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THE SPITZENKANDIDATEN PROCESS – AN ATTEMPT TO EUROPEANISE ELECTIONS OR A TOOL TO INFLUENCE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE EUROPEAN UNION?

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Abstract: *The aim of the article is to investigate how a change in the election method of the President of the European Commission influenced the political system of the European Union. Given the 2014 election results and the consequences of actions taken by the European Council in 2019, a question arises: what opportunities did the party families hope to be brought by The Spitzenkandidaten process? Did it strengthen cooperation among national parties belonging to the same European party during the campaign? How has the role of the European parties in the EU's political system changed? What attitude to The Spitzenkandidaten process did individual European party families display? Has this process exacerbated turf wars between institutions? The purpose of the considerations made in the article is to verify the following hypotheses: H1: The Spitzenkandidaten process was an attempt of strong party families to gain influence in the EU executive. H2: Changes to the election method of the President of the European Commission introduced in 2014 led to the changes in the European parties functions within the EU's political system. During the studies, the author used the method of in-depth interviews with individual representatives of the European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (PES), and the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE). Twenty-five interviews were conducted..*

Keywords: The Spitzenkandidaten, Party at the European level, President of the European Commission, European Parliament.

1. Introduction

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) are referred to as second category elections (Reif, Schmitt 1980; Hobolt et al. 2009; Hix, Marsh 2011) due to low voter turnout, lack of citizens' interest in European affairs, and the manner of running a campaign by parties which focus during it on national issues. Although transnational federations of European parties were established in 1979, their role was not widely recognized until 2014.

The very process of institutionalization of the transnational European parties was spread over time. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty legally institutionalized them, and it was laid down that they “will express the political will of the citizens of the European Union”. However, until 2014, there was hardly any cooperation to be seen in the European parties during the elections to the European Parliament. They also did not perform their function, which involved “expressing the will of citizens” and was laid down in the treaties. A chance to change their role in the elections appeared with the provisions included in the Treaty of Lisbon, which introduced a different election mechanism of the President of the European Commission (EC). Under the new provisions introduced in 2009, after consultations with the European Parliament and taking into account the election results, the European Council (EUCO) approved the candidate for the President. In practice, this element was meant to enhance the role of the European parties in the EU’s decision-making process about concerning the interpretation of this provision by the Member States and the EP. During the elections to the EP, the European parties were to nominate their candidate for the President of the European Commission as part of the so-called The *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates) process. This mechanism was used for the first time in 2014 and then in 2019. Although the first direct elections to the European Parliament were held in 1979, it was only in 2019 that they assumed an-European character.

The topic of change of the election method of the President of the European Commission was analyzed in the context of changes to campaign actions taken by the European parties and the increase in voter turnout (Schmitt, Hobolt, Popa 2015; Popa, Schmitt, Rohrschneider 2016; Hobolt 2004; Dawson 2019), as well as the impact it had on the EU’s political system (Christiansen 2015; Kassim 2017; Gomez Wessels 2015; Dinan 2015; Deckarm 2017; Christiansen 2016; HeidebrederSchade 2020). Literature on the subject also discusses the of legal institutionalization of the Lead Candidate process and the selection procedure of a potential Lead Candidate in the European parties (Wolfs, Put, Van Hecke 2021). This topic has not been exhausted, however.

Given the 2014 election results and the consequences of actions taken by the European Council in 2019, a question arises: what opportunities did the party families hope to be brought by this mechanism? Did it strengthen cooperation among national parties belonging to the same European party during the campaign? How has the role of the European parties in the EU’s political system changed? What attitude to The *Spitzenkandidaten* process did individual European party families display? Has this process exacerbated turf wars between institutions?

The purpose of the considerations made in the article is to verify the following hypotheses:

H1: *Spitzenkandidaten* process was an attempt of strong party families to gain influence in the EU executive.

H2: Changes to the election method of the President of the European Commission introduced in 2014 led to the changes in the European parties functions within the EU's political system.

