Learning from this experience, the EPP made it very clear before the 2004 European elections that if it was to remain the largest group in the EP, the new Commission president should come from the party.<sup>5</sup> After the elections Chancellor Schröder and President Chirac proposed Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt to succeed Prodi. However, as a liberal he was unacceptable to the EPP, which had kept its relative majority in the Parliament. Spurred on by the EPP leadership, it was the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who opposed Verhofstadt's candidature, together with British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Unanimity among the members of the European Council was therefore not reached and another candidate had to be chosen. Backed by the EPP, the Portuguese Prime Minister José Manuel Barroso eventually became Commission president after the EPP leadership first proposed the British Commissioner from the Conservative Party, Chris Patten.<sup>6</sup> At last the new president of the European Commission had originated from the largest group in the EP.

### 2009: the first *Spitzenkandidat*

Another step was taken five years later. In the run-up to the 2009 European elections, the EPP not only claimed that the new Commission president should be from its political family if it were to remain the largest group in the Parliament, but it also presented a candidate. At its electoral congress in Warsaw at the end of April, it proposed José Manuel Barroso for a second term.<sup>7</sup> This was the very first time that a *Spitzenkandidat* had been chosen, although the term was not yet used and it was a largely informal proposal. The expectation was that the second largest European political family, the Party of European Socialists (PES), would do the same. The problem, however, was that a number of socialist heads

---

<sup>5</sup> See EPP, *Resolution for the Appointment of the Future President of the European Commission*, adopted by the EPP Statutory Congress, Brussels, 4–5 February 2004; Jansen and Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> See Martens, *Europe*, 173–8.

<sup>7</sup> Jansen and Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service*, 134.



of state and government—such as Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—also supported Barroso for a second term. These internal divisions made it impossible for the PES to agree on a common candidate. In the end the PES did not present an alternative, making Barroso the only *Spitzenkandidat*.

## The 2014 EP elections

By the elections five years later, in 2014, the Lisbon Treaty had been implemented and procedures were much more formalised within the EPP. More importantly, four other European political families also presented their candidates to become president of the Commission.<sup>8</sup> This time, the real political battle took place after the EP elections, as the European Council was hesitant about appointing Jean-Claude Juncker, former prime minister of Luxembourg and the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*. The EPP's leadership was divided: European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in particular stuck to the line that it was up to the heads of state and government to nominate a new Commission president, not only formally but also in substance. Eventually they had to give in after the newly elected EP, and especially the group leaders of the main political families, made it clear that they would not vote for any candidate that had not been part of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system.<sup>9</sup>

## Lessons to be learned

What lessons can be learned from this 25-year-long *Spitzenkandidaten* history?

First, there is a warning for the members of the European Council: the EPP played a big role in the development of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and therefore its Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are less likely than others to abandon it. EPP support for this system is much stronger than for transnational lists, an idea that was received rather half-heartedly (and was voted down in the Parliament in early 2018, largely due to the EPP's opposition).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> For a legal perspective, including the importance of the introduction of the European Convention and the EPP's role in the development of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, see 'The Story of the *Spitzenkandidaten*', Factsheet.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, V. Pop, 'EP Leaders Tell Van Rompuy to Nominate Juncker', *EUObserver*, 12 June 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, P. Teffer, 'Centre-Right Torpedoes Pan-EU Electoral Lists Plan', *EUObserver*, 7 February 2018.



Second, there is no automatic link between being the *Spitzenkandidat* of the largest group and becoming Commission president (this is a potentially weak spot for the EPP).<sup>11</sup> The *Spitzenkandidaten* system *sensu stricto* only says that a new president should be found among the *Spitzenkandidaten*, not necessarily that he or she should be the candidate of the largest group, despite the discourse that is often heard among the EPP's ranks. First and foremost, a *Spitzenkandidat* has to obtain majority support in the Parliament, and this majority does not have to include the largest group. So far the EPP has managed—as the largest group—to maintain a central role in the Parliament, but this has no eternal value. It could lose either its status as the largest group or its pivotal role, as other groups might form a majority without the EPP. The result would be that the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat* would not become the Commission president.

