

The Spitzenkandidat: Time to rethink a failing democratic experiment

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Executive summary

Hailed as a breakthrough for EU democracy when it was first introduced in 2014, the *Spitzenkandidat* system has since failed to fulfil the promises made to European citizens. The system, based on an interpretation of Article 17.7 of the treaty on the European Union that stipulates how the Commission president is (s)elected, dictates that the lead candidate of the European party which obtains the most votes in the European elections should become European Commission president and was used in the election of Commission presidents Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen.

This paper argues that the *Spitzenkandidat* system has not contributed to deepening the pan-European political debate, reinforcing the political legitimacy of EU institutions, or increasing the accountability of the European Commission to the European Parliament. On the contrary, the way that European political parties and members of the European Parliament have implemented the system has led to a more powerful and partisan Commission, as well as a weaker Parliament with less oversight powers. And while the European Parliament—engaged in an institutional competition with the European Council—has used the lead candidate experiment to establish a parliamentary government at EU level, this has created ambiguities over the form of government the EU should have and where legitimacy should derive from.

On 18 July 2024, a majority in the European Parliament re-elected Ursula von der Leyen, the lead candidate of the European People's Party, as Commission president. A year later, the Commission's agenda does not reflect the political balance of the so-called 'Von der Leyen coalition' that backed her election, which proves that the Commission is not politically accountable to the Parliament. The first anniversary of her re-election is an opportunity to draw lessons from the *Spitzenkandidat* experiment and start rethinking how it can deliver on its democratic promises.

Political parties, the European Parliament, and the European Council should address the negative effects of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and work effectively to improve the EU elections process. In particular:

Political parties should stop claiming that the lead candidate of the party finishing first in European elections should automatically become Commission president.

The European Council and Parliament should agree ahead of the 2029 elections on how to implement Article 17.7 of the Treaty on the European Union.

Member states in the Council should accept the creation of an EU-wide constituency for the EU elections, in addition to the existing national and regional constituencies.

The European Parliament should reconsider its attempts to establish parliamentary democracy at the EU level and prioritise its demands for treaty reform on measures that would effectively increase its powers or improve general EU governance.

The European Parliament should work to increase its scrutiny powers over the Commission, most immediately by putting political pressure on the Commission to finalise the revision of the Interinstitutional Framework Agreement governing cooperation that was signed by the EP and Commission in 2010. It should also make full use of the tools at their disposal to scrutinise the Commission, including the special scrutiny hearings, which were introduced in 2024.

The European Parliament should formalise a structure and 'checklist' of criteria for the process of assessing the commissioners-designate, to avoid politically motivated hearings without proper scrutiny.

European political parties should select lead candidates who have solid political experience at the national and/or EU level. Contrary to the current practice, these candidates should also run for the European Parliament and commit to sitting as MEPs if they do not become Commission president or vice-president.

The European parties should strive to improve the visibility of the EU in their national campaigns, including by systematically indicating their party affiliations in campaign material, and presenting and promoting in member states the manifesto they publish at EU level.

Introduction

Nearly a year after Ursula von der Leyen was elected Commission president by the European Parliament (EP) on 18 July 2024, threats from centrist and left-wing groups in the EP to withdraw their political support,¹ as well as a motion of censure tabled by right-wing MEPs,² have raised doubts over her capacity to navigate a fragmented EP and advance the Commission's agenda.

This situation also highlights the complex relationship that has developed between members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the Commission president since European political parties introduced the *Spitzenkandidat* system in 2014. According to this system, the lead candidate of the European party that obtains the most votes in the European elections should become Commission president.

The lead candidate system is one of the most ambitious attempts to enhance EU democracy, increase the Commission's accountability and foster citizens'

engagement with EU politics. Yet its results have been suboptimal. Political and institutional actors have been unevenly committed to it, and its democratic promises are far from being fulfilled. On the contrary, it has led to a more powerful and partisan Commission, as well as a weaker Parliament. It has also created ambiguities over what form of government the EU should have, and which institutions it derives legitimacy from.

