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Tajani's Presidency

New EP President, Mini Political Earthquake and Why it Matters for Serbia

The election of a new President of the European Parliament will have strong implications on the future balance of power between the institutions. This CEP Insight analyses the latest developments and suggests how the Serbian authorities should position themselves vis-à-vis the new circumstances.

On 17 January 2017 Antonio Tajani became President of the European Parliament (EP), succeeding Martin Schultz in this position. He underwent four rounds of voting – a practice [rather unseen](#) in the EP, which indicates how firm different political groups were in supporting their candidates. This CEP Insight takes a closer look into Tajani's profile and ambitions as EP President; analyses the new shifts in balance of power that came as a result of Tajani's election; examines its implications on Serbia's EU membership aspirations and finally suggests how the Serbian authorities should position themselves vis-à-vis the new circumstances.

Who is Antonio Tajani?

Even though Antonio Tajani is not well-known to the European public, he has a long list of [achievements](#). He began his EU career in 1994, when he became a member of the EP (MEP), as an Italian representative in the European People's Party (EPP) coming from Silvio Berlusconi's political party *Forza Italia*. He was continuously re-elected as a MEP until 2008, when he became a Commissioner for Transport under Barroso's first administration. Two years later, Barroso took him under his second administration as a Commissioner for Industry and Entrepreneurship, where he served until 2014, when Junker took office. Since then he served as the vice-president of the EP.

European business and industry interest groups [welcomed](#) Tajani's election. Since his focus during his time as Commissioner was Transport and Industry, it could be assumed that he might continue to show some interest for those areas during his presidency. Interestingly, he was

"I will be everybody's [president](#), I don't intend to be the prime minister of the European Union".



even [accused](#) of having a past record with certain lobby groups.

Tajani, the Backseat President

Tajani has been described as [anti-Schultz](#), a non-charismatic and undistinguished Commissioner. In fact, Tajani has implicitly criticized the previous EP President by saying: “We need a good [speaker](#) and a strong parliament, not a strong president and a good parliament.” Therefore, this is suggesting that he is envisioning the presidency in a more limited manner than Schultz did. For instance, he has said that he does not have a [political agenda](#) and that it is not up to the President of the EP to push one. Unlike Schultz who was known to meddle in power-politics, now a passive

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President is to be expected, who will probably not abuse his presiding position and exceed his rather limited duties.¹ Therefore, if he follows through on his promises, one can imagine Tajani as a president who will act more as a simple moderator, than as a leader with a vision.

Tajani's presidency: Stronger or weaker Parliament?

What is more significant than Tajani's election *per se* is the fact that it has brought new dynamics in the coalition-building relationships between different political groups represented in the EP, which may render his call for a “strong parliament” difficult to achieve. There are two reasons why it is believed that the next two and a half years might see the decline of EP's relative power and influence vis-à-vis other EU institutions.

The first reason is related the collapse of the “Grand Coalition”, which existed between the EPP and the Alliance of Progressive Socialists and Democrats (S&D) during Schultz's presidency, with the rationale to oppose extremist and anti-EU tendencies as nearly a third of the MEPs elected in 2014 came from anti-establishment political backgrounds. According to the [original plan](#), on the one hand, the EPP was supposed to endorse Schultz's presidency, which it did despite being the political group with the largest number of MEP seats gained; on the other hand, S&D was supposed to return the favour by endorsing the EPP's candidate in the next election cycle.² However, S&D realised that had it followed through on its promise to endorse its rival's candidate, in this case Tajani, it would have given too much power to EPP, by letting it control [three presidencies](#) (EP, European Commission and European Council) at the same time. Additionally, [S&D claim](#) that there had originally been an understanding that the former Danish PM Helle Thorning-Schmidt – a socialist – would be chosen as the president of the European Council instead of Donald Tusk. Therefore, according to their interpretation, once Tusk was chosen, the agreement was broken.

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However, EPP's leader Manfred [Weber argues](#) that the actual agreement does not say anything about the other presidencies.

