



**PROGRESSIVE
YEARBOOK 2020**



Progressive Person of the Year

The year 2019 was crucial and challenging for European politics. Did any progressive personality stand out from the rest? Did we see any exceptional performance around us? The answer is yes. With the Progressive Yearbook, FEPS will from now on single out a person of the year, be s/he a politician, an academic, a political or social activist, who delivered a remarkable contribution for our political family. An innovative campaign, a significant political victory, an outstanding achievement in government or academia can all be of equal inspiration for our audiences, and can all motivate progressives, young and old, to renew and reinforce their commitment to our common cause. Such actions or activities are vital for strengthening our movement and for helping improve the lives of Europeans.

How is success created? What is behind the key achievements of our time? An interview helps reveal thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain hidden behind the façade of politics.

The European Parliament elections dominated 2019 and made our progressive hero shine: **Frans Timmermans**. He is, in the judgment of FEPS, the person of the year.



Progressive Person of the Year: The interview

László Andor

interviews Frans Timmermans

László Andor: We have launched a number of new initiatives at FEPS. One of them is to start publishing a Progressive Yearbook. There are many annual publications on the market, but none that would serve the social democratic family on a European scale. When it came to the content for the book, we thought it would be good to identify a ‘Person of the Year’. And whether you are surprised or not, it was in a split second that we thought it should be you!

Of course, some might think we chose you simply because you were a *Spitzenkandidat*, but from the FEPS point of view – and it has to be admitted there is a subjective choice here too – it has a lot to do with the fact that in January 2019 you faced a panel composed entirely of young people at “THE VOICE: Millennial Dialogue on Europe edition” organised by our Foundation. And I believe this was a very important event for you too. Can you explain what it meant to you to be there and engage with them?

Frans Timmermans: I think to a large, to a substantial, extent this meeting with the young people actually fed into our programme for the European elections. And you know, the European Green Deal is not a result of the conservatives’ election programme, it is not a result of the Renew election programme, it is a result of *our* election programme. The fact that we put sustainability and the climate crisis front and centre is to a large extent the result of our interaction with the young people then and the discussions we had with young people in the run-up to the campaign, including the many citizens’ dialogues I did with a lot of young people all across Europe in my role as First Vice-President in the Commission.

If that is the starting point, you then look at all the relevant elements. Because what we are doing is changing an economy and societal model that for the last 200 years has been based on carbon into a model that should deliver better well-being, better welfare, better economic growth. I do not think that we have ever seen such a challenge. That is a true revolution in a sense of an industrial revolution combined with an environmental revolution. And young people are at the forefront of this. We had a bit of a preview in January...

By the way – look where we were in January (2019) and look where we are now. One week after a 16-year old activist was named personality of the year by *Time* magazine.¹ Would you have thought that possible back then, in January?

LA: Definitely not...

FT: So developments are going so incredibly quickly. And would we have had the Green Deal without our elections campaign? Absolutely not. Because the irony is that the conservatives only had one goal – which was not linked to the content, but to positions – and so the content was mainly determined by us. And that is why we are where we are now, with a European Green Deal.

Would we have a Green Deal if there weren't activists on the street every Friday? Probably not. So there is a direct link between the young people and the Green Deal we have now.

LA: Yes, indeed. And the campaign was a massive marathon. I believe you ought to receive congratulations because your performance was extremely impressive. Our political family thought: "now we have a leader, a fighter, a thinker ...". Would you tell me about the most memorable moments for you in this long – wait, it was half a year – endeavour, which was not only collectively formative but, I suppose, also incredibly transformative for yourself?

FT: Yes, of course. Well, our party gave me the experience of a lifetime. It is something I will never forget, and I will be eternally grateful for this experience. And I thank everyone in the party at all levels for having supported me and for being part of this incredible journey. It was really incredible. But if you ask me to name a few highlights, I think – you know – the Congress in Lisbon was something out of this world. It was the time when we showed that we have the courage, the audacity to say that we can win. Whereas until then we could hardly master the courage to say "well, we hope we will not lose that much". This was a defining moment, from a party that was on the defensive to a party that went into an offensive. And I felt this support incredibly from all sides in Lisbon. After that, we had the Madrid Congress too. But Lisbon was for me the defining moment. When the party and I sort of fired each other up in a very combative spirit. I will never forget this.