Looking ahead to the next EU leadership transition in 2029, the build-up to which is taking place in the context of significant global uncertainty, security threats and the continuous rise of anti-democratic forces,³ it is necessary to address the shortcomings of the *Spitzenkandidat* and its effects on the EU political and institutional system. While the ambition to improve EU democracy remains worthwhile, the political controversies and questions about von der Leyen's leadership⁴ indicate that it is time to start rethinking the *Spitzenkandidat* system.

An innovative attempt to improve European democracy

The *Spitzenkandidat* system was introduced by several European political parties at the 2014 European elections.⁵ It was based on an interpretation of Article 17.7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), which states that the Commission president is elected by the EP upon a proposal from the European Council, "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations."

The stated main purpose of the lead candidate system was to strengthen European democracy.⁶ Its proponents argued that it would "deepen the pan-European political debate",⁷ "reinforce the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission",⁸ as well as "increase the legitimacy of the President of the Commission, the accountability of the Commission to the European Parliament and the European electorate and, more generally, increase the democratic legitimacy of the whole decision-making process in the Union."⁹

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The first successful *Spitzenkandidat*, Jean-Claude Juncker, also argued that the process would align the EU "with the rules and practices of parliamentary democracy."¹⁰ The development of an EU parliamentary government, in which executive power, represented by the Commission, is derived from the popular will represented by the EP, and in which the Commission is directly accountable to the EP's majority, was considered an effective way to reduce the perceived EU democratic gap.¹¹

The election of the Commission president by MEPs, based on political competition between European parties' lead candidates, was also welcomed as a step towards more politicisation of EU decision-making. More left-right politics at the European level, it was argued, would allow the EU to overcome institutional gridlock, encourage policy innovation, produce a mandate for reform, and consequently increase the EU's legitimacy.¹²

The *Spitzenkandidat* system has been applied three times: in 2014, 2019 and 2024. It was successful in 2014, when Juncker, the candidate of the European People's Party (EPP), which won the most votes, was proposed as Commission president by the European Council and elected by the EP (with 422 votes against 250). It failed in 2019 when Manfred Weber, the EPP's new candidate, was rejected by the European Council, despite the party once again coming first in the European elections.

Instead, another German hailing from the EPP, Ursula von der Leyen, was proposed by the European Council and elected by the Parliament (383 votes against 327).

In 2024, von der Leyen was the EPP's lead candidate. She was proposed by the European Council and elected for a second term by the EP (401 votes against 282). It is difficult to definitively assert whether she was re-elected because she was the lead candidate of the winning European party or because she was the incumbent and thus provided a guarantee of stability and continuity at a time of uncertainty and crises. Before the elections, some EU leaders were considering other candidates for the position, including former ECB president and Italian Prime minister Mario Draghi.

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The mixed record of the *Spitzenkandidat* system owes much to the competition between the European Council on the one hand, and the EP and European political parties on the other, for control of the Commission and its president. The Commission presidency, the oldest leadership position in the EU system, remains the most influential thanks to the role played by the Commission as sole initiator of EU legislation, guardian of the treaties, and manager of the EU budget (Article 17.1 and 17.2 TEU). For this reason, EU leaders have been clear since 2014 that “there is no automaticity” in the *Spitzenkandidat* process, and that the European Council has “the autonomous competence” to nominate a candidate.¹⁵

The reluctance of the European Council to concede to the EP the automaticity of the lead candidate is only one reason why the system has not become a constitutional convention.¹⁴ Another is that it did not deliver the anticipated democratic benefits during the EU elections, or strengthen the accountability of the Commission to the EP. Political parties have been only partially committed to it, and it failed to reckon with the evolution of EU institutions.

EU elections have not been Europeanised

Contrary to expectations, the introduction of the lead candidate system has not ‘Europeanised’ EU elections, nor has it increased European citizens’ interest in the vote. In its report on the 2024 elections, the Commission admits that “the political debate and campaign...in the member states remained dominated by national and local issues, with the link to the European level being less well discussed and understood.”¹⁵

EU elections remain second-order elections in which domestic considerations dominate the campaign and influence voters’ choices more than EU issues do.¹⁶ Research into voting patterns in EU elections over the past decades confirms that EU election results are largely driven by national dynamics.¹⁷ There is also little evidence that the lead candidate system has affected this since its introduction in 2014.¹⁸ This is corroborated by the EP’s 2024 post-electoral survey, in which 5% of respondents said they voted “to influence the choice of the Commission President,”¹⁹ down from 8% in 2019 and in line with 2014.

