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Is it all about European Democracy? The Motives behind the Institutionalisation of the Spitzenkandidaten

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Abstract

The European Parliament elections in 2014 and 2019 were different insofar as European citizens had the possibility to 'directly' influence who could become the next President of the European Commission. This innovation is based on the idea of 'Spitzenkandidaten', where a vote for a given political party also represents a vote for its lead candidate. This article examines the process behind the institutionalisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, with attention focused on the actors involved and their motivations for supporting this institutional innovation. Using a qualitative content analysis of EU institutional and party documentation, the article confirms that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure should be perceived as the culmination of a long-term process beginning in the pre-Amsterdam era. It also concludes that the procedure, as firstly applied in 2014, represents the common effort of two supranational institutions and four European political parties. It is also argued that while the emergence of the Spitzenkandidaten is primarily a result of perceived shortcomings of the EU's democratic quality, actors' self-interest was also driving force.

Keywords

Spitzenkandidaten; Lead candidates; EU democracy; European Commission; European Parliament; European political parties

The European Union (EU) has been contending with issues of legitimacy for over half of its existence. The introduction of direct elections in 1979 was important for democratising and legitimising the integration process. In recent years, the EU has intervened in several areas that are salient for EU member states' citizens. This intervention has led to the simultaneous weakening of support for European integration by citizens. The EU and its member states are therefore endeavouring to implement innovative methods which could bring the EU closer, and make it more attractive, to its citizens. One of these innovations is the so-called 'Spitzenkandidaten' procedure.

The Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the EU political system added new elements to political contestation at the European level and transformed the appearance of European Parliamentary election campaigns. Recently, this concrete effort to make European Parliament (EP) elections more attractive has gained significant attention in academic research. Unsurprisingly, attention has focused mainly on the evaluation of the procedure's impact on overall turnout (Hobolt 2014), voters' propensity to cast ballots (Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015), or on new campaign attributes such as debates between candidates (Maier, Faas, Rittberger, Fortin-Rittberger, et al. 2018). However, little is known about the actors responsible for instigating this innovation and their motivations to participate in the Spitzenkandidaten 'experiment'.

This article aims to fill this gap by answering three questions. First, how did the Spitzenkandidaten procedure emerge? Second, who participated in the process of its institutionalisation? Third, and most importantly, what were the motives behind the activities leading to the institutionalisation of the

procedure, and to what extent were the arguments supporting the Spitzenkandidaten idea driven by the debates about democracy at the EU level? This article therefore focuses on the actors behind this institutional innovation, their contribution to the final form of the procedure, their attitudes towards and their motivations for supporting the idea of Spitzenkandidaten, and the development of these factors.

Based on a qualitative content analysis of EU institutional and Euro-party documents over a longer term, the following conclusions are drawn. First, the idea of lead candidates gained political relevance in the mid-1990s, and therefore its realisation in 2014 should be considered a result of a long-term process. Second, key players acted with different intensity depending on variety of factors. The EP was an active proponent during the whole period. The European People's Party (EPP) promoted the Spitzenkandidaten idea from the post-Amsterdam period. The Party of European Socialists (PES) was supportive of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure since the mid-1990s, however, it became more active (alongside the Commission) mainly in the post-Lisbon era. Third, the willingness of actors to support the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was driven not exclusively by democratising motives, but also by actors' self-interest manifested in an effort to strengthen their own position within the European party system, or within the EU.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section describes the current state of knowledge related to the development of the procedure. As we are interested in democratic arguments as factors influencing the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, we then introduce the democratic deficit debate as point of departure for our analytical framework. The data as well as methods used in this study are then explained, before the results are analysed and discussed. The final section summarises the main findings and offers proposals for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several lines of research related to the Spitzenkandidaten. The first could be characterised as elections- and campaign-related. Within this line, there is a focus on the appearance of an electoral campaign and its impact on voting behaviour and electoral turnout, citizens' preferences and other campaign-related issues (for example Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015; Popa, Rohrschneider and Schmitt 2016; Hobolt 2004). The second line relates to the role of media in EU politics. In this regard, the presence of lead candidates in the media and the media's role in providing information about Spitzenkandidaten are of importance (for example Schulze 2016; Maier, Faas, Rittberger, Fortin-Rittberger, et al. 2018; Gattermann, De Vreese and van der Brug 2016). A third line of research is oriented more towards the EU's political system. Here, attention is focused on the nomination of candidates for the presidency, the composition of the Commission, the internal organisation of the Commission, as well as on the consequences for the EU's political system (for example Thomassen 2016; Kassim 2017; Gómez and Wessels 2015; Dinan 2015; Deckarm 2017; Christiansen 2016).

These avenues of research tend to focus on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure's effects on various aspects of EU politics. Our research questions, however, do not necessarily require a discussion of the overall effect of the procedure. This is not to say these studies do not provide useful information about the Spitzenkandidaten procedure's emergence, the actors involved and their motives. Nevertheless, most relevant for our research are studies investigating development of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and actors' involvement in that process.