Writing the article, the author used the following research methods: institutional and legal analysis, desk research, and in-depth interviewing method. The article presents the results of empirical studies conducted in the European Parliament, which were funded by the National Science Centre¹. During the studies, the author used the method of in-depth interviews with individual representatives of the European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (PES), and the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE). Twenty-five interviews were conducted. Respondents' answers were anonymised; only the political affiliation of the European parties representatives remained unchanged. The answers were designated by abbreviations formed from the English name of the party and the interviewee's number e.g., EPP_1, ACRE_3.

2. European parties in the EU's political system

The European Union is not a typical international organization which aims to enhance cooperation in economic affairs. However, together with the development and spread of integration through a free-trade area, customs union, and the establishment of the European Union, the institutions that came into existence during its operation started to acquire competencies within the executive, legislative and judicial authority.

According to Simon Hix, together with the relations within European integration growing closer and the development of new cooperation mechanisms between the Community institutions, the EU started to acquire the characteristics of a political system. Hix noticed that the European Union had the elements characteristic of political systems, such as a stable and clearly defined system of institutions and role division in the context of their management, permanent and mutual

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links between the environment of the political system, and solutions implemented in the decision-making processes (Hix 2010).

The executive authority is divided between the European Council, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union. The European Council is responsible for defining the direction of the Union. The EU Council has legislative and executive powers. The European Commission plays the role of the government. Each of the 27 Commissioners is responsible for a specific policy area that lies in the EU competencies. In addition to legislative initiative, the EC plays a supervisory role over the Member States, for example, by monitoring how they implement the law. The Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the European Parliament share the legislative authority. The European Parliament performs three main functions: legislative, supervisory, and budgetary. In the legislative procedure, on the proposal of the European Commission, it adopts together with the European Council European legislation, approves decisions in relation to signing international agreements and EU enlargement, and may also request the Commission to submit a legislative proposal. In addition, the European Parliament approves the candidate for President of the Commission by approving other candidates for EC members and the presidents of the European Central Bank, the European Court of Auditors, or the European Ombudsman. The European Parliament also has supervisory powers over the Commission, for example, by granting the discharge of the budget. On the other hand, the judicial power is, on the other hand, exercised by the Court of Justice of the European Union and national courts. Thus, the EU's political system functions differently from the national political system, and EU policies are formulated without applying practices and processes typical of representative policy (Paczeński 2014).

Although the European parties do not form part of the EU's institutions, they hold certain powers enshrined in treaties. Thus, they perform functions in the EU's political system, which are characteristic of national political parties. For example, studies indicate that the European parties perform organizational and integrational functions, financial functions, and electoral functions (Skrzypek 2014; Kosowska-Gąstoł 2014; Schmitt, Hobolt 2015; Gattermann, De Vreese 2017, Wiśniewska 2020).

One of the activities which the European parties undertake while performing their organizational functions involves establishing party structures at the transnational level and in the EP. Within the European party, members of the European Parliament work in task groups with

members of the presidium on the issues that fall within the area of the EU's activity. As part of transnational cooperation, they work on common manifestos which are published before European elections. In addition, they organise congresses and party meetings which are attended by members of the European Parliament, representatives of the parties belonging to the political family, and representatives of candidate countries. From the perspective of the parties whose members failed to join the European Parliament, participation in the events organized by the European parties is a bridge between the party and EU structures. Furthermore, the European parties integrate parties from non-Member States. As recently as in the 1990s, EPP and PES were taking action to support the countries undergoing democratic changes. Cooperation with EU entities was regarded as an act of legalization of democratic changes, which could be seen in Georgia or Moldova. Since parties from non-Member States can belong to the European parties, it is a common practice for them to join European party families before accession. MPs from the candidate countries are also socialized by political groups – they are, for example, invited to the European Parliament as observers.