The second moment that always comes to mind in this campaign is with my 12-year-old daughter at the Women's March in Madrid on 8 March. To be part of this huge feminist movement, fighting for women's rights and then to have the youngest member of my family there – who had a sort of awakening moment during it. Initially she was interested in coming with me because she liked the idea of going to Madrid and seeing all these people. And then in the course of the afternoon and evening, I saw a 12-year-old girl opening up to this idea of fighting for something, for something that is good – not only for oneself, but also for all the other women and girls. Wow. And we even had a picture taken there – her and me – that was used in the Dutch campaign. And it was a telling and powerful picture because this was the moment you can actually see how it really touched my heart and my daughter's heart.

And then I believe for the campaign, especially the debates, we could clearly state our case. That worked quite well. Also to be able to use different languages in different circumstances – I really liked doing that.

¹ Ed: This interview was recorded on 19 December 2019. Greta Thunberg was nominated person of the year by the US magazine "Time" on 11 December.

Another moment – though not such a positive one – but the one that really woke me up, was my visit to Budapest. Where I had sort of a flashback to the 1980s, when trade unionists were almost scared to meet me. You know, I was a member of the European Commission, I was in an EU member state, and trade unions were just afraid to meet me because they had been intimidated by the government. Subsequently the government went into the media claiming that ‘trade unions do not even want to see *him*’. We had to meet in a room without windows, in a secret location, which in the ‘good’ Soviet tradition was not so secret of course – and this too was a defining moment for me. The feeling I had, the very anger that built up in me – saying “I will not be intimidated. Not by you. You are not defining what Europe is”.

LA: You have mentioned the Dutch campaign. And it made a real difference. Because your party was uplifted...

FT: Yes...

LA: It was uplifted by your campaign. Could that be a starting point? Because there have been many ups and downs in recent times for the PvdA. Did that help put it on more stable ground?

FT: There is no stable ground in today’s politics. For anyone. The fundamental thing that happened is that after being in the government and especially after the internal fight between two people who were competing for the leadership of the party, we were sort of put in the doghouse by the Dutch electorate. And what happened during the campaign – when we were able to reconnect with people, and with each other in the party – the effect of that was that the people let us out of the doghouse. And now we are back. This does not mean that we will win the next elections, but we will be a contender. Mind you, in the latest polls we are on a par with the biggest party. It’s a very low par – I have to say – because there are about four parties that are at the same level – but we are there again. We used to be at 5% or even less. Now we are much stronger and we have maintained that since the summer. The only conclusion I can draw is that the Dutch people have let us out of the doghouse. Some say “it’s Timmermans” – but no, it is not – it’s because of the content and style of the campaign, and because of the proposals we made that really resonated with voters. And this gives us a fighting chance. Is that a guarantee? Absolutely not. Is that an opportunity? Absolutely yes.

LA: And then we have to discuss what happened between the end of May and early July...

FT: Yes. My favourite part (laughing).

LA: Yes, exactly. But I think – you know – let’s face adversity. From my perspective this is a clash of two principles. One is the *Spitzenkandidat* principle, which wants to ensure that there is a strong connection between the campaign and how the executive is created. The other is that we have a written Treaty and there are some for whom it is more important to stick to the letter of the Treaty. As opposed to...

FT: Come on, it has nothing to do with the Treaty!

LA: (laughs)

FT: I wish it were that!

LA: So what is it about?

FT: This is about who determines what happens. This is about a tug-of-war between the European Parliament and the European Council. And the European Parliament had as a principle

– and the principle I think is rooted in the good understanding of democracy – you do a campaign, and then you see who comes out of the campaign and then you see if that person can master a majority in the European Parliament. That person should then also be nominated by the European Council.

Some of the members of the European Council, however, said to Parliament “hey, wait a minute, we determine what happens – not you!” And so it became a sort of a tug-of-war between the two.

Now, there were different understandings of the *Spitzenkandidat*. The Liberals killed the idea of picking one candidate, and then came with a *Spitzenkandidat* after the elections. Which is interesting. But if that is a definition of democracy, I am a bit surprised. Why did they kill the *Spitzenkandidat*? I guess because they did not get their way on the transnational lists. And look at the contortions Guy Verhofstadt had to go through from being a champion of the *Spitzenkandidat* to somebody who said he was against it...

Then we had the conservatives' side. They were strongly in favour of the *Spitzenkandidat* with the thought ‘since we are probably going to be the biggest party coming out of the European elections, we can then rest assured that our *Spitzenkandidat* will automatically be the Commission president’.