Third, the EPP's political opponents might have good reasons to prepare such a plan, both given the predominance of the EPP in this story and because so far only that party has benefited from the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. This could lead to a situation in which the other political groups support a non-EPP *Spitzenkandidat*, but it could also induce them to cease their support for the system itself, since its outcome has always been beneficial to the EPP.

Finally, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is only one (albeit a very strong) example of a longer and broader power struggle between the EU's member states and the EP. One should never underestimate a newly elected Parliament that wants to be taken seriously and to show its strength, and which is ready to use rules, including treaty articles, creatively to the benefit of its own position vis-à-vis the other institutions and the member states.<sup>12</sup> That the phrase 'taking into account the elections to the European Parliament' in Article 17(7) regarding the appointment and election of the Commission president has been used to limit the role of the European Council is a clear victory for the Parliament.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Declaration 11 in Article 17(6) and (7) of the Treaty on European Union, especially the plural 'candidates for President of the Commission': 'The Conference considers that, in accordance with the provisions of the Treaties, the European Parliament and the European Council are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the European Commission. Prior to the decision of the European Council, representatives of the European Parliament and of the European Council will thus conduct the necessary consultations in the framework deemed the most appropriate. These consultations will focus on the backgrounds of the candidates for President of the Commission, taking account of the elections to the European Parliament, in accordance with the first subparagraph of Article 17(7). The arrangements for such consultations may be determined, in due course, by common accord between the European Parliament and the European Council.'

<sup>12</sup> See the many examples in, for instance, S. Hix and B. Høyland, *The Political System of the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).



However, this is not written in stone and it is easily imaginable that the European Council will try to tilt the balance of power back in its favour.

## The political model behind the *Spitzenkandidaten* system

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system is expected to serve various goals: to increase the stakes of the European elections and improve voter turnout, to personalise European politics, to Europeanise the election campaigns (which are still fought within the boundaries of the member states) and so on. In sum, the main aim of the system is to strengthen ‘European democracy’. It can thus be argued that only those opposing democracy at EU level would be against the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. The problem with this line of argument is that the empirical evidence that the system has had a positive effect on voter turnout is limited so far. It should be noted, however, that 2014 was only a starting point and that it will probably take more time for these effects to materialise.

From an institutional point of view, the fact that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is part of a longer-standing power struggle between the EP and the member states reveals that the ultimate goal is probably parliamentary control over the EU executive. It is clear that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has (1) strengthened the position of the EP vis-à-vis the member states with regard to the installation of a new European Commission; (2) strengthened the role of European political parties in selecting the *Spitzenkandidaten*, and therefore the future Commission president; and (3) directly linked the leaders of the parliamentary groups with the president of the European Council as the Treaty provides that the European Council will ‘conduct the necessary consultations’ with the ‘representatives of the European Parliament’.<sup>13</sup> This does not come as a surprise. The EP has already gained influence over the process to install the EU executive, particularly through the hearings with the commissioners-designate before the approval vote in the plenary session. European political parties too have focused increasing energies on making the most of their

---

<sup>13</sup> See Declaration 11 in Article 17(6) and (7) of the Treaty on European Union, which for the first time makes explicit the role of the political leadership of the EP in this process. For the role of European political parties in the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, see G.-J. Put et al., ‘The Choice of *Spitzenkandidaten*: A Comparative Analysis of the Europarties’ Selection Procedures’, *Politics and Governance* 4/1 (2016), 9–22.



representation in the European Commission. Trying to gain more influence over the top office within the Commission seems logical for both actors.