In a Eurobarometer survey conducted three months before the 2024 EU elections, 71% said that they were likely to vote.²⁰ The actual turnout was much lower, at 50.74%, with only a slight increase compared to the 2019

elections (50.66%). Although the long-term decrease observed since 1979, when the EP was directly elected, has been reversed over the past two election rounds, the level of voter participation remains much lower than in national elections. In comparison, in parliamentary elections that took place in member states in the months before and after the 2024 EU elections, turnout reached an average of 68.68%.²¹

This suggests that the European dimension of EU elections fails to mobilise voters, possibly because it is not sufficiently conveyed to them. In that respect, the *Spitzenkandidat* system has not fulfilled the promise of deepening the pan-European political debate. It is also difficult to argue that it has increased the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process. Eurobarometer surveys show that the proportion of European citizens with a good image of the EU went up from 35% in spring 2014 to 44% in spring 2024, with the highest levels during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 and after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (there was a slump after the 2015 migration crisis).²² This suggests that output legitimacy—the quality of EU’s performance, especially during crises²³—is a more crucial factor than the *Spitzenkandidat* system.²⁴

The illusion of EU parliamentary democracy

The *Spitzenkandidat* system has also failed to establish an EU parliamentary government, which was a motivation for its introduction and a desired effect for those who saw the experiment as a way to strengthen EU democracy. According to advocates of *Spitzenkandidat*, the Commission's power would derive from the parliamentary majority that would elect its president, and this would lead to a representative democracy in the EU.²⁵

Only once, in 2014, did the political groups that supported the election of the Commission president form a formal majority coalition.²⁶ But the coalition agreement broke down in 2017 and has not been followed by similar ones since. In 2024, in a reversal of parliamentary logic, von der Leyen directly and separately negotiated with EP groups' ahead of her election, and won their support.²⁷ The EPP, the S&D and Renew Europe eventually signed a "Platform Cooperation Statement" four months later.²⁸ But the primary motivation was to unblock the confirmation of commissioners-designate, not to formalise a political mandate for the Commission president or express genuine political convergence. Von der Leyen again had to bring the leaders of the political groups to her office to help resolve the deadlock.²⁹

A year after the election of the Commission president by the EP, the 'von der Leyen majority' that was supposed to support the Commission is not a coherent bloc.³⁰ In particular, the EPP, the biggest group in the EP and von der Leyen's political family, has built an alternative majority that includes the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and parts of the far-right Patriots for Europe (PŒ).³¹ The EPP cooperates with both left- and right-wing groups on a case-by-case basis.

Consequently, the EU's agenda does not reflect the political balance that was found in the July 2024 negotiations and in the Commission's Political Guidelines on the basis of which von der Leyen was elected. This is particularly the case when it comes to climate and environmental policies.³² For that reason, parties that are supposed to be part of the coalition admit that the Commission is no longer accountable to them. They have accordingly threatened to withdraw their backing.³³

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This situation partly results from the increasing political fragmentation, and consequent weakening, of centrist parties in the EP. In 2024, the EPP, the largest group in the Parliament, occupied only 26% of seats. In the future, lead candidates may command an even smaller share of seats and will need to rely on increasingly heterogeneous and volatile majorities.

The EP has relinquished its scrutiny powers

In 2024, MEPs relinquished some of their supervisory powers of the Commission. For the first time since 1999, no commissioner-designate was rejected after the confirmation hearings held in the EP (compared to one in 2014 and three in 2019).

Since they were established in 1994, confirmation hearings have been part of the EP's effort to scrutinise the Commission. Their function is all the more important in the context of the lead candidate system. The hearings allow MEPs to block the nomination of candidates whom they deem to be unfit for the position by threatening to vote against the confirmation of the whole college. In 2024, the members of von der Leyen's Commission were not confirmed according to their individual abilities or performance during the hearings. Most hearings were limited to exchanges of questions and scripted answers, often with no follow-ups from MEPs.³⁴

The process was preceded by a general understanding between parties that, for the sake of political balance and to avoid delays, they would refrain from rejecting candidates supported by other groups.³⁵ The outcome was decided by the agreement over the "Platform Cooperation Statement" to ensure that all their party representatives in the college would be confirmed.³⁶ After a weak performance by the EPP commissioner-designate Jessica Roswall, the EPP put on hold the decision over the Renew-affiliated candidate Hadja Lahbib in order to guarantee Roswall's confirmation.³⁷ This situation also benefited the Hungarian candidate, Oliver Varhelyi, who was confirmed despite a negative record as outgoing Enlargement Commissioner and notwithstanding his proximity with his country's illiberal prime minister, Viktor Orban.