It is argued that the EPP played a pivotal role in institutionalising the procedure, at least until 2009. This argument reflects the fact that it was the EPP which proposed its own candidate for the Commission Presidency ahead of EP 2004 and 2009 elections (Westlake 2016; Kassim 2017: 17). The situation changed in 2009. After the EP elections and the re-election of Barroso, it was the PES who

became the more active proponent of the Spitzenkandidaten idea (Reiding and Meijer 2019; Peñalver García and Priestley 2015: 63-64), while the European Green Party (EGP) seemed to have no reservations about nominating their candidate. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe's (ALDE) position remained sceptical, even after 2009 (Kassim 2017; Christiansen 2016).

Besides the Euro-parties, it was both the Commission and the EP who contributed in the early 2010s to the procedure's institutionalisation and realisation by inviting parties to present their lead candidates for the upcoming elections. From the Commission's point of view, personalising the electoral campaign would create a link between voters and candidates. It would increase the legitimacy of the Commission President and, in turn, the whole decision-making process. The EP argued in a similar vein when it emphasised the need for strengthening the legitimacy of the EU and the EP elections' attractiveness for voters, which could lead to higher turnout (Westlake 2016; Kassim 2017: 3-5; Hobolt 2004: 1532; Dinan 2015). The Council was not actively involved in the Spitzenkandidaten institutionalisation. It discussed the idea twice, but only informally (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015).

It is apparent that the arguments based upon perceptions of democracy played an important role in the institutionalisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. As Kassim (2017) argues, the procedure is best understood in the context of efforts to respond to democratic deficit debates since Maastricht. From this point of view, the procedure's institutionalisation can be perceived as a result of long-term tendencies (Reiding and Meijer 2019; Christiansen 2016: 994). However, there are also interpretations stressing actors' individual motives for supporting the Spitzenkandidaten idea. In this regard, the EP's involvement is often interpreted as a power grab within the EU inter-institutional relations. An example of how such a power grab can be realised is the interpretation of the treaty provisions by the EP to its benefit. In case of Spitzenkandidaten, the role of the Article 17.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, which states that the European Council shall propose a candidate for European Commission President after taking into account the EP elections, and after having held appropriate consultations, and its interpretation by the EP are emphasised. It is argued, that this article provides a legal basis for the Spitzenkandidaten procedure (Schimmelfennig 2014; Reiding and Meijer 2019; Peñalver García and Priestley 2015: 56-64; Gómez and Wessels 2015). In accordance with this line of argumentation, the procedure can be seen as an opportunistic act of the EP and particular political groups to gain greater influence over the selection of the Commission President (Kassim, Connolly, Dehousse, Rozenberg et al. 2017: 659). Another interpretation of the Spitzenkandidaten relates to the EU party politics. Here, the PES's initiative in 2009 can be seen as a response to the nomination of a lead candidate by the EPP in 2004 (Janning 2014), and EGP's involvement as an opportunity to increase its visibility (Lefkofridi and Katsanidou 2018: 1469).

It is evident that the emergence of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure is accompanied by rival, but not mutually exclusive explanations. The first one stresses the need for enhancing the quality of EU democracy while the other highlights self-interest of particular actors. We believe that the origin of the different evaluations lies in the absence of studies focusing on actors' motivations. The above-mentioned findings related to the development of the procedure are to some extent discussed in many studies, however mostly only as a brief description of, or introduction to, the procedure. From this point of view, the motives behind the process of institutionalisation are not the primary research question driving existing research. This has important implications for our knowledge since existing studies rely on similar data, and the data needed for answering such questions was gathered in a non-systematic way.

Our article seeks to fill this gap by focusing primarily on actors and their motives for supporting the Spitzenkandidaten idea. We chose 1995 as the starting point of analysis since we believe that the preparation of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) in 1997 represents relevant point in the process of amending the procedure used for nomination and appointment of the Commission

President. We followed the period from here until July of 2014, when the Commission President was elected. By focusing on this rather long period, it is possible to follow the development of actors' motives, to evaluate how those motives relate to the debates about democracy at the EU level and to conclude whether the Spitzenkandidaten procedure's institutionalisation should be perceived as result of democratisation debates in the EU, or rather as a result of actors' self-interest.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Academic discussion addressing the democratic quality of the EU is relatively recent. Its most important point of departure can be identified as the changes delivered by the Maastricht Treaty. Also, subsequent political development in the EU (for example, repeated rejections of Treaty revisions in several EU member states and the extension of sectoral cooperation on the highly sensitive areas or increased support for Eurosceptic parties) has sparked debate over how much sovereignty nation states can relinquish without endangering popular sovereignty at home and how democracy at the EU level should be organised. This lively discussion has resulted in at least four approaches towards EU democracy. As Rittberger (2010) points out, debate on the EU's democratic quality has followed a particular path, starting from a liberal representative approach towards democracy and later on including also republican/communitarian approaches as well as the deliberative perspective. Hand in hand with this three-stream conceptualisation of EU democratic deficit, a fourth approach has been developed which is critical to applying the standards of democratic legitimacy to the EU polity.