Initially, the European parties were financed by the political groups operating in the EP, and it was the fractions related to them that played a more important role during European elections. Since 2003, when the EP adopted provisions forbidding financing election campaigns from the EP budget, the role of the groups has diminished, and the European parties have become solely responsible for financing pan-European campaigns (Sasmatzoglou 2013). In 2011, they were granted funding from the EP budget, and as a result, they could intensify campaign action. Since then, they have started to perform the function financed for the national parties. Therefore, they can financially support the national parties during and between elections by co-financing the events that focus on European Union-related topics. During elections, funds from the European parties budget are spent on campaign gadgets and Lead Candidates' activities. In 2014, the European parties were granted 4.5 million euros for activities promoting Lead Candidates.

The rules of financing the European parties changed in 2019. Since then, 85% of the funds coming from the EP budget are divided proportionally among the European parties, provided that they have their representatives in the EP. 15% constitutes, on the other hand, the European parties contribution. The chart below shows the funds that the European parties have at their disposal. EPP and PES received the most funding from the EU budget. Thus, the largest European party

families have the funds necessary to run an office, pay administrative fees, maintain an official seat or support national parties.

The main function of transnational federations of political parties was established in 1979 was to coordinate European elections. Until 2014, the role of the European parties was limited to organizing congresses (by such parties as PES, EPP, EGP, ALDE) which were attended by national parties and drawing up election manifestos. In the programs of the European party family, they presented their visions for European integration. The candidates rarely used the programs at the national level. Members of the European Parliament focused mainly on national affairs, which their electorate seemed more interested in. Supporting national parties, the European parties performed their electoral functions. They were, for example, preparing informative and promotional materials with the logo of the European party. Since 2014, their role in the European campaigns has changed, and their actions have taken on more pan-European character. The changes resulted from a new election method of the President of the European Commission. Since 2014, the European parties have been responsible for nominating a candidate for the President of the European Commission during elections to the European Parliament. As a result, the actions have been intensified, and the candidates for the EC President started to present the logos of the European parties. The parties started to compete with each other at the European level. Viewpoints of particular European families on the problems that EU citizens had to face started to be presented during debates. Moreover, in 2019, the candidates representing particular European parties were willing to support member parties by participating in the events organized by the parties at the national level.

3. Institutionalization of the Spitzenkandidaten process

The change of the election method of the President of the European Commission was initiated in the 1990s due to works on the Treaty of Amsterdam. The idea of the European Parliament strengthening its role in the decision-making process and proposing a candidate for the EC President was put forward by the representatives of Denmark, Greece, and Austria. They were working on the amendments to the Treaty on European Union as part of “*Reflection Group*” led by the member of the European Parliament, Westendorp. Their idea did not gain, however, much support among the Member States. As a compromise, the Greek government proposed a solution that assumed that the European Parliament would approve the candidate of the European Council.

Ultimately, the Treaty of Amsterdam provided that the European Parliament should approve the candidate for the President of the European Commission.

The idea of the European parties nominating their candidates for the EC President before elections (European Parliament 1995) was first suggested by the member of the European Parliament, David Martin, associated with the Party of the European Socialists.

Further steps in this matter were taken in 1998 by Elhmar Brok from the European People's Party. In the report of 1998, he proposed two ideas for electing the EC President. The first idea assumed that the European Council would take into account the EP election results nominating a candidate for the EC President. The second idea was based on the *Spitzenkandidaten* system under which the European parties were to nominate a candidate before the EP elections Council whom the European Council would later approve, provided that the European parties they represented won the elections. The Lead Candidate procedure was included in the resolution presented by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) and adopted in the EP resolution in 1999. The resolution was adopted by the votes cast by the MEPs from the following groups: EPP-ED, ELDR, PES, and GUE/NGL.

The idea of changing the election method of the President of the European Commission was brought up again during talks at the European Conference on the Future of Europe. In a draft of the Constitutional Treaty, the EPP representatives, Elmar Brok and Alain Lamassoure proposed that the European Council should nominate a candidate for the President of The European Commission, taking into account the election results to the European Parliament. Later, the European Parliament was to vote on the candidacy and approve it by a majority of votes. Adopting such a solution would mean that a vote in favor of a particular European party would be equivalent to electing a particular candidate for the President of the European Commission. The proposal was included in the draft of the Constitutional Treaty, which eventually did not come into force after being rejected in a referendum by the citizens of the Netherlands and France.