Political parties have been superficially committed

The EP and the biggest European political parties continue to advocate for the lead candidate system—the former to strengthen its institutional position; the latter to extend their political influence. But the parties are selectively applying it, focusing more on nominations than campaigns.

The number of parties putting forward lead candidates went from five in 2014, to six in 2019, and four in 2024. For the latter elections, in addition to the EPP, the European Left presented a lead candidate, and the Greens a pair of co-lead candidates. The European Socialists chose Nicolas Schmit, an outgoing commissioner. But he did not challenge his boss von der Leyen and this failed to create the debate that one would expect in a campaign.³⁸ The liberals put forward a trio of politicians, rather than a lead candidate, and the ECR, which had one candidate in 2019, decided to pass this time.

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Since 2014, the parties have also failed to develop a real and direct link between the lead candidates and the election of MEPs. In 2024, neither von der Leyen,

Schmit, nor the European Left's Walter Baier were on any list as candidates, even in a lower, symbolic position. Only the Green co-lead candidates, Terry Reintke and Bas Eikhout, campaigned to become MEPs.

The parties also put little effort into linking their European campaigns to national contexts. In 2024, national parties still did not systematically indicate their affiliations to European parties and only occasionally published the manifesto of their European party in addition to their national platform.³⁹

When lead candidates were presented by parties, they waged limited campaigns, with little footprint in the member states. Ursula von der Leyen traveled to nine member states during her two-month campaign, all but one of which were governed by a fellow EPP leader who welcomed her. The candidate for the Party of European Socialists (PES) Nicolas Schmit campaigned in 18 member states and held 10 rallies in seven countries. In comparison, lead candidates in 2014 visited 246 cities across the EU. The PES candidate campaigned in 23 member states, and the EPP candidate in 18.⁴⁰

The lack of interaction with European citizens was not compensated for by EU-wide debates. Two debates were held in 2024 with the lead candidates and representatives of the main parties, in addition to one focused on economic issues that included speakers from only four parties. In 2014, nine debates were organised with two or more lead candidates, and eight in 2019. The first of the 2024 debates, held in Maastricht, was watched live by just 2,500 people.⁴¹

The 'partisanisation' of the Commission

The *Spitzenkandidat* system, while attracting attention from Brussels-based media, seems increasingly disconnected from the actual EU elections, campaigning for which happens mainly at the national level.

At the same time, it has become a central tool for European parties to influence the EU system. Rather than politicising EU issues as intended, it has led to the 'partisanisation' of the Commission, whereby the composition and internal balance of the college of commissioners increasingly reflects political affiliation.

In 2024, European parties competed for the most influential Commissioner portfolios based, not on member state distribution, but on political affiliation.⁴² They insisted that the composition of the college should reflect the majority that elected von der Leyen in the EP, even though the treaty stipulates that the college is composed of "nationals of the member states" (Art 17.5 TEU), and not party representatives. Von der Leyen accepted and

even used the partisanisation of the Commission. She created six executive vice presidents in the college and distributed them between the EPP, Renew Europe, S&D and ECR as a way to consolidate political support from the central bloc in the EP ahead of the vote of approval of the college, as well as to secure occasional support from the ECR group. The hearings, in which MEPs abandoned their scrutiny powers over the nominations, were a logical consequence of the parties' efforts to secure posts that would benefit them.

At an institutional level, the logic underpinning the distribution of vice presidencies among parties is reflected in the treaty change proposal adopted by the EP in 2023. The EP called for the name of the Commission to be changed to "European Executive", for the member states to lose the power to nominate commissioners, and for the Commission President to be able "to choose its members based on political preferences."⁴³

The true power relationship is not between the Commission and Parliament

The efforts of the European parties and the EP to ‘parliamentarise’ the Commission through the *Spitzenkandidat* process have failed because the real power relationship in the EU is not between the Parliament and the Commission. For reasons both institutional and political, the European Council and the Commission president have become the EU’s dual executive power.

