



## **CEC Weekly Political Update** **11th October 2018**

### **Timmermans to run for EC President**

After weeks of speculations and rumours, European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans announced his plans to run for President, the top European Commission position – in which he would succeed Jean-Claude Juncker. Timmermans is widely recognised as the European Union’s representative, who is currently spearheading the Commission’s actions regarding rule of law in Poland. It is likely that his campaign and potential future Commission policy will strongly oscillate around this subject. This in turn, may mean that there will be little support for this candidacy from Poland, Hungary, and potentially Romania – countries, which fell under the EU’s spotlight. Timmermans is a supporter of strong-handing Poland into reversing its judiciary reforms – forwarding Article 7 procedures and enforcing the full scope of EU

mechanisms. On the other hand, Jean Claude–Juncker and Martin Selmayr, Juncker's chief enforcer, argue that moving forward with these procedures may lead to irreversible divisions within the bloc. They agree with Timmermans that it is necessary to ensure Poland respects the rule of law, however, this should be a process. This conflict also relates to grander issues and the elections in 2019. Timmermans' success or failure will consequently influence the future of rule of law proceedings against Poland. He himself, argued that the upcoming European Parliament elections will determine the future of the bloc – “There is a lot at stake. This is the first European election that’s not about a bit more to the left or a bit more to the right, but about are we going to have a European Union in the future?” he said.

In accordance with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council selects a candidate for the President of the European Commission – a qualified majority is required. The selected candidate then presents his political program which has to be approved by the European Parliament with a majority vote. The role of the President of the European Commission is especially important in regard to setting out the bloc’s policy, but also the selection of new commissioners. Though commissioners are not supposed to defend the interests of their countries, these are prestigious positions within EU structures. The Council of the European Union, in agreement with the President, establishes a list of commissioners, following the suggestions of the member states – in a later stage the European Parliament questions and approves selected candidates.

The European centre–left, which includes Poland’s Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) will choose their candidate for the successor of Juncker in December. The leader of the German Social Democratic Party Andrea Nahles has already declared her support for Timmermans’ candidacy, and addressed a letter to the Party of European Socialists (PES) backing him as PES’ *Spitzenkandidat*. Currently, Timmermans' only rival within the centre–left is Slovak Maroš Šefcovic, who is now the vice–president of the Energy Union Committee. Still, many commentators believe that winning the Presidential seat will be a challenge – the PES is unlikely to win a majority in the upcoming spring European Parliament elections. Other parties will also propose their own candidates. Already the European People’s Party leader Manfred Weber and former Finnish Prime

Minister Alexander Stubb have revealed their bid to seek the nomination of the conservatives. After a major defeat of Timmermans' party in the 2017 Dutch elections, he may also face some opposition within his own domestic structures. Still, due to health reasons Jean-Claude Juncker is unlikely to seek re-election – this has potential to boost Timmermans' poll position.

Furthermore, it still remains uncertain how European political groups will align before the elections. Speculations of changes to major European parties have circulated the media throughout the past months – in June, PiS politicians have suggested unofficially that their party is seeking to join the EPP (European People's Party). However, since then, neither PiS nor the EPP have returned to the subject. Moreover, French President Emanuel Macron's attempts at creating a strong liberal force in the European Parliament may be an indication of upcoming shifts, which may in turn influence the structure of electoral lists, but may also result in an ever heated race for the position of European Commission President.

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