There are five representative arguments which make up the liberal representative approach to the democratic deficit. These form the 'standard version of democratic deficit' (Weiler, Haltern and Mayer 1995). This version consists of a set of claims which Føllesdal and Hix (2006) summarise as follows. First, the process of European integration leads to a situation where there is increased executive power while the power of national parliaments is reduced. EU decisions are made primarily by executive actors in the Council and the Commissioners. As powers have shifted to these actors at the EU level, the power of the national parliaments has been reduced, leading to a phenomenon widely known as de-parliamentarisation. Second, the EP is weak. Increases in the powers of the EP have not sufficiently compensated for the loss of the parliamentary control at the national level. Third, there are no 'European elections' as citizens are not able to vote on EU policies, except in periodic referendums on EU membership or treaty change. Even EP elections are not about EU issues, as national parties and the media treat them as mid-term polls on the performance of the governments in power. Fourth, the EU is too distant, which means that citizens cannot understand the EU. The Commission is neither a government, nor a bureaucracy, and is appointed through an obscure procedure rather than being elected directly by the people or by the EP. Finally, as a result of the previous four factors, the EU adopts policies that are not supported by a majority of citizens in many member states, such as a neoliberal regulatory framework for the single market.

European elections, as a channel fuelling the EU political system with direct legitimacy, play a prominent role in the liberal representative approach to the EU's democratic deficit. The prominent presence of elections underscores the key claim of the democratic tradition, that political decisions should be legitimised by those who are affected by them. It is believed that this link is corrosive in the EU, since European elections attract a small portion of voters and represent (in the best case) second-order voting (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Thus, any innovations increasing their first-order character are desirable. The Spitzenkandidaten procedure represents such an innovation.

When speaking about the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, we were interested in identifying the following factors: actor; the procedure's attributes; actors' expectations and motivation. This leads to the analytical framework presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Analytical framework

Category	Subcategories	Operationalisation
Actor	Collective	EU institution, Euro-party, EP political group, member states.
	Individual	Individual politician as MEP.
Attribute		Procedure attributes related to intra-party procedure and to the shape of electoral campaign
Motivations/Expectations	EU democracy	Arguments driven by a need for greater legitimacy of the EU, its institutions or its decision-making process, a more transparent EU, and a desire to change the second-order character of European elections.
	Ideology/power	Arguments related to eventual changes in the balance of power between individual actors involved, arguments perceiving the procedure as a tool for strengthening their own position <i>vis-à-vis</i> another actor in inter-institutional or inter-party relations.

In the context of the actor category, the question is who placed the idea on the agenda and, respectively, who presented their own attitudes related to the procedure. This could be either a collective actor, such as EU institutions or an individual actor, such as a particular politician. In situations when a document was adopted as a common position of an institution, we tried to identify discrepancies among actors' opinions. This was especially the case of the EP. Therefore, we distinguished between the positions of individual EP groups. Additionally, we also differentiated between, and compared attitudes of, EP groups and political parties at the EU level where possible. When the procedure was discussed by an individual, we were interested in their party affiliation. Our second category, procedure aspects/attributes, focuses on specific traits with possibly important implications for intra-party decision-making processes (such as parties' selection procedures) and the shape of an electoral campaign (for example participation in TV debates or personal visits to member states). Here, we were interested in what aspects of the procedure were proposed and who raised such issues.

The third category, motivations/expectations, is our key target. Here, we distinguish between two analytical subcategories: EU democracy and Ideology and power. The former subcategory reflects the motives rooted in the democratic deficit debate outlined above, whereas the latter reflects motives rooted in ideological or power perspectives. Both subcategories were identified as relevant on the basis of existing research that we outlined above.

This analytical framework enables us to structure the analysis as three step process. This starts with (a) the description of the institutionalisation process, and (b) the identification of actors involved. These first two steps provide us with detailed picture of what kind of actor proposed particular content of the procedure. Afterwards, we turn our attention to (c), the actors' motives/expectations and the role of debates about democracy at the EU level in that process.

DATA AND METHOD

This study is based upon a directed qualitative content analysis of documents produced by the Commission, the EP, the European Council (EUCO) and Council of the EU, the European political parties, and the EP groups. The content analysis allowed us a systematic analysis of documents while following individual categories presented above. By using this method, we were able to not only identify relevant analytical categories, but also follow their development (for example changes in actors' motivations) and compare between them. The documents of the EU institutions were found in official document registers, while political party documents were obtained from party websites. Data employed in the

study comes from documents published between the beginning of 1995 and the end of July of 2014 (for information about how these documents were gathered see the appendix).

The second step in the data gathering process consisted of sorting documents based on their relevance. Documents containing only a general mention of the procedure used for a Commission president nomination and appointment (i.e. documents which do not provide information about an actor's preferences/opinions/attitudes/motivation for supporting eventual change in procedure) were excluded from the final dataset.