The European Council is composed of EU heads of state and government. Institutionalised by the 2009 Lisbon treaty to provide the EU with the “necessary impetus for its development” as well as “the general political directions and priorities” (Article 15.1 TEU), it is the only institution that combines the necessary influence, legitimacy and political capital to take difficult and bold decisions.⁴⁴

The Commission, for its part, has gradually increased its role in agenda-setting. It has achieved this through its legal and technical expertise, the exclusive right of legislative initiative conferred by the treaties, the management of new community instruments created in response to crises (most notably the €750 billion NextGenerationEU (NGEU) to address the social-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic), as well as a growing role as policy entrepreneur.⁴⁵ During the 2019-2024 cycle, the most complex political decisions, including NGEU, were achieved through close interinstitutional coordination between the European Council and the Commission, both at the highest political level and, crucially, at a technical level.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, most of the measures that were taken to fend off the negative impacts of Covid-19 and Russian aggression—including the joint procurements of vaccines and gas, the SURE instrument to protect employment, and the emergency mechanism to address high energy prices—were proposed by the Commission using an emergency procedure based on Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).⁴⁷ According to this procedure, the Council is not required to consult the EP, which is therefore deprived of its role as co-legislator. In 2025, the Commission used Article

122 again for the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) regulation, and the EP will most probably take it to the European Court of Justice for abusing this legal tool.⁴⁸

The institutional trend towards an ever-closer relationship between the European Council and the Commission president will likely continue in the context of the permacrisis, with defence and other core state powers increasingly getting involved.

This trend is intensified by the fact that Commission presidents are members of the European Council, where they can raise their profile and advance their agenda,⁴⁹ as well as by the evolution of the Commission’s internal governance. Past reforms have increased the vertical and political authority of the president and his/her cabinet over the commissioners and the directorate general.⁵⁰

The introduction of the *Spitzenkandidat* in 2014 encouraged Jean-Claude Juncker to claim that he wanted to lead a “political Commission”. Von der Leyen certainly took ownership of this ambition and pushed it further through a self-centred communication. While political groups bickered during the hearings about posts in the college, von der Leyen organised it with overlapping portfolios and diluted responsibilities, so as to arbitrate between Commissioners and further centralise decision-making.⁵¹

The introduction of the *Spitzenkandidat* in 2014 encouraged Jean-Claude Juncker to claim that he wanted to lead a “political Commission”.

Further development of the dual executive formed by the European Council and Commission will make it even more difficult for the EP to try to control both the Commission and its president’s nomination.

Recommendations for the next EU elections

Over the decade since it was introduced, the *Spitzenkandidat* system has neither increased the European dimension of the EU elections, nor improved the democratic legitimacy of the Union. It has also not strengthened the EP’s powers over the Commission. On the contrary, it has increased the powers of the

Commission’s president and diminished the EP’s capacity to scrutinise the Commission.

There is now a four-year window to clarify the (s)election process of the Commission president, address the negative effects of the *Spitzenkandidaten*

experiment, and work effectively to improve the EU elections process. Political parties, the EP and the European Council should all work towards that goal.

First, **the European Council and Parliament should agree ahead of the 2029 elections on a modus operandi to implement Article 17.7 TEU**, in the form of a joint statement or interinstitutional memorandum of understanding. Given the uncertainties and speculations that circulate prior to election campaigns, they should reach agreement before June 2028, i.e. one year before the next elections.

The EP and European Council should formalise a consultation process to take place after the elections. **Political parties should stop claiming that the lead candidate of the party finishing first should automatically become Commission president.** They could try to agree on a candidate in the days following the elections based on the results. The European Council should commit to examining the candidate, if there is one, but remain free—as per the treaty—to decide whether to appoint her/him.

In the new EP, **political groups should be free to conclude a formal or informal agreement to cooperate during the legislature, but this should not be considered a mandate for the Commission president.** On the day of the election of the Commission president, the groups should vote on the basis of the Political Guidelines presented by the candidate, whether or not there is agreement between them.