Although that new treaty regulations failed to be adopted, the European People's Party announced that the leaders of the countries and governments associated with it would support after the elections to the EP only this candidate for the President of the European Commission who belonged to the winning European party. EPP opted for such an election method of the President mainly because the political group associated with it had had a significant number of mandates in the EP for years.

The Lead Candidate process was partly implemented in 2005. Due to the heads of the countries and governments associated with EPP and PES, José Manuel Barroso became the President of the European Commission (Beukers 2005). Following its declarations from 2004, in 2009, before the next elections to the European Parliament, EPP put up its candidate for the President of the European Commission. It was again José Manuel Barroso. In 2009, other political families, PES and EGP, which supported this mechanism, also considered nominating their candidate for the President of the European Commission before elections to the European Parliament (Sasmatzoglou 2013). Neither social-democrats nor the Greens were able to decide within their parties about whom to nominate as a candidate.

According to Article 17(7) of the Treaty of Lisbon, the President of the European Commission is elected in the following manner.

“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. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.” (Treaty on European Union)

The final stage of legal institutionalization of the Lead Candidate process took place in 2010. The initiator of this was the European Commission chaired by José Manuel Barroso. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process was suggested in 2012 by the then President of the European Commission - José Barroso – in the State of the Union (Barosso 2012):

“A necessary means to deepen the pan-European political debate would be the presentation by European political parties of their candidate for the post of Commission President at the European Parliament elections already in 2014. This change can be done without Treaty change. This would be a decisive step to make the possibility of a European choice offered by these elections even clearer. I call on the political parties to commit to this step and thus to further Europeanise this European elections” (Barosso, 2012).

The idea was not supported by all the leaders sitting in the European Council. Among the opponents, there were, for example, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, James Cameron, or the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, who pointed out that she could not see any link between the Lead Candidate and the President of the European Commission (Höing, Müller, Gómez, 2014). At the forum in Strasbourg in 2013, the members of the European Parliament held a debate during which they addressed the need for the European parties to play a greater role during elections. One of the participants in the debate was Viviane Reding, the Vice President of the European Commission, who referred in her speech to Eurobarometer surveys and conclusions from citizens' dialogues which indicated that citizens would be more willing to take part in the elections to the European Parliament if they could also vote on the President of the European Commission (European Parliament 2013). As a result, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in which it requested the European parties to nominate candidates for this position before the 2014 elections. Moreover, the Greens/EF A tabled amendments to the AFCO Committee proposed that the candidates for the EC President visit the Member States. The resolution was adopted by EPP, PES, ALDE Party, and the Greens/EFA.

In one of the interviews, the EPP Secretary-General, Antonio Lopez, stated that consequently, it was the European parties, and not the European Parliament, that obtained a decisive voice in electing the President of the European Commission.

In 2014, the European Council, the European Parliament, and political European parties concluded an interinstitutional agreement. As a result, in 2014, the European parties were to nominate their Lead Candidates, and the candidate of the winning European party was to be appointed President of the European Commission.

4. Opinion on Spitzenkandidaten process among European parties' representatives

Opinions as to the change of the election method of the President of the European Commission vary among the members of the European Parliament and decision-makers within the European parties. EPP and PES representatives perceived this election method as a chance for increasing the European parties recognition among voters:

The idea itself is not bad. It gives the possibility of voting not only for a particular party but also for 'the face' who represents it. This may have an impact on voter turnout during elections. (PES_2)

From the perspective of marketing theories, choosing a particular politician for the face of a political party may result in greater identification with the party among voters. Voters then cast their votes on a particular person, and not only on the party's logo. The main problem during European campaigns was insufficient exposure of the European parties logos compared to national parties' logos. During the campaigns in 2014 and 2019, the candidates for the EC President were given exposure in the media during television debates. They also visited the Member States and supported the candidates from the parties associated with the European family.

