



Holger Schmieding, Chief Economist | [Holger.schmieding@berenberg.com](mailto:Holger.schmieding@berenberg.com) | +44 20 3207 7889

## EU JOBS DEAL: WILL PARLIAMENT REJECT IT?

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#### FOUR REASONS WHY VON DER LEYEN CAN PREVAIL

Will the European Parliament scupper the deal over top jobs in the European Union? The risk is real. By proposing Ursula von der Leyen as the successor to Jean-Claude Juncker, the leaders of EU member states have ignored the stated desire of many members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to let one of their “Spitzenkandidaten“ lead the new European Commission. Even many mainstream MEPs may be tempted to vote against von der Leyen in the secret ballot to be held in the week of 15 July. Judging by the snap reactions from some Brussels insiders, anger runs deep. However, for four reasons, we still see a probability of at least 70% that she will be confirmed:

- 1) Angry mainstream MEPs have largely themselves to blame. After none of the mainstream parties came sufficiently far ahead of the others in the 23-26 May election to claim victory, they could have jointly rallied behind one of their candidates. They failed to do so. Simply saying that one of their three candidates should get the job without agreeing who that should be was not good enough. Unable to strike the messy compromises themselves, MEPs de facto invited EU national leaders to find their very own solution.
- 2) As a conservative woman with the reputation as a tough person, von der Leyen seems well qualified for the job. Her strong pro-European convictions make it difficult for mainstream MEPs to vote against her.
- 3) Voting down von der Leyen would trigger an institutional crisis in the EU. Apart from the anti-EU fringes, no political force could expect to benefit. Such a crisis could give the anti-EU fringes the kind of moral victory that voters had largely denied them on 23-26 May.
- 4) The European Parliament has already elected centre-left David-Maria Sassoli (Italy) as its president for 2.5 years; the European Council has proposed Christine Lagarde as new ECB president. This has created facts. Rejecting von der Leyen would not lead to a completely different package for top jobs.

What if von der Leyen is voted down? To maintain balance, the Conservatives would almost certainly insist that the European Commission will have to be led by one of them nonetheless. French President Emmanuel Macron would hardly let himself be humiliated by dropping his opposition to the conservative “Spitzenkandidat” Manfred Weber at this stage. Having agreed to Christine Lagarde instead of Jens Weidmann for the ECB, Germany would probably insist on sending a German to the European Commission. Beyond registering their anger, disgruntled MEPs would probably achieve nothing by rejecting the jobs deal. They could neither force EU leaders to nominate a “Spitzenkandidat” nor to award the job to a different political group. De facto, MEPs may face a choice between von der Leyen and a potential other German centre-right candidate. If so, why should they really reject the strongly pro-European von der Leyen? Instead, I



expect MEPs to gradually turn their focus towards issues of substance, perhaps by agreeing a cross-party agenda to which von der Leyen would have to largely sign up in order to be confirmed.

### CHALLENGING NUMBERS

The rules are clear. Having been proposed by EU national leaders, a prospective president of the European Commission needs to be confirmed in a secret ballot by an absolute majority in the EU parliament. Last time, Juncker had received 422 out of 729 votes cast on 15 July 2014. This time, the numbers are quite challenging. If all 751 MEPs show up, von der Leyen would need 376 votes (as two Catalan MEPs may not be there, the threshold could be 375 instead). Taken together, the four pro-European mainstream groups have 518 MEPs, 182 for the centre-right, 154 for the centre-left, 108 for the liberals and 74 for the Greens. Many Conservatives are frustrated. The Greens and some key members of the centre-left have publicly opposed the deal. Although von der Leyen faces an uphill struggle, I expect her to prevail.

The **centre-right Conservatives** have to swallow hard after EU leaders failed to nominate Weber. However, von der Leyen herself is a solid conservative. While Weber and his supporters may be deeply unhappy, I expect them to vote for von der Leyen with very few exceptions. Upsetting the deal could hurt them. At 46, Weber is young enough to be in the running for this or some other top job next time again. Loyal support of the compromise now could advance his future career prospects in Europe or Germany.

The **liberals**, now calling themselves 'Renew Europe' after welcoming Macron's party to the fold, will probably be asked by Macron to support the deal. Expect most of them to comply, especially as one of them, Belgium's Charles Michel, is slated to succeed Donald Tusk as head of the European Council.

The **centre-left Social Democrats** feel let down. In the wake of the G20 Osaka summit, they had briefly hoped that their "Spitzenkandidat" Frans Timmermans could get the job despite coming only second in the EU elections. However, Europe's new star on the centre-left, Spain's Pedro Sanchez will probably use his influence to advance the deal which he helped to broker. The centre-left has little to gain from rejecting the jobs deal. Their votes will probably be split.

The **Greens** had not even put forward their own Spitzenkandidat. As the smallest of the four mainstream groups, they are not strong enough to claim any of the top jobs. However, the public discussion about at least one of their key issues, namely climate change, is moving their way. They will likely focus on shaping the policy agenda rather than the distribution of jobs. Expect von der Leyen to present a green-tinged agenda. If so, many Greens could support her.

Except for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had to abstain because her centre-left coalition partner in Berlin rejects von der Leyen, the leaders of all other 27 EU member states supported von der Leyen when the deal was struck on Tuesday afternoon. This includes the heads of the populist governments of Italy and Poland. Both governments have open or latent conflicts with



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the European Commission. They may have little interest in exacerbating such conflicts by obstructing other big decisions in Europe. In other words, I would not be surprised if, in the secret ballot, von der Leyen also receives some votes from the populist right in Italy and Poland to help her along.

It will not be easy at all. Von der Leyen started to court MEPs yesterday. If she stumbles in her contacts with MEPs, or if she does not strike the right tone upon presenting her ideas to parliament just ahead of the vote, she may not make it. But, on balance, we consider it likely that she will take the hurdle and lead the next European Commission.

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Joh. Berenberg, Gossler & Co.  
KG  
60 Threadneedle Street  
London EC2R 8HP  
Phone +44 20 3207 7889  
[www.berenberg.com](http://www.berenberg.com)  
[holger.schmieding@berenberg.com](mailto:holger.schmieding@berenberg.com)