The final dataset consists of 152 documents (see the appendix for a complete list of documents used). The content analysis proceeded as follows: in each document containing a proposal for modification of procedure which could potentially lead to the strengthening of the EP position in the process, or in which such a possibility is discussed or mentioned we identified an actor. Next, we explored motives or expectations lying behind supporting that eventual development (a change in procedure in general, Spitzenkandidaten, a particular aspect related to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure). In this regard, we were interested in motives and expectations manifested in a particular document. Identified motives and expectations were assigned into two analytical subcategories as per our analytical framework. Such an approach is especially important considering we follow the process over a rather long period of time. Thus, this helped us to trace the stability and development of an actor's motivation and the arguments presented and, consequently, explain attitudes regarding the Spitzenkandidaten idea more deeply.

One remark regarding the data is worth mentioning. The analysis is based on official documents and other sources of information which were publically available. Hence, one can argue that this kind of data is not most suitable for identifying the true motives of political actors. Indeed, a significant part of interactions between politicians takes place behind the closed doors. Nevertheless, we consider our approach as appropriate for three reasons. Firstly, based upon the data gathering process described above, we were able to support our conclusions on a broader set of documents, which were omitted in previous studies.¹ Secondly, conducting the interviews as a way of gathering data could be in general a better option for investigating actors' motives, but since we study a long period it would be difficult to cover the period of the 1990s and early 2000s. Thirdly, we tried to balance the generality of official documents by also including documents adopted in the course of preparation of an actor's position. We are convinced that it is more likely to identify greater variety of motives, especially in these documents. With respect to the method used, we agree that content analysis is characterised by risks of over-subjectivity and inclination to support (rather than to not support) a theory or previous findings (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1283). In order to increase our findings' replicability and reliability, we provide a list of all relevant documents analysed in the appendix.

ANALYSIS

How did the procedure emerge in the EU?

During the preparatory phase prior to the IGC in Amsterdam, the Commission's nomination procedure was not among the dominant topics. Within the Westendorp reflection group, only the representatives of Greece, Austria and Denmark were in favour of a change in the procedure. The EP was to propose a candidate for the post and be more involved in the appointment process. Nevertheless, this proposal was not reflected in later positions of the member states and the EP. The Greek government proposed that the Commission President should be elected by the EP based on a list submitted by the EUCO. This idea was supported by the EP and, to some extent, by the Portuguese and Austrian governments, while the Commission did not propose any amendments to the procedure.

This proposal figured in the Westendorp report as one of two scenarios alongside the maintenance of the existing procedure without any amendments. However, due to limited support during negotiations, that idea was replaced by the EP's formal approval of a candidate. This resonated in the draft treaty submitted by the Irish Presidency, and later entered into force as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The official EP position on the Commission appointment was shaped by two working documents, one prepared by EPP MEP D'Andrea (at the time the EPP was the EPP-ED group) and the second submitted by PES MEP Martin. D'Andrea's position was less ambitious than the official EP position. According to him, the President of the Commission must be nominated by the EU CO and subsequently approved by the EP (European Parliament 1995a: 90-91). However, this corresponds with the official EPP position presented prior to the IGC. The EPP expected the president to be proposed by the EU CO after consulting with the EP and subsequently formally approved. The formal approval was also considered to be sufficient by the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR). David Martin presented an opinion corresponding with the PES's priority in relation to the 1996 IGC, i.e. an ambition to strengthen the EP through an appointment process, for example by choosing among the candidates of the EU CO. As a more radical version of this proposal, Martin refers to a situation in which an individual political party at the EU level proposes its own candidate for the presidency prior to elections (European Parliament 1995b: 15).

In its evaluation, the EP welcomed the change made by the Amsterdam Treaty. Nevertheless, from the EP's point of view, amendments in the procedure made by the treaty were perceived as only a formal recognition of existing practice. The Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) was expected to bring forward a report on the institutional implications of the approval of the EP, with D'Andrea acting as rapporteur. D'Andrea argued that it is important that potential candidates for the post should be known prior to the elections and that the Euro-parties should present their own preferences (European Parliament 1998: 4). A majority of AFCO members, mainly the representatives of PES, EPP-ED, and European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), supported the possibility that the EP, as well as its political groups, could present its position regarding the candidate before a formal nomination was announced.

In 1998, D'Andrea was replaced by another member of EPP-ED, Elmar Brok. Through Brok's report, the EP showed an effort to create a strong link between the nomination of Commission President and the EP elections. This link can take two forms. The first consists of taking into account the election results when nominating a candidate by the EU CO. At the centre of the second scenario lies the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea. Such an institutional development was perceived by the EP as an important change in the political dimension of the European integration process. The EP did not make a claim on the EU CO prerogative of nominating a candidate, however it stressed that the member states' governments would probably not refuse to nominate a Euro-party's candidate who had been able to gain the majority support of the MEPs after campaigning (European Parliament 1998: 5-17).