Interestingly, the impact on the position of the EU executive has not played much of a role in this debate. In particular, the argument that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system also empowers the Commission, among other things by providing a stronger popular mandate, is seldom heard. This does not seem to be a major concern, as the focus seems to be on the system's strengthening of the mandate of the legislature (at least one branch of it, the EP, vis-à-vis the other one, the Council) to appoint the executive. The political power balance within the Parliament, the argument goes, should be reflected in the election of the Commission, hence the formula that the appointment of its president should take 'into account the election to the European Parliament', as stated in Article 17(7) of the Lisbon Treaty. This argument is anything but controversial as it is part of the constitutional system in most of the EU member states. A new government is formed at the national level after parliamentary elections, and it tends to reflect the political balance in parliament (but not necessarily the winners). To be legally more precise: the new government depends on a majority in the new parliament for its survival.

This is exactly what the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is about: there can be no new president of the Commission if he or she has no majority in the new EP. In many member states (including Germany, hence the German term in use) the same system is applied. Political parties nominate their candidate for the executive even if he or she is not a candidate in the whole member state, as there is no country-wide electoral district (the equivalent of European transnational lists and an EU-wide constituency at the national level). The only thing a *Spitzenkandidat* has to do is to obtain a majority after the elections in order to become the head of the executive. Aside from the fact that some member states are more familiar with this system than others, it is also clear where the real power lies within such a system: with the executive. Governments that are dependent on a majority within parliament tend to dominate the parliament rather than the other way around. In most national contexts, the





so-called parliamentarisation of the political system paradoxically leads to strong governments and weak parliaments.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is anything but neutral. It is not impossible that in the long run it will weaken the EP vis-à-vis the Commission, as in most national political systems governments tend to dominate parliaments. The implication is clear: supporting the *Spitzenkandidaten* system to strengthen European democracy might lead to weaker parliamentary control vis-à-vis the executive and end up strengthening the European Commission rather than the EP. Paradoxically, this weakening of the Parliament could be prevented by independently electing the executive, as in the political system in the US. There, the direct election of the president as head of the executive, independent of the election of the legislature, has created a political system in which parliament is not dominated by government, at least not as much as in so-called parliamentary systems. If the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is to also strengthen the role of the Parliament (and not only of the Commission, vis-à-vis both the member states and the Parliament), it can only be an intermediate stage. Eventually the Commission president<sup>15</sup> should be elected directly<sup>16</sup> and act independently of the EP, in order to secure a strong parliament as a crucial player within the democratic system of the EU.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> This thesis is not uncontested but is dominant within legislative studies. See, for instance, T. Raunio and S. Hix, 'Backbenchers Learn to Fight Back: European Integration and Parliamentary Government', *West European Politics* 23/4 (2000), 142–68. Mair and Thomassen warn about precisely this replication of the parliamentarisation model at the EU level, as they believe that it will confuse the representative function (parliament) with the governing function, a problem that also exists at the national level. According to them, keeping the two functions separate would strengthen EU democracy rather than weaken it, with the European political parties having an important role to play in the representative function. See P. Mair and J. Thomassen, 'Political Representation and Government in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy* 17/1 (2000), 20–35.

<sup>15</sup> Or alternatively a monocratic head that would be both president of the Commission and of the European Council, as proposed by some. See, for instance, European Political Strategy Centre, 'A Double-Hatted President: A New Way of Governing for a Union of 27', *Road to Sibiu*, Issue 2, 16 February 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See the EPP's plea for 'a direct election by the people of the President of the European Commission', EPP, Manifesto, adopted by the EPP Statutory Congress, Bucharest, 17-18 October 2012, pp. 4-5: [https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2015/09/Manifesto2012\\_EN.pdf](https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2015/09/Manifesto2012_EN.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Here, too, an important parallel with the introduction of transnational lists can be made. In addition to the many problems of implementation and a fair distribution of seats among member states, electing a limited number of MEPs on transnational lists only makes sense as an intermediate stage, that is, as a step towards electing one candidate in an EU-wide electoral district, i.e. the direct election of the Commission president. See W. Wolfs and S. Van Hecke, 'Proposals on Transnational Lists for the European Parliament', in S. Van Hecke et al., *Reconnecting European Political Parties with European Union Citizens* (Stockholm: IDEA, forthcoming).



