

HOUSE of CARDS

by Alain Bloëdt

Like Claire and Frank Underwood, well known to fans of the TV series *House of Cards*, the Franco-German couple, formed by Chancellor Merkel and President Macron, preferred to pursue their own petty domestic interests despite the ecological challenge and the crisis of representative democracy.

Ursula @vonderleyen's election as President of the @EU_Commission - thwarting the progressive agenda.
Alain Bloëdt @ProgPost_FEPS



Some historians will probably say that the concept of *spitzenkandidaten* (a German term that refers to the main candidate of the ticket of a given party, who is set to become EU Commission President if that party wins the European elections) created in 2014, caved in even before the campaign began, when in spring 2019, MEPs rejected the ambitious idea of transnational lists. But, without officialising its final declaration of death

– Social Democrats and Greens in the lead, have not had their last word – did the heads of state and government and the two main brokers of these negotiations – France and Germany – really have to return to the old practices of backroom arrangements, without transparency?

In a context of an embattled European Union, which is still considered distant and technocratic more than 60 years after its

creation, voters nevertheless expressed optimism by turning out more than usual for the elections. However, this revival of citizenship proved insufficient for French President Emmanuel Macron. As he had announced, even before the election: knowing that his European parliamentary group ALDE – from which he has since erased the liberal brand by renaming it ReNew – was not going to win the election, it didn't seem suitable to him to support the *spitzenkandidaten* system.

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The way was open for negotiations worthy of Roman conclaves!

Angela Merkel, for her part, as she has often done discreetly and effectively over the course of her long political career, tried to solve her domestic problems by shifting them to a European level. Was she convinced by the candidacy of Manfred Weber, a member of the CSU, the Bavarian party that is a complicated partner of her own CDU? It’s hard to say. However, at the Congress of the European People’s Party in Helsinki in November 2018, she decided to support him at the expense of another candidate, the pro-European, multilingual, highly qualified former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, who was severely beaten in his own capital. Then, during the negotiations and the final abandonment of the Spitzenkandidaten concept, she also solved another domestic problem at the German Federal Ministry of Defence where the presence of Ursula von der Leyen was becoming more and more difficult to manage due to numerous errors.

The Spitzenkandidaten

The skilled couple Merkel and Macron offered the good people, who were excluded from the negotiations, a token of satisfaction by naming for the first time two experienced women, Ursula von der Leyen and Christine Lagarde, to lead the EU Commission and the European Central Bank. But what about the others? Among the winners is the unsuccessful Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, leading a care-taker government, since his coalition government partner, the Flemish nationalist party NVA, refused in December 2018 to sign the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The crisis was one too much for the coalition and Michel, who, in order to keep his position as Prime Minister, had accepted for four long years without objection that his Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken, monopolised the debates around the issue of migration to the detriment of fiscal and

environmental issues, and without ever proposing fundamental reforms in this area.

Donald Tusk, without a successor

During these six-week-long EU negotiations, two other political realities, although for European democracy, seem to have been sidestepped by the European Council and its double-headed Franco-German leadership too: Brexit, on the one hand, and the divide between Eastern and Western Europe, on the other.

A few months before the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 15th anniversary of the Union’s enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries, the absence of a representative from these 10 countries among the new occupants of the key EU positions rings hollow. Admittedly, Hungary and Poland are currently no easy interlocutors, but they remain a minority among the 12 countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. While the effects of the migration crisis have not yet fully disappeared and economic models sometimes clash between founding countries and those still catching up, the absence of a successor(s) to Donald Tusk as a representative from the East is not the best message sent by the founding countries, which are over-represented with a Belgian, a French, a German and an Italian.

Merkel and Macron however did cave in to a particular Eastern-European demand: as a timely concession to the Visegrad Group and Salvini’s Italy, the Chancellor and the President have sacrificed both Spitzenkandidaten, Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans, on the altar of divergent national interests.

Among the excluded aspirants was another major player of this Europe that sometimes wavers but without breaking up: Michel Barnier. Indeed, the Chief European Negotiator, responsible for preparing and

conducting the Brexit negotiations with the United Kingdom, has made a brilliant contribution to keeping the 27 Member States of a European Union united for over three years, despite the fact that further exits were predicted following the British referendum of June 2016.

Difference in interpretation

Beyond these essential political considerations, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel also ignored the green wave that shook their respective countries during the European elections.

The German Greens managed to increase their share from 8.9% in the last federal elections in 2017 to 20.7% in the recent European election and came out for the first time in their history as the second party of the country. The result confirmed - to the detriment of the ruling conservative-Social Democratic coalition - the striking importance of environmental issues in the German public debate. And although Merkel has reacted in the past by starting, for example, the phase-out of nuclear and coal, these issues didn't have any influence on Weber's election-programme as candidate of the European People's Party. A lack of ambition that shows how much the European Conservatives still seem ready to defend the industries tooth and nail.

The French Greens, for their part, undoubtedly obtained a third place in this European election. Although Macron's party was able to attract some well-known environmentalist figures to its list, just as it had been able to seduce many socialists two years earlier, during the French presidential and legislative elections, there was no convincing strategic shift towards ecology. Environmental issues never seemed to be the President's top priority and the doubt about his ecological commitment was reinforced among the French after the resignation of the then Minister for Ecological Transition Nicolas Hulot, a symbol of the fight against climate change.

The Franco-German duo's lack of consistency on ecological issues has fortunately been counterbalanced. Pushed by the Social Democrats, they finally had to put water in their wine and, in exchange for the presidency of the European Commission, conceded some major pledges in the field of law, social and environmental issues. Ursula von der Leyen has thus committed herself to providing ecological pledges within the first 100 days of her mandate and has presented MEPs with more ambitious emission reduction targets than in the past, as well as a Green Deal for Europe project, not to mention projects for sustainable European investment.

Reflecting current European politics, where liberalism has succeeded austerity, the Franco-German couple had a huge influence on choosing the candidates for the EU top jobs, skilfully placing compatriots or allies. Will this offer citizens the strong and ambitious Europe they want? MEPs were disappointed and the complicated election of the new President of the Commission, with the support of the very conservative Polish PiS, Viktor Orbán's Hungarian Fidesz and the Italian Five Star Movement, M5S, does not bode well for a progressive agenda that is essential for a continent with growing inequality and a world where Europe needs to play a key role.

#HouseofCards, #EU version:
the couple Merkel-Macron put their domestic interests over the climate challenge and the crisis of representative democracy - Alain Bloëdt



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