It is like an attempt to say that European citizens will know more about the European structures by voting for the national candidates to the European Parliament. When you are talk about elections, when you are try to convince someone to do something in politics, saying that someone should vote for the structures is simply not enough. It is a person who is the symbol .It must be someone charismatic. That is why it is so important. (EPP_9)

During the last two campaigns, increased activity and visibility of the European parties in the media could be observed.

In 2014, 22,676 voters from all Member States took part in electronic voting on the EGP candidate (Put, Van Hecke, Cunningham 2016). In 2014, ALDE could choose between two Lead Candidates – President of the Political Group Guy Verhofstad and Commissioner Olli Rehn. In 2014, in EPP Jean-Claude Juncker vied in internal elections with Commissioner Michel Barnier. In November 2013, the EPP Political Bureau nominated Martin Schulz as its candidate, and his candidacy was approved at the Congress in Rome in March 2014. Once the Lead Candidates had been nominated by the European parties, EPP claimed to be the only major European party with an open, transparent, competitive, and democratic nomination procedure (Dinan 2015). Television debates of the candidates for the EC President were held with audience participation. The possibility of asking questions facilitated direct interaction between the citizens and the European parties representatives.

Moreover, the representatives of the party families associated with PES and EPP regarded such an election method of the EC President as an opportunity for strengthen the European Parliament's role and the European parties in the European political system.

The change of the election method and nomination of Lead Candidates is simply an element of the influence the European parties exert on the political system. (PES_04)

The interviewees representing the parties that are less enthusiastic towards the idea of strengthening the federal elements of European integration regard this change as an attempt to strengthen the role of the European Parliament and the victorious political families. In contrast, the element of choosing 'the face' of the European campaign seems to be unimportant to them.

The aim of this change is to increase the role of the political groups and of the European Parliament in the decision-making process as regards filling the post of the Commission President. It is of no importance from the perspective of voting behavior displayed by the supporters of particular political parties. The same party affiliation or the Spitzenkandidaten process is too remote from the voters. (ACRE_1)

Another interviewee emphasized that the *Spitzkandidaten* process does not necessarily have to facilitate democratization of the European elections. This procedure enabled the biggest ideological group to choose the President of the European Commission by the backdoor.

Knowing from the statistical research which family is going to win, one can easily predict who will be the number one. The winner is likely to have their candidate selected for the EC President. Practically, it is enough to get 30-40% of votes at the party congress, and you can choose the EC President from one of the political families. This means that in practice, parties from 3-4 largest countries decide who will be EC President. (...) Therefore, it can be said that we developed a machine this is seemingly democratic, but in fact, it is anything but that. (EKR_03)

As a result, the election power shifted from the intergovernmental European Council to the most powerful parties from the largest Member States, giving them an influence on the executive.

5. Selection of the lead candidates in 2014 and 2019

Research on the selection procedure of candidates within the European party shows that the formal requirements for candidates do not vary much among the European parties. In 2014, EPP, PES, ALDE, and EGP candidates had to be supported by their national party and a specific number of other European parties 2014 and 2019, EPL lacked formal selection procedures. The PES candidate had to be supported by 15% of all member parties. The parties could support only one candidate. Before presenting a nominee at the Congress, his candidacy had to be approved by the party leaders. EPP, PES, and ALDE nominees had to be supported by the delegates at the election congress. EGP members submitted their votes on candidates in e-voting. Every citizen who was at least 16 years of age could take part in the voting. In 2019, ALDE changed its candidate selection procedure.

In 2014, only five out of thirteen European parties nominated their *Spitzenkandidat*. As a result, in 2014, there were six candidates for the President of the European Commission: Jean-Claude Juncker from EPP, Martin Schulz from PES, Guy Verhofstadt from ALDE, José Bové and Ska Keller from EGP and Alexis Tsipras from EL. It was the parties which in their policies and election programs opted for the federalization of the European Union that decided to nominate their Lead Candidates. The parties that were against deepening European integration or those that ran into strong resistance from some member parties did not nominate their Lead Candidates. In February 2014, the President of the European Conservatives and Reformists declared the “lack of a European demos makes this election method of the European Commission President illegal” (Keating 2019). It is worth remembering that the British who were against combining the elections to the EP with the appointment of the EC President from the very beginning constituted in 2014 the second political power in the ECR group and the ACRE party.

