

SNAPSHOT

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A view from Germany

Introducing Spitzenkandidat: Manfred Weber

As Europe gears up for a new Commission President, could the European People's Party candidate replace Jean-Claude Juncker in July?

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"We need to return Europe to the people", Manfred Weber

Manfred Weber speaks quietly, the embroidered initials on his shirt are the only sign of extravagance. The man is actually interested in content politics; the show comes, if at all, second.

Born in 1972 in the small Bavarian town of Niederhatzkofen, Weber was involved in local politics as a member of "Junge Union", the centre-right Christian democratic political alliance's – CSU - youth organisation. In 2002, he was elected to the Bavarian state parliament until he became a member of the European Parliament in 2004 and was elected chairman of the European People's Party (EPP), conservative and centre-right, in 2014.

Despite his rather long political career, he is still relatively unknown in Germany. Within the CSU party itself, Weber has long been ridiculed for being too restrained, yet meanwhile his Brussels candidacy is all the more welcome and celebrated by the party brass. This is not an obvious matter, as the CSU in the past has often made a hallmark from a well-staged and calculated opposition to Brussels and the supposed Eurocrats.

Weber is not your typical CSU politician: he lacks the traditional Bavarian boisterousness but is gentle in appearance and liberal on socio-political issues. However, he can turn into a tough-as-nails domestic politician, for example when it comes to justifying the controversial policy

imposed by Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to seal off borders for refugees on the Western Balkans route in spring 2016.

A stronger Europe and strong nation states

In Weber's thinking, a new balance needs to be struck in foreign and security policy. He sees the introduction of a European army as a driver for European unity and as a chance for Europe to grow into taking its common international responsibility seriously. To him, this is a long-term but necessary project as peace in Europe cannot be taken for granted. Weber believes it is important to bundle the capabilities of the member states and to think directly at EU level when implementing new forms of defence such as in cyber security. In his mind, military power and a more effectively implemented external border control need to be democratically legitimised at a European level.

"Ghost of nationalism"

According to Weber, nationalism is one if not the greatest challenge facing Europe since World War II. He insists that the German right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) is an anti-European party and the "Brexit Party" of Germany. According to Weber, it represents selfish national interests for a minority and thus poses a threat to the European unity which was conceived to prevent another war on the European continent. For Weber, peace is not self-evident in Europe and must be protected by all means. He wants to prevent nationalist factions like the AfD or the

“LePens” from gaining influence in the European Parliament:
“The parties that reject Europe are my enemies”.

“Viktor Orbán is following the wrong political path”

This course has brought Weber into an uncomfortable conflict with Victor Orbán, the Hungarian leader whose Fidesz party is a family member of the EPP faction within the European Parliament, hence a partner of his own CDU/CSU faction. Weber sees parallels between Orbán and the Italian Lega¹ leader Matteo Salvini, as well as Polish PiS party’s Jaroslaw Kacynski, all of whom are right wing, arguing that their openly anti-European agenda is destructive and not in line with the values of the EPP. While reluctant to speak out against Orbán in the past for fear of losing Fidesz’s support in the vote that he needs to win to make it to the top of Commission, Weber has now taken a clearer stance, first demanding an apology from the Hungarian leader and threatening to impose sanctions if Orbán continued to pursue his anti-Europe rhetoric. Weber supported the EPP’s decision to temporarily exclude the Fidesz party from the EPP. He explained that Orbán would no longer have a say in the political course of the EPP. By choosing this middle ground Weber tries to live up to the democratic European values he claims to defend, but also intends to appease Orbán and his party by giving them the choice to resign from the EPP. In his eyes, this might be the most strategic move in order to secure the Commission Presidency.

Meeting high expectations

If Manfred Weber becomes Juncker’s successor, his attitude could be a chance for Germany to adopt a more forward-reaching presence in the EU in all aspects including defence. Moreover, as argued by Weber himself, “A commission president who is [...] there to show up, answerable to the concerns of the people” could be what Europeans need in order to feel that they are part of a European Union that they can help shape and that is able to listen. However, even with the full backing of his CDU/CSU party, plus at least the support of 80 per cent of the EPP, it remains open whether Weber can fulfill his ambitions of making the EU more democratic and steer the Union through these turbulent times of mistrust and discontent.

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