# Some neglected consequences of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system

---

As long as there is no direct election of the Commission president alongside the election of the EP, it makes sense to combine the *Spitzenkandidaten* system with the introduction of transnational lists. It should be emphasised, however, that what we have in mind here is very different from what the EP rightly rejected earlier this year. Opposing transnational lists certainly makes sense, for various reasons, when those lists relate to electing multiple MEPs, as was proposed in early 2018.<sup>18</sup> But opposing an EU-wide constituency (without which there cannot be transnational lists) to elect one seat—that of the Commission president—while maintaining the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is much more difficult to explain. The spirit of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is to increase the popular legitimacy of the Commission president. So far this has been done in an indirect manner, through the election of the Parliament across different constituencies, similar to the German political system. But introducing an EU-wide constituency would increase the popular legitimacy of the president of the Commission even more, as the vote would take place in a direct way. This small innovation would mean the de facto direct election of the Commission president. Hence, strengthening the *Spitzenkandidaten* system does not necessarily imply the introduction of transnational lists for electing multiple MEPs but it cannot speak against the introduction of an EU-wide constituency to elect one candidate from various lists.

The outcome of the 2014 experience with the *Spitzenkandidaten* system confirmed the old, unwritten rule (in place since the selection of Commission President Jacques Santer) that the European Council selects this one candidate from its own ranks. Indeed, Jean-Claude Juncker was prime minister of Luxembourg for many years and therefore a member of the European Council until he lost this position in the autumn of 2013. Moreover, he was the longest-serving member of the European Council and, as president of the Eurogroup, a central player in the management of the EU's euro crisis. Part of the hesitation of the European Council to comply with the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was overcome by the fact that the person involved was Juncker. Consequently, the true litmus test for the new system will be the 2019 elections, when the Parliament may want the European Council to nominate someone who has no experience as a former head of state or government.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



The appointment of Juncker has certainly encouraged the current hopeful *Spitzenkandidaten*. If Juncker had failed to become Commission president, it would be hard today to convince any senior candidates to run for the office of Commission president under this system. However, the uncertainty around the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, alongside the unpredictability of the elections itself, has so far discouraged current heads of state and government from putting forward their candidacies.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system also limits candidates who are not backed by their political family or by their national government. Indeed, as well as their nomination by a Europarty, a candidate should be assured of the backing of his or her member state in order to avoid a lack of support in the European Council, as it is rather unlikely that the heads of state and government would nominate someone who does not even have the support of his or her own capital. The lack of a transnational list in which politicians could generate popular legitimacy as an alternative to backing from a political family or a member state might also prevent certain politicians from running. The timing of the party procedures to select a *Spitzenkandidat* can also be discouraging. In the case of the EPP, the advancement of the date by which it must nominate its *Spitzenkandidat* (in 2014 it occurred in March, just two months before the elections, while the current selection will take place six months in advance) has prevented Michel Barnier from running in the race as he is still fully occupied with the Brexit negotiations on behalf of the European Commission.<sup>19</sup>

The current *Spitzenkandidaten* system favours politicians who seek to take a defining career step. Indeed, there may be clear benefits to running anyway, even if the individuals are not nominated by their political family or they do not win the *Spitzenkandidaten* contest in the end. Candidates can count on a certain degree of media attention, not least in their own member state. This increased visibility—however small—could give them an advantage compared to their direct competitors in the domestic arena. Furthermore, it could increase their chances of gaining other senior positions in the EU institutions. Take, for instance, Juncker’s initial two competitors to become the EPP *Spitzenkandidat* in 2014. Valdis Dombrovskis was nominated by his member state, Latvia, to become a member of the Juncker Commission, while Michel Barnier was selected by Juncker in 2016 to be in charge of the Brexit negotiations. In the socialist family, *Spitzenkandidat* Martin Schultz

---

<sup>19</sup> Note that Barnier concluded his 28 September letter to EPP President Joseph Daul, in which he announced that he would not run for EPP *Spitzenkandidat*, with a handwritten sentence: ‘Évidement, je resterai engagé à l’avenir et disponible pour défendre nos valeurs et renouveler ensemble le projet européen.’ Many commentators have interpreted this as indicating that while Barnier would not be the EPP candidate, that was not to say that he would not be available to become Commission president.



managed to stay on as president of the EP after the 2014 elections, while in the liberal family Guy Verhofstadt continued to lead the ALDE Group.

