

Weber's revenge deals a blow to Macron's European momentum

Blog post by Senior Associate Franck Thomas, 10 October 2019

The European Parliament's rejection of Sylvie Goulard today is the most significant consequence yet of the fragmented European election result in May. It is a reminder of the weak position of President-elect Ursula von der Leyen and a significant blow to French President Macron. He appeared to have built on his success in securing Christine Lagarde's presidency of the European Central Bank and installing his ally Charles Michel as Council President, securing a strong portfolio for another political ally. Goulard would have overseen the internal market, space, defence and industrial policy portfolios, but is now the first French nominee in history to be rejected.

A new nominee will eventually be forthcoming, but today's rejection exposes three longer term concerns for Macron as he seeks to build momentum with German chancellor Angela Merkel for EU reform at next week's European Council:

- The viability of a pro-European coalition for legislative work in the Parliament is now in question. Goulard will carry much of the blame: she fell short of reassuring MEPs about a corruption investigation and the wide remit of her portfolio. Her combative style during two hearings further alienated MEPs. But rejection in the secret ballot was also politically motivated, with only Renew Europe MEPs voting in her favour. The realignment of power in Brussels that Macron triggered with Renew Europe brought to an end the traditional 'grand coalitions' of centre-right and centre-left, with the prospect of increased leverage for smaller pro-European parties. But while they did reach agreement on isolating Eurosceptic MEPs, they are finding it harder for them to collaborate elsewhere and this increases uncertainty over the future legislative work.
- Macron has paid a price for killing the *Spitzenkandidat* process and faces a difficult choice about a successor. Manfred Weber's German delegation in the EPP, who lost the most from the appointment of von der Leyen, flexed their muscles as a reminder that even a fragmented parliament is central to decision making. Macron must now find a heavyweight replacement for Goulard, credible and experienced enough to resist calls to break up the newly enlarged Internal Market portfolio. Most at risk is responsibility for audio-visual services, which could pass to innovation commissioner Mariya Gabriel of the EPP. Former internal market Commissioner Michel Barnier, who was part of Macron's initial short list, meets many of the criteria but his nomination would jeopardise gender balance, further chipping away at von der Leyen's own fragile coalition of support.
- Macron's credentials to lead the EU agenda will be under scrutiny. This is the first time MEPs have rejected a commissioner nomination from either France or Germany, a shock for the French establishment, who until yesterday insisted Goulard would be approved. It also calls into question Macron's judgement for the nomination, as Goulard had already resigned as Defence Minister over the same unresolved conduct scandal. The clock is ticking towards the Commission

taking office on November 1st, but Paris may be inclined to move more slowly than other countries that have found themselves in this position, if another Renew Europe candidate risks being rejected or diminished during the hearings. Macron may have to spend precious political capital with other member states, especially Germany, to apply pressure on MEPs to guarantee a new candidate's approval.