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José Manuel Barroso hits back at criticism from French minister

By Hugh Carnegie in Paris and Michael Paterakis in Brussels



José Manuel Barroso, head of the EU's executive arm, has waded into battle with a French minister who accused him of fueling rightwing populism, saying Europe should not be made a scapegoat for domestic problems.

The president of the European Commission has become the focus of discontent from a number of EU capitals during the eurozone crisis.

But the angry exchanges with Arnaud Montebourg, leftwing industry minister in President François Hollande's socialist government, have starkly exposed dissent on the left and right in France against powers now wielded by Brussels to enforce budgetary discipline and the commission's perceived liberal trade stance.

Mr Montebourg said on Sunday Mr Barroso was "the fuel of the National Front", the far-right group that on Sunday scored highly in a parliamentary by-election, knocking the ruling Socialist party into third place.

Mr Barroso responded by saying: "It would be good if some politicians understood that we will not get very far by attacking Europe and attempting to make the commission a scapegoat for their own problems."

Reflecting Brussels' impatience with the pace of reforms in France, where the economy is stalled and public spending remains high, he added:

“When it comes to economic reforms, when it comes to opening up (the economy), when it comes to globalisation, some nationalists of the left and the extreme right have exactly the same agenda.”

Marine Le Pen, leader of the deeply eurosceptic National Front, weighed into the dispute on Monday.

“Yes, José Manuel Barroso is a catastrophe for our country and our continent, but that is because he is above all the (symbol) of a European system gone mad that is supported by both the (conservative opposition) UMP and the Socialist party,” she said.

The main parties fear the National Front will exploit the stalled economy and discontent with the EU in next year’s European parliamentary and municipal elections. The party gained a 46 per cent share of the vote in Sunday’s by-election run-off against the UMP. In national polls it is consistently scoring close to the UMP and ahead of the Socialist party.

President Hollande said Paris would not be dictated to when the commission recently called for faster and deeper economic reforms in France. This month, the government insisted that the commission exclude any discussion in coming EU-US trade talks of the “cultural exception” that allows protection of its film and music industry.

The breadth of hostility towards the former centre-right Portuguese prime minister, who recently branded French opponents of trade liberalisation “reactionaries”, was illustrated when Alain Juppé, foreign minister under former centre-right president Nicolas Sarkozy, on Sunday labelled Mr Barroso “archaic” for not adopting more protectionist trade policies.

But the spat with Mr Barroso prompted a furious response from Michel Barnier, France’s own European commissioner.

“What Mr Montebourg said was absurd and false,” he declared. “I say with a certain amount of anger that I have had enough of seeing in my own countrymen and women of the right and left say everything is the fault of others.

“It is the responsibility of ministers, and in particular Mr Montebourg, to fight against unemployment, for competitiveness and not close the frontiers, to undertake reforms in France and do their jobs.”

Additional reporting by Peter Spiegel in Brussels

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