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## LESS EXOTIC SPITZENKANDIDATEN

### EUROPEAN LEAD CANDIDATES ARE JUST A NORMAL PART OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

*In the 2024 European Parliament elections, European parties will once again nominate candidates for the Commission presidency. While the lead candidate procedure has repeatedly been called into question in the past, it is time to accept it as the democratic normality that it is.*

The 2024 European elections are approaching, and it will soon be lead candidate season again. For the third time, most European political parties – with the exception of the far-right ID and ECR groups and the still hesitant Liberals – will nominate candidates for the Commission presidency. Although no candidates have announced their intention to run as yet, the race promises to be interesting. If Ursula von der Leyen decides to stand for the European People’s Party, it could be the first election with an incumbent running. The Social Democrats have several prominent potential candidates too, including former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin.

Nevertheless, it seems that the debate might once again focus less on the candidates than on the procedure itself. Formally, the right to

propose the Commission president to the European Parliament rests with the European Council, and many heads of state or government have not yet come to terms with the increased role of the European parties. As a result, hardly any discussion about the lead candidates escapes the question of whether the procedure will “succeed” or “fail”, or even “die” if the European Council refuses to play along.

It is not only the European Council that has cast doubt on the procedure, however. Even its proponents often seem to disagree about what it actually means: Does it imply that the European Council automatically proposes the candidate of the strongest party? Or should the heads of state or government assess who has the support of a parliamentary majority?

Or could just any lead candidate who secures a qualified majority in the European Council win the nomination?

These open questions have been used by detractors of the procedure to cast it as a half-baked, controversial approach that is unfit for purpose. The widespread use of the German term *Spitzenkandidaten* has further contributed to an exoticization of the lead candidates, suggesting that they are a German invention alien to the parliamentary systems of other member states. All this has seriously damaged the lead candidates’ public visibility in past elections: Why should the media care to cover an outlandish procedure of dubious relevance?

But this perspective ignores the fact that the lead candidate system, with all its open questions, is

actually rather similar to the common practices in almost any multi-party parliamentary democracy. Whether they are called *lead candidates*, *lijsttrekkers*, or *candidati premier*, it is perfectly normal for parties to announce before an election who they want to lead the government. In some cases, this role falls almost automatically to the party chair, in others it is decided in primaries. Sometimes the lead candidates are at the top of nationwide electoral lists, sometimes they only stand in a local or regional constituency. But it would hardly occur to a major party to contest a national election *without* fielding a candidate for the executive top job.

After the election, it is not uncommon for no party to have an outright majority and for negotiations to form a coalition government to ensue. In most cases, such a coalition will be led by the strongest party and its candidate will become the head of the executive. However, this is not a foregone conclusion and depends on the compromises made between the parties. There are currently several EU countries, such as the Czech Republic or Sweden, where the candidate of the second or even third largest party has been

elected prime minister. And there are some, like Belgium or Bulgaria, where the coalition has agreed that the head of government would be none of the top candidates, but another person who was acceptable to all parties involved.

Finally, also in national parliamentary democracies, the selection of the head of government is not always left to the parliament alone. Heads of state often play some formal role too – and some of them, like the Italian president, even have a *de facto* veto right. In polarized situations, where the parties cannot agree on a government, a head of state may act as a mediator and even put forward their own suggestions. However, respect for the democratic process requires them to exercise restraint in this and not to impose themselves on the parliament.

All this can very easily be transposed to the EU. In a European parliamentary democracy, it is only natural for European parties to nominate lead candidates. After the election, the candidate of the strongest party will have the best chance of becoming Commission president, but this always depends on a parliamentary majority.

If negotiations between the parties reach an impasse, the European Council, as the EU’s “collective head of state”, can and should intervene – but with respect for and in support of the parliamentary process, not in confrontation with it. And if the talks result in a compromise in which a person who has not been a lead candidate is elected, this should not be seen as the “death” of the procedure. As in any democracy, an outsider can sometimes become head of the executive, but parliamentarism will live on and parties will still nominate lead candidates in the future.

The success or failure of the European lead candidate system does not depend on who becomes Commission president. It depends on whether the lead candidates are able to shape electoral campaigns, give visibility to the European parties and contribute to more meaningful elections. To achieve this, they need to be accepted as the democratic normality that they are. It is time to stop arguing so much about the procedure and start talking more about the candidates themselves. /