The *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure became a part of the AFCO's motion for resolution and subsequently it figured in the EP resolution adopted in 1999. The resolution was supported mainly by members of the ELDR, EPP-ED, PES, and GUE/NGL, but due to the lack of availability of relevant data, we were unable to identify preferences and attitudes presented during the plenary. However, although the EP's resolution does not deal solely with the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, we are able to conclude that the idea of lead candidates gained significant support. Our argument is based on the fact that, at the Union for Europe (UEN) group's request, the MEPs voted separately on the presence of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in the resolution (EUR-Lex 1999).

During the next round of treaty revisions embodied in the Treaty of Nice, the appointment procedure was among the least discussed issues. Only the EP and Benelux countries were willing to place nomination/appointment on the agenda. The EP presented the same position as in the case of the Amsterdam Treaty. The Benelux countries did not explicitly support the EP's proposal but noted that if the EP were to elect a candidate it could increase the legitimacy of the Commission. In accordance with its initial intention, the IGC did not provide a platform for more fundamental changes in procedure. Therefore, 'only' QMV was institutionalised. In the early 2000s, the European Convention on the Future of Europe (European Convention) proved to be a more appropriate forum for amending the procedure and for bringing forward the Spitzenkandidaten idea. During the European Convention, there were many proposals dealing with the nomination, election and appointment of Commission President. The most preferable scenario consisted of the election of the president by the EP. This proposal gained support among members of all groups of actors involved, including the European Convention President.

The most important contribution to the debates came from Elmar Brok and Alain Lamassoure (EPP). In a Draft Constitution for Europe submitted by Brok, a candidate for presidency would be proposed by the EU CO, taking into account the EP election results. Subsequently, the EP would elect the president by a majority of its members. Brok's proposal is in accordance with the EPP's position adopted during the EPP Estoril congress in 2002, to which Brok explicitly refers in the Draft Constitution (European People's Party 2002; European Convention 2002a: 47). Lamassoure argued in a similar vein when he emphasised that voting by the EP also allows the parties to nominate lead candidates. Thus, a vote given to a political party in the elections would become a vote for a candidate (European Convention 2002b: 3-4). Besides the EPP-ED members, the idea of personalisation of politics was also implicitly supported by the PES. Both claims were reflected in the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe. The Treaty amended the procedure so that the EU CO proposes a candidate after having held consultations, while taking into account the EP elections. A candidate is elected by a majority of MEPs (European Convention 2003). It must be emphasised that the other actors supporting the EP's right to elect a candidate (including heads of state and government) had to be aware of potential future changes in the nomination procedure. A consensus reached on the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe heralded the most probable scenario, in the centre of which lies the Spitzenkandidaten idea. At the end, the Treaty establishing a Constitution was rejected by Dutch and French citizens in 2005. Nevertheless, the wording of the relevant article, including mentioned amendments in procedure, came into force later with the Lisbon Treaty and its Article 17.7.

After the realisation of the European Convention, the Spitzenkandidaten idea continued to resonate among Euro-parties. The EPP entered the campaign prior to the 2004 EP elections with the expectation that the procedure, as outlined in the Constitutional Treaty, would be applied to the nomination of Commission President regardless of whether the Treaty was ratified or not. The party also announced that it was prepared to not support a candidate who did not belong to the winning party (European People's Party 2004a, 2004b). After José Manuel Barroso's nomination and election as a President of the Commission (see Beukers 2005), the procedure was perceived a great success. Additionally, the EPP's President Wilfried Martens proposed that other political parties should present their own candidates for the presidency in upcoming elections (European People's Party Group 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). In the 2009 EP elections, the EPP campaigned with Manuel Barroso as its lead candidate (European People's Party Group 2009).

The PES intended to adopt a similar approach with respect to the 2004 EP elections, i.e. to propose its own candidate or at least to declare its support to the candidates from the socialist political family. However, the party's representatives were unable to propose their candidate for the Commission presidency (Party of European Socialists 2004). This scenario repeated itself in the 2009 EP elections. Even though leading figures of the PES, namely Martin Schulz and Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, did not rule

out the possibility of nominating a lead candidate, the PES was unable to reach an agreement on who that candidate would be. The reason for this lies in internal fragmentation of the party, since some PES prime ministers were prepared to support the EPP's candidate (Party of European Socialists 2009a, 2009b).

In addition to the EPP and PES, the ELDR was willing to propose its own candidate for the 2009 EP elections, while the EGP was considering the idea (European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party 2007; European Green Party 2008, 2004). While until 2012, four parties declared their position in favour of nominating a lead candidate, a common will to do so among them was missing. It was only the EPP which proposed its own candidate before the 2009 elections.

The final phase of the Spitzenkandidaten institutionalisation began in the early 2010s with the Commission's initiative. From the Commission's point of view, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was perceived as a priority for the upcoming elections. Hence, Barroso called European political parties to propose their candidates for the Commission presidency prior to elections (European Commission 2012). In response to the Commission mandate, the EP adopted a resolution prepared by Carlo Casini (EPP), who urged European political families to nominate candidates for the post. At the same time, it was expected that candidates would play a leading role during the campaign. This request was supplemented within the AFCO by a proposal on behalf of the Greens/EFA that the candidates would personally visit member states. The resolution was supported by the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Greens/EFA (European Parliament 2012).

