

SNAPSHOT

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Giving you insight to what is on the EU agenda

Introducing the non-Spitzenkandidat: Michel Barnier

June 2019: You've heard of Brexit. You may have also heard of Michel Barnier, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator. Perhaps less apparent is the possibility that he could replace Jean-Claude Juncker and become the next Commission President. Although he isn't a formal candidate, he has spent the last three years touring European capitals and has become perhaps the best-connected European politician who could yet steal the race. While President Macron of France has provided encouraging words, does this pragmatic deal maker have the right credentials to revitalise a moribund European project? FTI Consulting Brussels looks at his potential candidacy.

Amid the Brexit uncertainty and the many challenges Europe faces, is it possible for someone who is not an official candidate for any of the political parties to clinch Europe's top-job? Could Michel Barnier, Europe's Mr Brexit, take the crown? If the current political climate is anything to go by, it's always good to think outside the box. Rules are sometimes made to be broken.

A politician, not a Brussels technocrat

Who is M. Barnier? For starters, he is an experienced political operator with a hybrid career, having managed some of the highest positions at both national and European Commission levels. He has built a reputation as straightforward and methodical. A native of the French Alps, he is very unlike your usual French political stereotype. While he lacks the typical urban sparkle and can come across as slightly stiff and rigid, he has an element of the common-touch. He avoids the small talk and likes to shake hands, meet local people and connect with regional influencers. What he lacks in charisma, he makes up for in his ability to manage complex situations with a cool head. He has proved to be a very popular and astute Brexit negotiator.

This silver-haired political veteran first started his political career at the age of 22 as a representative of the French Savoy region, his political homeland, where he organised the

"In politics, you must be decent, and respected by people: I'm not going to start singing in a television show." Michel Barnier

1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville. He is a political survivor, having made multiple come-backs, although some might argue he never really went away. Some call him Mr Teflon.

At the age of 67, he is now the only Frenchman to have been a minister four times, holding portfolios for the environment, European affairs, foreign affairs and agriculture. He has also been a European Commissioner twice (internal market and regional policy). Then there is Brexit of course. It would be unwise to write him off as a very viable and strong contender.

French or European?

"It might be too late for the UK but it's not the case for other EU countries." Michel Barnier

"Michel is Michel" according to David Davis, his former British counterpart in the Brexit negotiations, "he thinks of himself as a European rather than French these days". Such hybrid political DNA is hardly surprising. Over the last three years he has toured every European capital and met most EU28 leaders several times in his capacity as head negotiator, visiting national parliaments, engaging with trade unions, diplomats, and members of the European Parliament. He must be the most networked politician in Europe and as close as it gets to a political superstar in the long grey corridors that make up the European institutions.

However, he needs Paris to secure a nomination, to enable him to leverage his network. The provincial mountain dweller

(as he likes to define himself) has always had a foot in and out of Parisian-French politics. He hails from the conservative side of national politics and is a member of the right of centre 'Les Républicains', the same political family as previous French Presidents Sarkozy and Chirac. He is not part of President Macron's new centrist 'En Marche' movement.

He doesn't always get what he wants. Les Républicains previously backed 'bad boy' Laurent Wauquiez during the 2015 French regional elections, side-lining Barnier for being "too European". Although Barnier's Europeanness might look bad from a British or a Parisian perspective, his penchant for European politics and his ability to maintain unity among 27-member states was a tough exercise, but one that has won him many friends and allies.

"We need our nations to fight nationalism. We need our nations to build Europe." Michel Barnier

An insider campaigning as an outsider

Barnier has also been here before. He tried for the top job before in 2014, losing the Spitzenkandidat nomination for the European People's Party (EPP), the group in the European Parliament that represents Barnier's political background and heritage, to Jean-Claude Juncker, who went on to secure the Commission Presidency.

Notwithstanding, he seems to have learnt from previous battles and seems ready to step out of the shadow and develop a political profile. He recently gave a high-profile speech at the Catholic University in Leuven while the 'official' lead candidates were debating in Maastricht.

Despite his Brexit role, his campaign mode seems to be less reflective, more focussed on a forward-looking debate, seeking to address the necessary pillars of a future Europe rather than the consequences of past failures. Key themes include defence, a new 'green deal', European industrial champions and digitisation.

Being in it to win it

The issue is not whether he is a candidate; Brussels has broadly accepted that he is. The conversation is more about whether he *can* be a candidate? It's a semantic but important point.

What technically counts against Barnier? As we have already mentioned, his candidacy does not fall within the official Spitzenkandidat rules. He is not a formal candidate for any

of the political groups. Germany's Manfred Weber has the candidacy of the European People's Party.

Additionally, the formal selection process will be undertaken over the summer, when M Barnier will otherwise continue to lead on the Brexit negotiations. How can he possibly deliver his existing job effectively if he is indirectly campaigning for another? Can he go for the Presidency if Brexit remains unresolved? Could his personal ambition be thwarted by his ongoing responsibilities of getting Brexit sorted first? Though the current British Brexit impasse might in fact help his cause.

On a more positive note, the European Council is not legally bound by the Spitzenkandidat mechanism. This will delight the many new political movements struggling to align with the established European political groups, such as Macron's European list. The French president has until now been quite effusive about his fellow Frenchman. Two days before the EU elections, he praised Barnier's eminent qualities after having openly opposed Weber's candidacy.

Being French could be a strategic asset in supporting Emmanuel Macron's political agenda and balancing the Franco-German equilibrium. It's also worth mentioning that he has a strong working relation with Martin Selmayr, the Secretary General of the Commission. His continued influence in shaping the post-Juncker era should not be underestimated.

For the moment Barnier appears above the fray. The unexpected Brexit extension from March to October will keep him busy over the summer. His candidacy has a lot of support, despite the technical challenges, but so do the other candidates, for one reason and another. What might swing it for him is if European capitals prefer a known quantity, a proven captain who can steer a troubled ship to safer shores; a person who knows how to build consensus and who is all for looking forward, rather than reflecting on what could have been. This is a race Michel Barnier is ideally placed to win.

Author



Ségolène Milaire
Strategic Communications
Brussels



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