Finally, the choice of the *Spitzenkandidat* that might eventually become Commission president has certain consequences for other posts that need to be filled. First, the government of which the Commission president is a member can no longer nominate its own commissioner, as the choice has already been made in concert with the other member states (or at least a qualified majority of them). Second, because a certain balance in the most senior EU posts needs to be preserved with regard to political family, geography, gender, euro membership and so on, the selection of the Commission president has an impact on the choices for other posts, such as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Council president. If a national government (or a political family) prefers to have someone in these seats, this might lead to anticipatory behaviour with regard to the selection of the *Spitzenkandidat* and the Commission president. After all, political positions are linked, often as part of larger package deals made behind closed doors. The *Spitzenkandidaten* system certainly limits the room for manoeuvre for traditional political bargaining but it has not stopped it. Indeed, it only applies to the Commission presidency, which is only the first step in a longer series of selections of political personnel within EU institutions, including ones within the newly elected EP.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion and recommendations

---

Despite its limitations, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has clearly made the selection procedure for the Commission president more political and European political parties (as well as the EP) more powerful, at least for the time being. The 2019 elections will be a crucial test for the sustainability of the system. The following are recommendations to increase the likelihood of the system successfully passing next year's test.

- Focus on what the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is about: creating a linkage between the outcome of the EP elections and the selec-

---

<sup>20</sup> See the 2019 calendar and the way in which the current Commission presents the system: European Political Strategy Centre, 'Building on the *Spitzenkandidaten* Model: Bolstering Europe's Democratic Dimension', *Road to Sibiu*, Issue 1, 16 February 2018.



tion of the EU executive, thereby giving a bigger say to voters in the appointment of the Commission president. In other words, the system should not be sold through promises that cannot be guaranteed, such as increased turnout, although one might reasonably entertain the hope that the latter will be one of its positive side effects.

- Avoid ambiguities within the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. For example, make it clear whether or not there is an automatic link between being the *Spitzenkandidat* of the largest group and becoming Commission president.
- Avoid opportunism. Every political family should be clear before the EP elections about whether they support the system or not, irrespective of the possible outcome for them, in order to increase accountability.
- Ideally, Europarties that support the system should publicly commit their heads of state and government to it, in order to decrease the likelihood that they will not back it later in the European Council. They should do the same with their national opposition leaders to avoid candidates being criticised for purely domestic reasons.
- Refrain from giving a national government a determining voice in the nomination of a *Spitzenkandidat* or Commission president when the candidate comes from that member state, as this could not only jeopardise the democratic added value of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system but might also discourage high-profile candidates from putting themselves forward.
- In the long run, consider combining the *Spitzenkandidaten* system with transnational lists to elect them. Although this is only a second-best solution as an alternative to the direct election of the European Commission president, running *Spitzenkandidaten* in a Europe-wide district would increase the popular legitimacy of the Commission presidency and would provide an important incentive for high-level politicians to put forward their candidacy. Giving European citizens a direct vote—instead of the current indirect system—on who should become the next Commission president corresponds perfectly with the rationale behind the *Spitzenkandidaten* system.



- Eventually, establish the direct election of the Commission president. To avoid a significant weakening of the EP in favour of the EU executive—as has happened in the parliamentary systems of most member states—the direct election of the president of the Commission should be considered. This would not only improve the legitimacy of the EU executive, but also provide stronger guarantees of the independence of the EP and, consequently, of the political checks and balances in the EU’s decision-making system.

## Bibliography

Barroso, J. M., ‘State of the Union 2012 Address’, speech at the plenary session of the EP, Strasbourg, 12 September 2012, accessed at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-12-596\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-12-596_en.htm) on 23 October 2018.