The 2012 and the beginning of 2013 saw a broad consensus in relation to the suitability of the lead candidate idea. However, the question of how the practical realisation of Spitzenkandidaten should look remained and there was a need for defining the procedure's basic attributes. EPP members emphasised the European-wide campaign, where the lead candidates should visit all member states and present programme. The campaigns of both the candidates and the Euro-parties should concentrate on European issues, because a campaign oriented on domestic issues would have a negative impact on participation. Vital Moreira (S&D) called on national political parties to declare not only their affiliation to a Euro-party, but also their support of a candidate and their programme. Moreira also stressed that the candidate of the winning party should be considered first for the Commission presidency. Andrew Duff (ALDE) agreed with Moreira's second proposal. Duff also underlined that the parties' internal selection processes should be democratic and transparent. Sandrine Bélier (Greens/EFA) proposed conducting TV debates between candidates. All these aspects were adopted by the plenary in July of 2013 (European Parliament 2013a, 2013c, 2013d).

The Council adopted its position at the COREPER level. The Council's attitudes towards the Spitzenkandidaten is evident (at least implicitly) from conclusions in the EU Citizenship Report 2013. The Council was aware of actions taken by the Commission and the EP and did not present an explicit position regarding the Spitzenkandidaten idea. However, at that time, the procedure was at least not questioned (Council of the EU 2013).

To summarise, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure should be understood as the result of the evolution of the procedure used to nominate and appoint the Commission President. That process started in the pre-Amsterdam era, when the Spitzenkandidaten idea was placed onto EP's agenda by PES members. After the Treaty of Amsterdam, the idea of lead candidates was perceived by the EP as an integral part of the EP's position on developing EU politics. Between 2004 and 2011, the Spitzenkandidaten idea figured on the agenda of four Euro-parties, however, no collective action of all these actors took place. The only party which pushed the idea of lead candidates forward during this period was the EPP. In the early 2010s, as a part of the preparations for the 2014 EP elections, the procedure was institutionalised. The process, starting with the Commission's initiative in 2012, continuing with

designing practical elements related to the character of the 2014 electoral campaign and culminating in the Council's implicit approval, can be considered the final phase of the formal (although not legally binding) institutionalisation in the period we followed.

Who were the actors involved in the institutionalisation process?

It is evident above that EU institutions, Euro-parties and EP groups all participated in the process of institutionalising the Spitzenkandidaten. The EP supported the lead candidates during whole period. The documents related to the EP's activity reveal that the idea of proposing candidates prior the EP elections resonates as relevant in the EU politics since mid-1990s (European Parliament 2013a, 2012, 1998, 1995b). The Commission's active engagement was present particularly in the early 2010s, during which an intention to enhance EU democracy was tied to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure (European Commission 2013a, 2012). Before that period, the Commission did not present an explicit official position, but there were instances when this topic resonated within the Commission. The EPP promoted the Spitzenkandidaten most actively from the post-Amsterdam era until the late 2000s. The EPP proposed its lead candidate twice, and it also encouraged the other parties to propose their own ones. Furthermore, its members were among the most active advocates of the idea during the European Convention (European Parliament 1998; European Convention 2003, 2002b; European People's Party Group 2009, 2004a; European People's Party 2004a, 2004b). The PES pushed the idea forward in the pre-Amsterdam period. Indeed, it was the PES members who promoted the idea in the EP in 1995. The European Socialists were supportive of the Spitzenkandidaten system also during the early 2000s. However, they became the main proponents only after their electoral defeat in 2009. As the experience of 2009 suggests, a reason for their less active involvement could lie in internal party fragmentation and inability to propose their own candidate (Party of European Socialists 2009a, 2009b, 2004; European Parliament 1995b; EUR-Lex 1999). The ALDE (formerly the ELDR) and EGP were involved in the process, though with less intensity. Nevertheless, they were more active in the final phase of the institutionalisation process when the attributes of procedure were defined (European Parliament 2013b; European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party 2007; European Green Party 2008, 2004).

In summary, the emergence of the Spitzenkandidaten system is the result of interaction and cooperation between supranational EU institutions and the two strongest EP groups and European political parties. Intergovernmental institutions and member states played a marginal role. Smaller EP groups and Euro-parties were also less active. This is not to say that they remained silent, but when compared to the institutional and group duos, they followed what the most active players had suggested. Remarkably, the fact that all actors were visibly active in the institutionalisation process can be seen as a promotion of deeper integration processes.

What were the reasons for promoting the Spitzenkandidaten idea and how were they related to the democratic deficit debate?