As part of the agreement on the process, **member states in the Council should agree to create an EU-wide constituency** in addition to the current national and regional constituencies, as demanded by the EP in two resolutions in 2015⁵² and 2022⁵³. This would require unanimous votes in the Council to revise the 1976 European Electoral Act and the 2018 Decision on the composition of the European Parliament. Member states should commit to not vetoing them.

European political parties, for their part, should focus less on placing their representatives in the Commission, and more on increasing citizens' interest in EU elections, 'Europeanising' national campaigns, and increasing the democratic legitimacy of the vote.

Having lead candidates personifying the different political families and their vision across the EU remains a potentially useful instrument for fostering political debate both at the EU and national level. **European parties should select lead candidates who have solid political experience at the national and/or EU level.** A minimum requirement for those aiming for an EU leadership position should be executive experience as minister or commissioner. This would facilitate discussions within the European Council, as well as between the Council and Parliament in view of the choice of Commission president.

From 2029, **the European parties' lead candidates should also run for the EP** in their country, in another member state, or preferably in the EU-wide constituency if it is established. In addition, **the lead candidates should commit to sitting as MEPs if they do not become Commission president or vice president.** Both actions would contribute to highlighting the EU dimension of the vote to the citizens, as well as signalling that lead candidates want to represent EU citizens, and not only become commissioners.

The parties should also seek to improve the visibility of the EU in their national campaigns. Ahead of the next elections, European parties should ensure that their national member parties clearly indicate their affiliations in the campaign material, and systematically present and promote their European manifesto in their local language. These measures should be complemented by the lead candidates visiting and defending their platform in at least half of member states, to increase the EU dimension of the national campaigns.

The European Parliament should reconsider its attempts to establish a parliamentary democracy at the EU level. It should prioritise its demands for treaty reform and focus on adapting the EU to the planned enlargement and future challenges.⁵⁴ It should spend its political and institutional capital on measures to effectively increase its powers, such as over the budget, the introduction of mechanisms for participatory democracy, or a reform of the general EU governance.

More immediately, **the EP should work to increase its scrutiny powers over the Commission.** It should first put political pressure on the Commission to finalise the revision of the Interinstitutional Framework Agreement governing their cooperation, which dates back to 2010. In October 2024, when von der Leyen was seeking the MEPs' vote of approval for her college, the two institutions agreed on nine principles to reinforce their cooperation, increase the Commission's responsibility and improve the EP's role in decision-making.⁵⁵ But the technical work that followed has not been concluded, delaying the implementation of the agreed measures.

MEPs should also make full use of the tools at their disposal to scrutinise the Commission. In 2024, the EP introduced the possibility of holding special scrutiny hearings to question Commissioners on an issue of major political importance (Article 141 of the Rules of Procedure), but it has so far failed to use this option. MEPs should also reform the plenary debates with the Commission president and college members, as well as with the European Council president, and introduce more direct Q&A sessions. In addition, MEPs should ensure that they are actually in the hemicycle when these debates are held.⁵⁶

The Parliament should also anticipate the next post-election process. To avoid politically motivated hearings, **it should formalise a structure for the process and a 'checklist' of criteria to assess the commissioners-**

designate’s “general competence, European commitment and personal independence” (as mentioned in Annex VII of the EP’s Rules of Procedure ⁵⁷). It should also ensure that the process is as objective as

possible. This assessment form should be agreed to by the Parliament’s Bureau, in consultation with the Conference of Presidents, before the next EU elections, and made public for democratic transparency purposes.

The priority should be to foster EU democracy

With the *Spitzenkandidat* system, political parties and MEPs attempted a top-down approach to developing an EU-wide democratic space and increasing the legitimacy of EU integration. This approach has failed and has resulted in a less open and legitimate process.

With four years to go until the next European elections, and illiberal and anti-EU forces gaining ground in the member states, at the EU level, and abroad, it is

necessary and urgent to draw the lessons from the last decade, and invest in a bottom-up strategy to increase citizens’ interest in EU elections and promote real pan-European political debate, instead of continuing with an experiment that has had a negative impact on EU governance. The priority should not be to save the *Spitzenkandidat*, but rather to foster EU democracy.

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