Before the 2019 elections, seven candidates for the post of the President of the European Commission were presented. In 2018, there were already two politicians in EPP who were vying for the nomination for the Lead Candidate – Manfred Weber, who was then the President of the EPP political group, and Alexander Stubbe, the Finnish Prime Minister. It was Manfred Weber who won the internal elections by a majority of votes. PES did not hold internal elections. Socialists nominated by a majority of votes Frans Timmermans, who held the position of the Vice President in Jean Claude Juncker’s Commission. Same as in 2014, the Greens nominated two

candidates: Ska Keller for the second time and Bas Eickhout. In 2019, ALDE did not nominate *Spitzenkandidaten* and decided that the programme of Liberals and Democrats was going to be presented during the European campaign by a group of people – Team Group, which was comprised of seven people. The group’s selections was to reflect ideological differences, party’s geographical location and gender-balanced. In the European Left, the candidates for the President of the European Commission were nominated by the EPL leaders. Taking into account the issues of gender balance and geography, EPL decided that its program and vision were going to be represented by Nico Cué and Violeta Tomic. The candidates chosen by the EPL leaders were approved by the member parties.

In the 2019 elections, the Lead Candidates’ race was joined by the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists and the European Free Alliance. In ACRE, the politician seeking nomination as the Lead Candidate had to win the support of ACRE and the members of the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM), which ACRE cooperates with and which belongs to the same group in the EP. Later, members of the ECR political group participated in voting (Wolfs, Put, Van Hecke 2021). ACRE nominee was Czech MP Jan Zahradni, who held the position of ACRE President. He was the only candidate seeking the nomination as *Spitzenkandidat*. ACRE decision regarding the Lead Candidate’s nomination was influenced by the fact that the British, who were in the final phase of negotiating their withdrawal from the European Union, had less influence within the European party and ECR group.

In the European Free Alliance, there were two politicians seeking the nomination as the Lead Candidate. Eventually, it was Orió Junqueras who won the support of the EFA Bureau. His candidacy was formally approved in March 2019 by the General Meeting (Wolfs, Put, Van Hecke 2021). EFA regarded the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure as an opportunity to draw public attention to the political issues related to Catalonia’s independence and the situation of Scotland in the face of Brexit (Wolfs, Put, Van Hecke 2021).

6. Analysis of the 2014 and 2019 election of the President of the European Commission

In the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, two European parties gained an advantage; these were the European People’s Party and the Party of European Socialists. EPP won 221 seats and PES 191. The next power was the Alliance of European Conservatives and

Reformists (70 seats), ALDE with 67 seats constituted the fourth power. Populist parties also enjoyed much support among citizens. The topic which prevailed during the 2014 election campaign was the economic crisis and its consequences, and the populist parties tended to attack the EU's institutions and the monetary union, blaming the crisis on the European Union (Sasmatzoglou 2013). Considering the election results and prior arrangements, the European Council proposed to the European Parliament Jean Claude-Juncker as a candidate for the President of the European Commission. Before the European Council summit, Jean Claude-Juncker met with the EPP, PES, and ALDE MEPs. He won their support, and it was agreed that he would take the post of the Vice President of the European Commission if Germany were to nominate Martin Schulz as the candidate for the Commissioner. Formally, the candidate had to win a majority of votes among the heads of the countries and governments at the European Council summit. However, some of the state leaders did not approve of his candidacy and the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure itself. One of the most influential opponents within the European Council was Angela Merkel. Although they both belonged to the same ideological family of political parties, former Luxembourg's Prime Minister had more social democratic views rather than Christian democratic ones (Dinan 2015). Differences in approach of Jean Claude-Juncker could be mainly observed during the economic crisis when Juncker was lobbying for the issuance of Eurobonds, which would not be advantageous from Germany's economic perspective.