We as a family had a different opinion: ‘It will be determined by whoever gets a majority in Parliament – like in any democracy – so we will fight to be the biggest party and to build a progressive majority after the elections’. Does the biggest party in a member state by definition provide the prime minister of the government? No. The prime minister and the government are determined by who gets the majority. So that was our position.

I have no problem whatsoever with the fact that Poland and Hungary would not vote for me in the Council. We knew that. And that is not a determining factor. Because Hungary did not vote for Juncker, Britain did not vote for Juncker, and Juncker still got elected as Commission president. In fact, it is not the determining factor what Poland and Hungary did. The determining factor is that the resistance of Poland and Hungary was used by others to create a blocking minority for my candidature. Not even a majority against me – but really a blocking minority. And this comes despite the willingness of Merkel to accept me as Commission president, which was not met by the willingness of her party. That is where it changed. So whereas theoretically one could follow your reasoning that some were saying ‘we follow the Treaty’, this was about power politics.

LA: Yes, exactly!

FT: And for the Christian democrats – many just could not cope with the idea that the Commission would not be led by a conservative. The downside of that is that I did not get the Commission’s presidency – the upside of that is that they were willing to pay a price for getting the job, so we got to focus and bring in the policies.

And what is more important for us, or rather for the people who voted for us – that we get a job or that we get the policies that we campaigned for and which improve their lives? I would argue policies.

LA: Before I dig into your new policy area, may I ask what you were doing between July and November? Because that is – you know – people see that there is summer, then transition, hearings... Did you have to prepare a lot for the hearings?

FT: Yes, because it is a complicated subject matter. So, I concentrated enormously on the subject matter. Because my portfolio is so large, I needed to learn about climate, about energy, about transport, about agriculture, about social elements, about buildings, about international relations. I really wanted to be well prepared and I put a lot of energy into that. And at the same time my old job was still going on. On the rule of law, amongst other things.

LA: Is it an issue that the Commission is now even more hierarchical than in the past? Because the Juncker Commission was more hierarchical than the Barroso, and now with two layers, two different types of vice-presidents, even more hierarchical. Is that an issue or we should not deal with that?

FT: I think it is an improvement because with Barroso you had the president and individual relations with the commissioners, as you personally know...

LA: Yes, I do (laughs)...

FT: ... which gave the president huge control, because he could bring something immediately to the College with one individual commissioner and then it was very difficult to mobilise opposition against that. Now – when we have more tiers, more layers – what happens is that the political issues become politicised at the lower level and actually we become more collegial. When you then go to the College, it is boiled down to one, two or three really political issues, which can then be discussed. I think it is an improvement of the situation. So, although it is more hierarchical, in principle it would offer more counterweights throughout the system.

LA: I should ask you about the new portfolio. Because indeed, this is absolutely strategic. And very clearly front-loaded. Nobody is currently referring to the 'von der Leyen plan', or the 'Timmermans plan' – as they did with the 'Juncker Plan' – but your new portfolio is the focus now. Very clearly. This is how this Commission wants to differentiate itself from the previous or the next one. How do you see the dynamics unfolding and the chances of success?

FT: Well, the good thing is that the president is truly very passionate about this. She is already very strongly committed to the European Green Deal. So are the two other executive vice-presidents, which creates a dynamic in the Commission but also has an interesting impact on the outside world that sees that we are actually all committed to this.

And I believe that given the fact that the Green Deal is such a complete, holistic approach – it engages almost all the DGs in the Commission as well. So what you get is a sort of war machine because of this. That is really exciting.

LA: Final question. This Commission is different from the previous one, and also from Barroso II, because of the number of progressive commissioners.

FT: Yes.

LA: When we started, we were 6 out of 27. As it was before Croatia's accession. And now you are 9. It's a greater share and probably more pluralistic. There is a better balance of the political forces – isn't that the case?

FT: Yes.

LA: Do you see potential in that for the progressives?

FT: Yes! Not just because we are nine, but also because of the common campaign we've experienced and which has brought us here together, and the rallying of our political movement around our manifesto. There is now a natural tendency for the progressive commissioners to

work together as a team and a natural tendency for us to involve each other in everything we prepare. So I would argue – and I have to be careful how I formulate it – that among the political families present in the European Commission the way we organise ourselves is different from the others and is linked more closely to our campaign promises. Because Renew have a leader who really became the lead only after the elections. And for the conservatives, their campaign leader is in the Parliament, not the Commission. Of course, they have a leader in terms of the president – but she is the leader of the whole College so it's a bit different.

LA: Look, if FEPS can help you in any way – we will definitely be at your service.

FT: Thank you!