

BRIEFING

SPOILT FOR CHOICE – BUT WHO WILL HOLLANDE GO FOR?



In this Europe Decides briefing, Jonathan Hooley of Burson-Marsteller i&e, Paris, looks at who may be the next French nominee to be European commissioner.

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While most people involved in French politics see March's municipal elections as the key test of opinion in the coming months, the race for positions in the European Parliament and the European Commission is hotting up.

The procedure for selecting candidates for the European Parliament elections has already been a difficult one, and seems set to continue.

After the European elections, the French President, François Hollande (pictured left), faces his own big choice – who to send to Brussels as France's next nominee for a position in the European Commission.

The choice of person will depend much on the political situation that Hollande finds himself in, needing to balance the desire for strong French representation with other factors, such as keeping key figures in his Socialist Party (PS) happy.

Here is our overview of the choice facing President Hollande in the summer:

Beres and Trautmann – they have the European credentials, but have they got the clout?

Two current (PS) MEPs, Pervenche Berès and Catherine Trautmann, have been mentioned as potential nominees – the former primarily by herself. Berès told *Europolitics* last autumn of her plans to stand again for the European Parliament (she is the number two candidate, behind PS leader Harlem Désir, in the Ile-de-France region) and floated the idea of becoming a commissioner.

Berès certainly has the European credentials – she has been an MEP since 1994, including spells as Chair of the influential committees on Economic and Monetary Affairs and on Employment and Social Affairs. However, while she is a well-known figure in Brussels, she is not such a big name back home in France, and may appear a rather odd choice for some.

Her fellow Socialist MEP, Catherine Trautmann, is a former culture minister and a former Mayor of Strasbourg. She has a better national profile but seems to have fallen out of favour: she attacked the PS leadership's decision to replace her as head of the party's list in the East region, parachuting in Edouard Martin, a media-savvy trade union activist who has vociferously criticised the government in the past.

Moscovici and Montebourg – exit stage left: national ministers looking for new start

President Hollande and his government have historically low opinion ratings and the Socialists face a thrashing in March's municipal elections – something that is likely to precipitate a government reshuffle before the European Parliament election at the end of May.

Ministers who may find themselves looking for a new posting include Pierre Moscovici, the current finance minister and a former MEP. Rumoured to be in open conflict with the Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, and weak within his own economy super-ministry, Moscovici is nevertheless well-placed to seal a top job in Brussels.

A former Europe minister, Moscovici has now proven himself to be a respectable finance minister and has made no secret of his willingness to join the Commission and take an important economic portfolio. In September, he was quoted in the *Journal du Dimanche* as saying that a Commission job for himself would “*be magnificent and an important appointment for France*”. But even if the Socialists do suffer a catastrophic defeat in the local polls, will Hollande really want to let one of his key ministers leave?

Arnaud Montebourg, the Minister for Industrial Renewal, is an outsider for a Commission job from among the current crop of ministers. Montebourg is a left-wing figure who has made a name for himself as a promoter of French-made products and a defender of French factories threatened with closure.

Before he came into ministerial office, he advocated *démondialisation* (the reversal of globalisation), although he is less vocal on this issue nowadays. He is said to be interested in a role in the Commission, but it is unclear how his strident anti-liberal opinions would go down in a College that is likely to remain politically and economically centrist.

Guigou, Delanoë, Aubry and Royal – waiting in the wings

The PS grandees – known as *éléphants* – are also likely to have a keen (and often personal) interest in the nomination.

Elisabeth Guigou - who, like Pierre Moscovici, is a former MEP and a former Europe minister – now chairs the French parliament's foreign affairs committee. She is said to have her eyes on the High Representative role currently filled by Catherine Ashton.

Bertrand Delanoë, the current Mayor of Paris, will step down in March after a ten-year stint in this job. A powerful orator and popular politician in his Paris stronghold, he may be looking for something new to occupy his time. However, he may well become a minister in France after the local elections, and his lack of international experience may well count against him taking a role in the Commission.

Martine Aubry, the daughter of former Commission President Jacques Delors, has international politics in her blood, but may decide to hold on in France as Mayor of Lille and a much-vaunted 'Prime Minister-in-waiting'. Hollande may have other ideas. Sometimes depicted as one of the President's political nemeses, Aubry's transfer to Brussels could be a good strategic move to stop her causing trouble at home.

Finally, there is Ségolène Royal, the PS candidate for the French presidency in 2007 and François Hollande's former partner. Despite a series of setbacks – the 2007 defeat to Nicolas Sarkozy, losing out in Socialists' presidential primaries in 2011, and failing to win a seat in the 2012 legislative elections – she remains a well-known national political figure, admired and loathed in fairly equal measure. Motivations political and personal could see a nomination for a Commission job, putting an end to Royal's political woes.

Lamy – the internationalist technocrat

European Commissioner for Trade between 1999 and 2004, Pascal Lamy recently stepped down from his position as Director-General of the World Trade Organisation. Prior to taking up these positions, he served as an advisor to Jacques Delors, firstly when Delors was France's finance minister, and then when he became President of the European Commission.

With a CV such as this, Lamy is unsurprisingly hotly tipped for a position in the European Commission in a major portfolio. However, for some in the PS, Lamy is too economically liberal and – with Europe undergoing a political and democratic crisis – it may be hard for Hollande to justify nominating someone who has never held an elected mandate.

Barnier – the right-wing joker card and his presidential ambitions

Michel Barnier, the current Commissioner for the Internal Market, is a former foreign minister and MEP who knows Brussels intimately.

He has already signalled that he is willing to stand again, and it is strongly rumoured that he would want to be President of the European Commission (possibly seeking the nomination of the European People's Party as its common candidate).

It seems unlikely that Hollande would pick a figure from the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), the PS's main opponents in France. However, national prestige may be a decisive factor, and Hollande may face little option if the EPP, with Barnier as its lead candidate, wins the European Parliament elections.

While Hollande is close to the Party of European Socialists' candidate-designate, Martin Schulz, he may decide that safeguarding French national interests is more important in the case of inconclusive European election results – and that Barnier is best-placed to help secure those interests.