Turning our attention to actor motivation, it can be concluded that the EP intended to create a connection between choices made in the EP elections and the nomination of Commission President. The main motive behind that effort was the continuing imbalance between citizens' and political forces' participation in EU politics on the one hand, and the level of integration already achieved on the other. In other words, with the continual deepening of the integration process, it would be expected that participation would be higher. As this did not happen, the view was that persistent imbalance could be resolved by creating the mentioned link. The EP argued that in the event that political parties were to nominate their own candidate prior to elections, the battle for Commission

presidency would become a campaign issue that could increase the visibility of the EP elections, leading to an end of citizens' indifference to them. The EU's institutional design was identified as one reason for that apathy. The EU's institutional set-up differs from national political systems, especially with respect to the fact that the EP elections did not contain an aspect of choice between truly rival policy programmes, nor do they provide an opportunity for citizens to influence the composition of the European executive. Hence, changing this would increase the EU's democratic legitimacy (European Parliament 1998, 1995b). During the post-Lisbon era, the EP also stressed the economic crisis and related discussions about the EU's future, and the transformation of Euro-parties into actors capable of leading an electoral campaign (European Parliament 2013a, 2012).

The Commission openly supported the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea from the beginning of the 2010s. In that period, one of the most discussed issues by the Commission was a need for establishing a political union. The Commission claimed that the sustainability of the Economic and Monetary Union depended on institutions behind it. From this perspective, the economic and financial crisis as well as the related decreasing confidence of citizens in the decision-making process, became the catalysts for the Commission's initiative. This situation could be solved by creating a political union, which however presupposes the existence of a public sphere. The importance of the presence of lead candidates lies in the conviction that the Euro-parties should contribute to the development of the EU's public sphere. In general, the Commission's attitude was driven by citizens' interest in being allowed to choose between political opportunities on European issues, the negative consequences of domestic issues dominating in European elections, an unsatisfactory connection between European and national political parties, and by the belief that Euro-parties are best placed for connecting citizens and EU politics (European Commission 2013a, 2013b, 2012).

The Council of the EU also concluded that the active involvement of Euro-parties and EU citizens is central to the functioning of the EU. Thus, the Council supported Commission's effort to strengthen the European public sphere and to encourage political participation in the EP elections, since it would contribute to enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the EU's decision-making process (Council of the EU 2013).

When speaking about the political parties at the European level, the EPP was an active proponent of the idea until 2009. The EPP stressed the need to offer citizens the opportunity to express their will. This was later reflected in the process of nomination, and the desire to increase participation in the European elections would thus lead to increased democratic control of the Commission (European People's Party Group 2009, 2004a; European People's Party 2004a, 2004b; European Parliament 1998; European Convention 2003, 2002b).

The PES supported the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea during whole period. However, the real breakthrough was their electoral defeat in 2009 and the re-election of Barroso. The absence of a PES *Spitzenkandidat*, the fragmentation of PES and inadequate party visibility were identified as the causes of defeat. From the PES's perspective, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was perceived as a tool needed for winning the next round. Through the persona of their lead candidate, the PES should be able to present a real alternative to the EPP and attract more voters. Furthermore, the procedure could resolve the problem of decreasing participation in EP elections and contribute to higher public awareness and visible differentiation between Euro-parties (Party of European Socialists 2011, 2010, 2009a).

Similarly, the EGP's position was influenced by more 'pragmatic' motives. They considered the low level of participation in the European elections and their second-order character as problematic aspects of EU politics. However, the primary motivation behind the eventual nomination of an EGP lead candidate was an effort to be prepared for a situation in which other parties would propose lead candidates. That intention was later confirmed when the EGP stated that the procedure could increase

the party's visibility and provide an opportunity to confront other parties (European Green Party 2008, 2004). The ELDR's positive attitude towards the Spitzenkandidaten was driven by an effort to create a political Europe, as well as by the belief that political parties should play a key role in connecting the citizens and EU's institutions (European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party 2007).

The motives behind the actors' activities can be identified by interpreting the above findings. Turning back to both the historical events and the players involved in them, democratic deficit reasons predominantly explain the activities behind the procedure. More pragmatic motives, related to actors' self-interest, were also present. Especially for the PES, EGP and to some extent the EP, the procedure was perceived as an opportunity to strengthen their own positions. However, it is evident that actors who supported the Spitzenkandidaten idea had one thing in common. Their motivations to participate in the Spitzenkandidaten experiment were centred in discussions about democracy at the EU level. During the whole period, there was a desire among all actors to increase the legitimacy of the EU (including the Commission and its President), to strengthen the link between citizens and the EU and to change second-order character of the EP elections.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Spitzenkandidaten procedure is an important development in political contestation at the European level. Research focusing on its development has stressed the long-term character of that process, in which, above all, the contribution of the EPP prior to and during the realisation of the European Convention, the change in PES position after the 2009 EP elections, and the initiatives of the EP and Commission during the early 2010s were highlighted. This study sought to contribute to our knowledge by focusing on the actors involved in the process of the procedure's institutionalisation, and their motivations for doing so.

