

SNAPSHOT

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Introducing Spitzenkandidat: Frans Timmermans

June 2019: A gifted communicator, experienced politician and *Spitzenkandidat* for the S&D group in the European Parliament, Frans Timmermans is the hope of the socialist and democrats for the European Commission presidency. For the past five years he has been the First Vice-President of the European Commission, tasked with some of the most complicated and politically fraught files, positioning him as the defender of fundamental rights and values for some, and the European elitist interfering in domestic policies for others. Can he convince a coalition to support his bid? FTI Consulting Brussels looks at his candidacy.

Multilingual communicator, experienced politician and diplomat

In a time where (new) anti-establishment parties are vocal and growing, even in his own country, Timmermans is quite the opposite. He speaks confidently in English, German, French, Italian, Russian and Dutch. He has spoken on Italian television about the budget, debated on German television with Manfred Weber (of the rival European Peoples Party - EPP) and sailed through his European Parliamentary confirmation hearings by replying to many MEPs in their own language.

Meanwhile, back home in the Netherlands, Timmermans is still known as the Foreign Minister who gave one of the most impressive speeches in modern Dutch history, when he spoke at the United Nations after Malaysian Airlines MH17 was shot down over Eastern Ukraine, killing 298 passengers and crew, including 193 Dutch nationals.

These communication skills have certainly helped his campaign. Against all odds, Timmermans defied the polls by winning the 2019 European elections in the Netherlands with the Labour party. He won most of the debates he participated in, showing his political skills and experience. The campaign was content heavy and relied on his track record of making a difference.

A committed European

Timmermans is a committed European. Having grown up in a Dutch-German-Belgian border region, he attended schools in Belgium and Italy and universities in the Netherlands (European Law) and France. He has also worked for the Dutch Foreign Affairs Ministry (including a posting in Moscow) and for European Commissioner van den Broek in Brussels before being elected to the Dutch Parliament. All roads, for him anyway, seem to lead to Brussels.

“Europe must fight an unprecedented crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a political crisis and we must find a European response for a problem that cannot be dealt by each member-state separately.” Frans Timmermans

In his election campaign he consistently made the point that European cooperation is the only way to manage the pressing challenges that European countries face. Timmermans often reminds audiences of the origins of the European project: to foster peace and cooperation.

He hasn't always gotten the mood of the public right. He left politics shortly, after Dutch voters failed to ratify the proposed new EU constitution in June 2005 by a significant 62%. Timmermans had been one of the most vocal supporters of the Treaty and experienced this loss as a personal rejection.

More or less Europe?

Being a convinced European should not be confused with Timmermans believing that many more powers should reside with the European institutions.

As Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Timmermans oversaw the Dutch version of the balance of competences review in which he came to the conclusion that the balance of powers between the EU and the Member States is generally correct. Even if the 17-page long report included 54 recommendations, the differences between EU law and the Dutch government's point of view turned out to be minimal. This exercise might have helped Timmermans be awarded another key task of the Juncker Commission: overseeing its Better Regulation initiative.

The Juncker Commission has prided itself on being 'big on big things' and 'small on small things'. Consequently, it committed itself to improving the quality of EU policy- and law-making, to better serve the electorate and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality - in effect ensuring Europe does what it does best whilst leaving issues that are better dealt with by Member States to be dealt with individually. Consequently, this Commission has technically produced less legislation than previous Commissions.

Mr Juncker's Mr Fix-It

Ever since the original hearings in the European Parliament in 2014 to confirm the current Commission, Timmermans has been positioned as Commission President Juncker's chief fixer. He has been an important face of a European Commission that has spent a fair amount of its Mandate defending fundamental rights in Member States, managing unprecedented migration flows as well as driving the Better Regulation agenda. In other words, all very visible and highly political issues.

This started when the Spanish Commissioner-designate for the energy portfolio, Miguel Arias Cañete, came under pressure for perceived conflicts of interest related to his nomination to manage a portfolio that included sustainability. The outcome was that this competence was subsequently transferred to become Timmermans responsibilities.

Timmermans has also been the lead Commission representative in the immigration discussions with Turkey and a key driver of the subsequent agreement. Although

controversial, it has delivered on its objective by significantly decreasing the flows of immigrants from the Eastern Mediterranean, largely caused by the Syrian conflict.

Finally, Timmermans might be most known for taking on governments accused of infringing fundamental values of the EU. Ironically, these battles might also turn out to be a major obstacle to his candidacy. Key targets of his attention on these issues, such as Poland and Hungary, might well object. Asked whether he has made too many enemies and how this could negatively impact his chances of becoming the European Commission President, Timmermans seems rather sanguine, shrugging off any potential implications, stating: *"show me a politician without foes and I'll show you a politician without a backbone."* As the proverb says: 'friends change, but enemies grow'.

Take a chance

On balance, does this make Frans Timmermans the key candidate for the European Commission presidency? Not necessarily. The EPP group is still bigger than the S&D; and both traditional main parties lost substantially overall in May's election. In addition, the *spitzenkandidat* system, which deems that the largest party should have the mandate to assume the Commission Presidency, is itself not subscribed to by the full Parliament, nor by many Member States (including The Netherlands). And support from his home nation is not guaranteed given his Labour party is not part of the governing coalition in the Netherlands. The Dutch Government could simply fail to back him.

However, this year more than ever, the outcome of who secures Europe's top jobs has become an open race. It could be possible that the biggest party does not get the opportunities it might otherwise expect. If Timmermans could form a coalition to support his bid, striking a deal with the Greens and Liberal Democrats in ALDE, to counter balance the EPP, it could still become a reality.

Aside from his stated detractors, Council considers him a stable and safe pair of hands. In short, his experience is invaluable, something that cannot perhaps be said for Manfred Weber, his main challenger in the EPP. However, if Timmerman's primary bid fails, he may well have his eye on another top job, that currently held by fellow S&D member, Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission.

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