On the other hand, British Prime Minister David Cameron, on the other hand, was not interested in strengthening European Parliament's powers because this would be a step towards building a solid supranational institution. Instead, like most Eurosceptics, Cameron wanted the intergovernmental European Council to have a powerful voice (Dinan 2015). At the informal European Council summit in May 2014, it turned out that Cameron was not the only one who was against Juncker's candidacy; however, he did not manage to form a broader coalition against this candidate.

The European Council summit regarding the election of the President of the European Commission was held on 26 and 27 June 2014. Despite the opposition voiced by Great Britain and Hungary, the European Council proposed to the European Parliament Jean Claude-Juncker as a candidate for the President of the European Commission. What spoke in favor of his candidacy was over a decade of political experience, which made him a well-known figure among the leaders of the EU member states. For many decades EC Presidents held important positions: they were

prime ministers, as well as ministers. Jean Claude-Juncker fitted this description perfectly. Moreover, his experience somewhat guaranteed that he would be able to serve as President of the European Commission.

It was recorded in the EC conclusions that Great Britain voiced concerns about the nomination procedure of the candidate for President of the European Commission. Due to the opposition expressed by some of the state leaders, it was also recorded in the conclusions that once a new Commission was formed, the Council was to deliberate how to appoint the President of the European Commission in the future.

Although in 2014, the election of the President of the European Commission was run in a spirit of a reached a compromise, the atmosphere after the 2019 elections and moods among the leaders of the states and governments no longer reflected aspirations for EU consolidation. The political situation changed alongside the divisions on the European party scene. Although after the elections, EPP still outnumbered other political groups, it was Liberals and Democrats who turned out to be real winners, thanks to 21 French MPs from Emmanuel Macron's party who joined ALDE. French MEPs dominated the ALDE group, resulting in ALDE changing its name for Renew Europe. With 98 seats, the new group became the third power in the European Parliament. Empowerment the position of the liberals changed the political situation in the European Parliament and broke "the grand coalition" of Christian democrats and social democrats, which had existed for many years. With a 50% turnout, which was the best result since 1994, European citizens clearly showed that they did want to maintain the status quo in the European Parliament. Political families of Christian democrats and social democrats lost 70 seats, whereas liberals, the Greens, and populists gained 99 seats more than in 2014. Although, as a winning party EPP could still demand that its candidate hold the position of the President of the European Commission, it had to reckon with other political families. The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, used his strengthened position during negotiations on the approval of the candidate for President of the European Commission.

After the European election results were announced, leaders of the states and governments met at an informal dinner preceding the European Council summit, where they discussed the election process of the President of the European Commission. After this meeting, the President of the European Council emphasized that the President of the European Commission would be elected in compliance with the treaty provisions:

“The Treaty is clear: the European Council should propose, and the European Parliament should elect. Therefore, the future President of the European Commission must have the support of both a qualified majority in the European Council and a majority of the Members of the European Parliament.” – Donald Tusk’s remarks after the informal European Council dinner (Official website, Consilium 2019).

Right after the European election results were announced, *Spitzenkandidat* Manfred Weber tried to organize a post-election meeting with the presidents of the biggest political groups in the European Parliament. However, seeing that after the election, there was a chance for a change on the European political scene, the Greens, ALDE, EL, and ECR did not agree to meet with him (Politico, 2019). During further negotiations, he also failed to receive support from most fractions of the European Parliament.

The President of the European Council started consultations with the EU member states and the European Parliament in order to lay the groundwork for negotiations on the election of the President of the European Commission. The European Council wanted to participate in the election of the EC President, and one of the criteria that it declares to take into account was balance. Moreover, the election was supposed to reflect the EU’s diversity in terms of geography, size of the country, gender, and political affiliation.

