

EU top jobs: Restarting the Franco-German motor

In the battle for the European Union's top jobs, France and Germany have come out on top. But there may be a price to pay, **writes Luuk van Middelaar**



The German Chancellor and French President, July 2017

Source: Shutterstock

An unexpected outcome

After last week's twists and turns in the battle for the EU's top jobs, a clear picture is emerging – even if formal appointments have yet to be made. With the nominations of Ursula von der Leyen and Christine Lagarde at the helm of the European Commission and European Central Bank, respectively, France and Germany have all but cemented their joint leadership of the EU. It was an unexpected outcome after weeks of Franco-German bickering.

Throughout the nomination process, French President Emmanuel Macron made clear he would oppose conservative candidate Manfred Weber – front-man of Angela Merkel's EPP party – as Commission president, attacking the Bavarian's lack of executive experience. At the same time, he was careful to spell out this was not an anti-German move; "if she were a candidate, I would definitely support the Chancellor", he said. Nevertheless, France's obstruction was not taken well in Berlin. Merkel knew she had to stand publicly behind a candidate who had campaigned for the

Commission job, if not Weber then the socialist runner-up, Frans Timmermans.

To make matters worse, Paris also quietly backed the Italian and Spanish resistance to German central banker Jens Weidmann as successor to Mario Draghi. In response, Merkel dismissed all French names floated for either the Commission or ECB jobs. In sports terms, both teams focused on preventing the other from scoring and favoured a 0 – 0 match over a 1 – 1 result. So how did we end up with German Commission President Von der Leyen (probably) and French ECB President Lagarde (certainly) in the running?

How it happened

More than ever, both party political and national rivalries entered into the game. The German reaction to the outcome demonstrates this clearly. As EU leaders put forward the first German national for the Commission presidency since 1967, you might have expected big hurrahs in Berlin. Instead, a serious fight arose within Merkel's coalition. The SPD preferred "their" candidate, Dutch socialist Timmermans: rather a party member than a compatriot. French media were stunned at this lukewarm German reaction to a clear national victory.

Leaders who played both cards emerged as the winners. President Macron planted the French flag at the ECB in Frankfurt, but he also secured the job of President of the European Council for a party ally, liberal Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel. By contrast, Chancellor Merkel misread the mood in her own Conservative party. At the margins of the G20 in Osaka, she agreed to back the socialist claim on the Commission presidency for Timmermans, but underestimated the ensuing revolt of Conservative prime ministers from smaller member states. Resistance against the Dutchman came, not only from the Hungarian and Polish leaders (as expected, in view of Timmermans' actions to uphold the rule of law in their countries) but also from the Conservative leaders of Ireland, Bulgaria, Croatia and Latvia. After Manfred Weber, the other *Spitzenkandidat* was now politically dead, too.

While the papers started writing about the demise of the chancellor's sway over her EPP party, Merkel prepared her next move. Like a tennis player at the end of a long career, she is still capable of brilliant strokes. Following Macron's suggestion (who proved his point that he had nothing against a German candidate in principle), the chancellor secured the candidacy of her party member and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as Commission president. And she did not mind accepting her good friend Christine Lagarde at the ECB, a dual stroke which handed two of the most influential jobs in the EU to women. As [predicted](#), the political campaigns in the wider arena have determined Draghi's successor.

The price to pay

What will be the impact of this Franco-German double victory? On the upside, it may restore trust between Paris and Berlin, which is vital as the EU enters a new political cycle (2019-2024) and as difficult budgetary, economic and geostrategic decisions lie ahead. It also puts two committed Europeans and experienced communicators from the two biggest member states in leadership positions. On the downside, it points to a domination of Western Europe – with the other three top jobs going to a Belgian (summit chair Michel), a Spaniard (foreign policy supremo Josep Borrell) and an Italian (speaker of the Parliament David Sassoli) – and thereby leaves Eastern Europe empty-handed. For lack of a candidate to defend, the four Visegrád countries could only celebrate the blockage of their rule-of-law nemesis Frans Timmermans.

This is not a positive agenda. Knowing the simmering East-West tensions within the bloc, it might have been wiser to give political responsibility to a leader from the East as well – thereby visibly binding all to a common future. The last-minute Franco-German compromise does not come without costs.