

SNAPSHOT

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Giving you insight to what is on the EU agenda

Introducing Spitzenkandidat: Margrethe Vestager

June 2019: Europe has now voted and Brussels will be getting on with the business of appointing a replacement for Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission. One of the most prominent and successful Commissioners in the Juncker term has been the plucky Dane in charge of Europe's competition agenda. Having shown aptitude and resilience on the global stage, she hasn't hesitated to take on major multinationals and confronted big business. She has excelled as a good communicator at a time when the European project is struggling to appeal to the electorate. Is Europe ready for its first female Commission President? FTI Consulting Brussels looks at her candidacy.

To those who remember her first few days on arriving from Copenhagen in 2014, the Brussels Bubble became particularly enamoured with Margrethe Vestager's seeming interest in espousing her family life while knitting during media interviews. She quickly evolved into Brussels's very own Iron Lady, with a nod to another famous Margaret.

This above all: to thine own self be true

Commissioner Vestager quickly developed a strong public profile, known for her down to earth and principled approach to her job, a team player who secured the support of her extended staff. She soon earned a reputation as someone who is not afraid to take a stand on issues she feels strongly about. A senior politician with gravitas and a sense of accountability, she has also been seen as a key champion of Commission President Juncker's approach to re-engage the European electorate and deliver transparency and value.

Her brief however isn't necessarily an easy one to translate into related headlines that might engage the public. Competition law enforcement relies on data and complex legal and economic analyses that may not be digestible to the public. However, Margrethe Vestager has excelled at communicating what the European Commission does for its citizens. Often quoting the need for *'fairness' and 'trust'*, her speeches often refer to how the decisions by the European Commission make people's lives better. In short, what she does has an impact, and has shown how better communication can work in making the European project relevant to an increasingly disengaged audience.

"Europe is closing loopholes so all companies, big or small, pay their fair share of taxes in the future" Margrethe Vestager

The lady doth protest too much?

She does have her critics. Is the knitting some form of secret power play? Some have called her Queen Margrethe III, Viking conqueror of Silicon Valley, hammer of tax-dodgers, tamer of corporate super-egos, knitter of elephants, and renowned baker of cinnamon buns!

She has made a major name for herself challenging big business. She has made a number of big corporations tremble by challenging them on a number of issues raging from abuse of dominance, behaviour and attitudes, to tax practices and where domiciliated.

On tax she clearly feels many multinationals, in collusion with some Member States' governments, are avoiding paying their fair share of corporate tax, by manipulating the rules of the single market. Many have been American and she has subsequently attracted the ire of President Trump, who quite publicly said *'your tax lady, she clearly hates the U.S.'* Perhaps not the best feedback from Europe's biggest trading partner and largest investor.

For a Europe that is facing major competitive issues in an increasingly competitive commercial landscape, many leaders feel that the EU's competition stance is not helping. Key member states such as Germany and France are actively pursuing an industrial policy that looks to create major European sector champions, through consolidation, to best position them on the global stage. President Macron, who could well play a key role in deciding who becomes the next EU Commission President has made it a very public objective. French Ministers have been quite vocal about some of Vestager's recent decisions, accusing her of being too technical and losing the bigger picture when she has blocked key mergers. Rumours also abound about Macron's preference for Michael Barnier, who has just spent the last three years touring European capitals in his capacity as lead Brexit negotiator for the EU, although a French President is probably bound to support a French candidate.

To be or not to be, that is the question

Is Europe ready for its first female Commission President? Is Europe ready for its first Nordic President? Both quite plausible arguments for supporting Vestager's candidacy. Given that every single one of the 12 previous incumbents have been white males and that 10 of them have come from the six founding Member States, maybe it's time.

In addition, she is hugely admired by her staff and across the College of Commissioners. She has also clearly shown where the EU can add value, isn't afraid of a political fight and is popular without being populist. Perhaps the most compelling argument, beyond her specific experience and abilities, is that she appears a natural contender in a contest that remains relatively opaque and, uninspired at this stage. She would probably win the peoples vote, if it existed.

The arguments against are more technical, based on the careful political balance that always dominates the nomination.

Firstly, she is only one out of seven *Spitzenkandidaten* nominations for the liberal ALDE grouping in the European Parliament. They occupy the centre ground, representing the Liberals, sandwiched between the European People's Party (EPP) on the centre right, and the Social Democrats (S&D) on the centre left, both of whom represent larger blocs and have their own nominations.

More specifically Denmark is not in the Eurozone and there is some speculation that whoever wins the Danish election on 5th June, may not endorse her, or even nominate her as a future Commissioner for the country. Denmark has more EU opt-outs than even the United Kingdom, including the super sensitive issue around migration. Additionally she comes from a small country in an era of big politics and the odds may work against her.

Much will be determined behind closed doors between the key power players. The issue is whether the traditional horse trading of vested interests will continue to dominate the process for a Europe that desperately needs some inspiration and a leadership that is able to reconnect to the average European. Vestager very much fits this bill but, as one former British Prime Minister once said, a week is a long time in politics. We can assume that it's going to be a long summer. Much can change.

"At være eller ikke være. Det er spørgsmålet"

courtesy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, by W. Shakespeare

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