EPP, *Resolution for the Appointment of the Future President of the European Commission*, adopted by the EPP Statutory Congress, Brussels, 4–5 February 2004.

EPP, Manifesto, adopted by the EPP Statutory Congress, Bucharest, 17-18 October 2012, accessed at [https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2015/09/Manifesto2012\\_EN.pdf](https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2015/09/Manifesto2012_EN.pdf) on 3 November 2018.

European Political Strategy Centre, ‘A Double-Hatted President: A New Way of Governing for a Union of 27’, *Road to Sibiu*, Issue 2, 16 February 2018, accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc\\_-\\_road\\_to\\_sibiu\\_-\\_a\\_double-hatted\\_president.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc_-_road_to_sibiu_-_a_double-hatted_president.pdf) on 30 October 2018.

European Political Strategy Centre, ‘Building on the *Spitzenkandidaten* Model: Bolstering Europe’s Democratic Dimension’, *Road to Sibiu*, Issue 1, 16 February 2018, accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc\\_-\\_road\\_to\\_sibiu\\_-\\_building\\_on\\_the\\_spitzenkandidaten\\_model.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc_-_road_to_sibiu_-_building_on_the_spitzenkandidaten_model.pdf) on 30 October 2018.

Hix, S. and Høyland, B., *The Political System of the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Jansen, T. and Van Hecke, S., *At Europe’s Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People’s Party* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011).

Mair, P. and Thomassen, J., ‘Political Representation and Government in the European Union’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 17/1 (2000), 20–35.



Martens, W., *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2009).

Pop, V., 'EP Leaders Tell Van Rompuy to Nominate Juncker', *EUobserver.com*, updated 12 June 2014, accessed at <https://euobserver.com/eu-elections/124585> on 23 October 2018.

Put, G.-J. et al., 'The Choice of *Spitzenkandidaten*: A Comparative Analysis of the Europarties' Selection Procedures', *Politics and Governance* 4/1 (2016), 9–22, accessed at <https://www.law.kuleuven.be/eur/en/events-eu-law/files/politics-and-governance-2016-9-22.pdf> on 23 October 2018.

Raunio, T. and Hix, S., 'Backbenchers Learn to Fight Back: European Integration and Parliamentary Government', *West European Politics* 23/4, 142–68.

Teffer, P., 'Centre–Right Torpedoes Pan-EU Electoral Lists Plan', *EUobserver.com*, updated 7 February 2018, accessed at <https://euobserver.com/institutional/140899> on 23 October 2018.

'The Story of the *Spitzenkandidaten*', Factsheet, accessed at [https://elmarbrok.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/spitzenkandidaten\\_factsheet.pdf](https://elmarbrok.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/spitzenkandidaten_factsheet.pdf) on 23 October 2018.

Wolfs, W. and Van Hecke, S. 'Proposals on Transnational Lists for the European Parliament', in S. Van Hecke et al., *Reconnecting European Political Parties with European Union Citizens* (Stockholm: IDEA, forthcoming).

## About the authors

**Steven Van Hecke** is an assistant professor in comparative and EU politics at the Public Governance Institute of the KU Leuven. His research focuses on European political parties, EU institutions and European integration history. He is a Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies Research Associate and the Chairman of the KU Leuven Wilfried Martens Fund.

**Wouter Wolfs** is a junior research fellow of the Flemish Research Foundation at the Public Governance Institute of the KU Leuven. His research focuses on the financing of European political parties, the role of national parliaments in the EU and Euroscepticism.

**Victor De Groof** has a master's degree in Public Management from the KU Leuven, where he is currently studying public economics.



# Credits

---

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies  
Rue du Commerce 20  
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information please visit [www.martenscentre.eu](http://www.martenscentre.eu).

Editor: Federico Ottavio Reho, Strategic Coordinator and Research Officer,  
Martens Centre

External editing: Communicative English bvba

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

© 2018 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use.

Sole responsibility lies with the authors of this publication.