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The second reason for potential decrease of EP's influence relates to the EPP's domination in all EU decision-making

1. According to the EP's Rules of Procedure, Rule 22, the President's duties are limited to ensuring the respect of the Rules of Procedure; to open, suspend and close sittings; to rule on the admissibility of amendments, on questions to the Council and Commission, and on the conformity of reports with these Rules; to maintain order, call upon speakers, close debates, put matters to the vote and announce the results of votes; and to refer to committees any communications that concern them. He should not provide input into the debates, but instead sum it up. In case he wants to join the debate, he needs to vacate his presiding position. See: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sipade/rulesleg8/Rulesleg8.EN.pdf>
2. The mandate of the EP President lasts for two and a half years.
3. EP is required to approve the adoption of the EU's Multi-Financial Framework, which sets the amounts allocated for IPA.

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institutions. Based on the outcome of Tajani's election, one could claim that the biggest winner of this presidential race is the EPP itself, as its representatives are now heading all the key policy and decision-making institutions (Jean-Claude Juncker – European Commission, Donald Tusk – European Council, Tajani – EP). Such a setting might enable the Union to function more efficiently, assuming that the communication between these institutions would run more smoothly thanks to their leaders' political allegiance. However, having a passive president and the forum embattled with coalition-building games might in turn weaken the EP's position and further give a boost to other two pro-active EPP leaders to set the course of the Union's action.

What are the stakes for Serbia?

Most up-to-date information suggests that Tajani's presidency will neither help nor damage Serbia's path towards the EU. Based on the previous analysis of Tajani's profile, no evidence was found that he would have a position on the enlargement policy diverging from the EP's traditional supportive stance. It is hence expected that Tajani will keep himself outside of this area and leave it up to the other EU institutions as well as those MEPs specifically engaged with the enlargement cause to handle it. This represents quite a contrast to Schultz, who has acted as an additional supporter of enlargement and held occasional meetings with the leaders from the Western Balkans during his presidency. His last meeting with Serbia's Prime Minister Vucic was held in [Davos](#), this January.

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Tajani's election and his lack of interest for enlargement further makes a case for Serbia's more substantive engagement with the EP. Even though the EP does not have a formal role during the EU enlargement process (formal consent of the EP is required only in the stage of ratification of the accession treaties), it does issue non-binding annual resolutions on the candidate countries, which do have political weight and do receive high interest in the candidate countries. The Commission also considers these resolutions when it produces its annual country reports. Moreover, MEPs interact with the candidate countries through informal groups (Friends of Serbia, Bosnia, etc.) and the institution has a say on the envelopes allocated to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).³ Although not an EU member, Serbia can in certain cases be directly affected by the EU *acquis*, as is the case with the already mentioned budget on the IPA funds, regulation on the visa regime with the Schengen area,⁴ the announced [ETIAS](#)

regulation, etc. What is more, as Serbia is getting closer to EU accession, the number of legislative acts with a *de facto* direct implication on Serbia is likely to increase. At the same time, the fact that the EP possesses legislative powers in almost all policy areas seems to be overlooked in Serbia.⁵

For all these reasons, it is in Serbia's national interest to engage with the MEPs working on the legislation of concern to Serbia and with the ones who are supportive of its EU membership bid. It can do so by suggesting to the interested MEPs concrete measures and legislative amendments; it can stimulate other MEPs to vote in its favour, by identifying the particular interest for an MEP to engage in that matter; and take advantage of numerous self-promotion opportunities that the EP as an institution can

4. Regulation (EU) No 509/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32014R0509>

5. The Lisbon Treaty extended the EP's legislative powers to almost all policy areas. The only areas in which EP retained its consultative role are competition policy and certain elements of internal market (which are the exclusive competence of the European Commission) and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (exclusive decision-making competence of the member states).



offer (i.e. organise discussions, expert events, exhibitions, touristic presentations, etc.). Building alliances in the EP should be seen in a broader context of advancing Serbia's negotiating position in the process of EU accession, which should be pursued in parallel to securing constant support from the EU member states. Active engagement on several fronts is supposed to produce multiplier effects.

Therefore, if Serbia is considering where to improve its administrative, diplomatic, political and lobbying capacities, it should certainly increase its presence and engagement with the EP. Moreover, one can draw a more general conclusion that Serbian authorities need to think and plan proactively about the lobbying and representation engagement with a whole range of institutions at EU and member state level, based on sound analyses of their roles, effective influence, decision-making powers as well as networking potential. This matter requires attention both at the analytical and policy level in the coming years.

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European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of

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