Having analysed the development of the procedure over the long term, we argue that the picture is more complex. The Spitzenkandidaten idea had already gained political relevance in the pre-Amsterdam period. At that time, it was the PES that supported the idea of lead candidates and promoted changes to procedure which would lead to the strengthening of the EP in nominating the Commission President. After the Treaty of Amsterdam, the EPP became an active proponent of the idea, and the PES, ELDR and EGP MEPs also had positive attitudes towards Spitzenkandidaten. The Commission's initiative in 2012 came at a time when all relevant actors were already willing to participate in the Spitzenkandidaten experiment. Hence, the emergence of the procedure is not a result of an individual actor's ambition, but rather the consequence of cooperation between the EP, Commission and four political parties at the EU level.

When considering actors' motivations, earlier studies do not provide an unambiguous answer to the question of why the Spitzenkandidaten emerged. On the one hand, there is the explanation that the procedure should be perceived as an effort to respond to problematic aspects of European democracy which resulted in the 'first presidential elections' in the EU where the citizens had the opportunity to decide who would govern the EU as Commission President (see Kassim 2017). On the other hand, there are interpretations which stress actors' self-interest when promoting the Spitzenkandidaten idea (for example Shackleton 2017; Kassim, Connolly, Dehousse, Rozenberg et al. 2017; Janning 2014; Gómez and Wessels 2015).

Our analysis shows that both interpretations have merit. There is clear evidence that actors' motivations were predominantly driven by the effort to resolve the problematic character of European elections, as well as to enhance the quality of democracy at the European level. These motives were present in the agendas of all actors involved in the process of Spitzenkandidaten institutionalisation,

as well as during the whole period we studied. Nevertheless, actors also evaluated the possibility of presenting lead candidates in more pragmatic terms, focusing on their position vis-à-vis other actors. These motives, however, were more marginal compared to the democratising motivations. When it comes to the interpretations of the Spitzenkandidaten emergence, our analysis supports the view that the institutionalisation of the procedure should be evaluated above all as a long-term effort to resolve shortcomings of democracy in the EU. Based upon these findings, we argue that the rival explanations interpreting the Spitzenkandidaten system as a coup d'état by the EP, or because of party relations between the PES and EPP over-simplify the matter. The evidence suggests that all relevant actors, including EU member states, were aware that the Spitzenkandidaten idea was perceived as a desirable development in EU politics. Thus, it was clear that wording of the relevant treaty provision as agreed during the European Convention and eventually in the Lisbon Treaty (current Article 17.7) could be interpreted to institutionalise the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. In the second case, it was PES's inability to propose its own candidate in 2004 and 2009 EP elections which led to their more active engagement in the process. From this point of view, the 2009 electoral defeat should be seen as a catalyst, rather than a cause, of the PES's determination to promote the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.

This study and others (for example Westlake 2016; Kassim 2017; Dinan 2015) stressed the role of democratising motives in promoting the Spitzenkandidaten system. Unsurprisingly, most attention is given to investigating whether this innovation changed EU politics accordingly. However, available evidence provides a rather disappointing answer for the procedure's proponents. Electoral turnout remained low despite the personalisation of the campaign (Hobolt 2014: 1536) and the second-order character of the EP elections seemed to persist (Schmitt and Toygür 2016: 176). Furthermore, candidates' recognition by citizens was low (Hobolt 2014: 1535-1537; Gattermann, De Vreese and van der Brug 2016: 47) and media interest in providing information about the lead candidates was also low (Schulze 2016: 31-32). Lastly, national parties did not pay much attention to the Spitzenkandidaten system either (Braun and Popa 2018: 1138).

At this point, it seems that the procedure cannot resolve the shortcomings of the EU democracy. Nevertheless, recent analysis indicates that more active engagement of actors could lead to a more positive reception of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. In this regard, lead candidates, media and political parties play a crucial role. In a situation when citizens are aware of individual candidates for the Commission presidency, the likelihood of casting a ballot is higher (Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015: 363). Since the information provided to EU citizens about lead candidates matters (Gattermann, De Vreese and van der Brug 2016: 46), it is difficult to imagine a successful story of Spitzenkandidaten without more active media engagement. National parties and their leaders also have a role to play (Hobolt 2004: 1535; Braun and Popa 2018: 1140). It will be interesting to follow whether the procedure fulfilled the expectations of its main proponents in 2019. However, it is not only the direct impact of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure that requires attention. Its role in the European public sphere and its salience for European public discussion should also be evaluated.

For now, it seems that the proponents of the Spitzenkandidaten system identified in this study are determined to preserve it. Since the experience of 2014, the EP repeatedly declared its intention to make the Spitzenkandidaten procedure an integral part of campaigning before the EP elections (European Parliament 2017, 2015). Additionally, the Commission gave its blessing to the Spitzenkandidaten in 2019 as well (European Commission 2018). However, while European political parties were campaigning with their own candidates for the Commission Presidency in 2019, it remains to be seen whether this will enhance the quality of EU democracy and resolve its shortcomings.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Nevertheless, there is no assurance that our dataset is fully representative due to retrospective data collection (some documents might have been deleted). In addition, some documents might not have been published at all due to ‘political sensitiveness’ of the topic (especially those containing information about actors’ self-interest).

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