The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, did not support such election method of the President of the European Commission. He wanted the EU to have a transnational list of candidates so that all European voters could vote on the same candidates and European parties leader. The candidacy of Manfred Weber did not find the approval of the French and other Council members. The FIDESZ party of the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was suspended from membership of the EPP party before the election to the European Parliament. In the Council, it came to political and party competition between EU leaders, since each supported their candidate’s campagne (Heidbreder Schade 2020). Although Weber was known at the European level as President of the EPP party and later as President of the EPP Group in the European Parliament, unlike his predecessors in the post, he did not have experience holding higher public positions. It was also one of the objections raised at the meeting of the European Council in June. The other candidate was the representative of Social Democrats – Frans Timmermans. His candidacy, however, met with the objection of two Central and Eastern European countries, which was due to the actions he

took during his term in the former European Commission, where he was responsible for issues related to the rule of law. Although Timmermans gained Angela Merkel's support, other EPP representatives, for example, Leo Veradkar and Andrej Plenković, did not approve of his candidacy because it would make their political family lose its position (Politico 2019). This stand was supported by MEPs from the EPP group, who did not want to vote for a candidate who was not a social democrat. Since the candidates nominated by the political families were not approved by the European Council, and it was not certain whether the MEPs would approve them by, the leaders were faced with the task of finding a new candidate for this post. The person who was able to gain a majority in the Council and the EP and represent the winning political family was Ursula von der Leyen. Her candidacy met with the approval of the conservative majority and representatives from Central and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, she had experience in holding a ministerial post at national level (Heidbreder, Schade 2020). She held the post of the Minister of Family Affairs and later of the Minister of National Defence of Germany. She was unanimously nominated for the President of the European Commission by the European Council.

A nomination of a social democrat for the President of the European Commission also affected the division of functions in other institutions. Considering the elections to European Parliament, the families of political parties separated the posts of the President of the European Parliament, President of the European Central Bank, President of the European Council, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. As a result the President of the European Parliament and the High Representative were held by representatives of the social-democratic family. In contrast, politicians associated with Christian democrats held the posts of the President of the European Central Bank and the President of the European Council.

7. Summary

As the analysis of the actions taken by the European actors shows, the least important role in supporting the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was played by the European Council and the Council of the European Union. Initially, also smaller parties and political groups were not engaged in changing the election method of the President of the European Commission. However, the 2014 European elections and Jean Claude-Junker's success encouraged even the most Eurosceptic parties to nominate their candidates in 2019.

The analysis shows that each institution perceived the change of the election method of the EC President as an opportunity to attain different goals. For the European Commission, the possibility of presenting to the citizens the candidate for the President was an opportunity to personalize the campaign and build a connection between the candidate and the voters. MEPs regarded this change as an opportunity for to increase the importance of the European Parliament in the EU's decision-making process and increase the level of EU legitimization. Large families of European parties (EPP, PES) perceived it as an opportunity for strengthening their position on the European scene and making their candidate more likely to hold the position of the President since EPP and PES gained the most seats in the elections to the European Parliament. For the political families interested in deepening cooperation within the European Union, engaging the European parties in the process of the EC President's nomination was an instrument to institutionalize their role in the political system. As the 2014 and 2019 campaigns showed, the European parties attempted to Europeanise election-related activities. On the other hand, the Eurosceptic parties perceived this mechanism as anti-democratization of the election procedure. However, in 2109 they ultimately decided to nominate their candidates.

The situation after the 2019 elections showed that in the end, it was the decision of the state and government leaders. Thus, the Member States became again responsible for making decisions. State leaders used their positions to present contrary opinions, and party and political interests predominated over the balance of power in the Council. The Actions of state leaders highlighted the internal conflicts which the European Union has been facing. It has also been confirmed that the opinions within the EU regarding European integration and how it should proceed are mixed.

If this procedure is to be used again in 2023, the European parties should reconsider the nomination procedure and the person who is going to represent them. Political experience and recognisability among European elites are important to the European Council, which is the institution nominating the candidate for the President of the European Commission in the end. However, the 2019 election results showed that we should bear in mind that it is the candidate of the winning political family that has the greatest chance to become the head of the EU's executive.

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