



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reelected

A successful embrace

The European Parliament has reelected Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission. In terms of political substance, the German centre-right politician had ventured far beyond her own “tribe” and tried to include all parties—from the far left to the far right.

Ursula von der Leyen’s reelection had required many compromises. Her election was not straightforward, especially as the European Union with its 27 member states has a parliament in which 200 national parties are represented. The big embrace has paid off. When she presented her programme, she was able to convince a majority of MEPs to reelect her. 401 MEPs voted for her, 284 against, with 15 abstentions and 7 invalid votes. This gave von der Leyen the required majority of 360 votes.

In the debate before the vote, however, von der Leyen faced strong opposition from all corners of the parliamentary spectrum. While the French liberals reacted positively to her speech, the Ger-

man liberals announced before the election that it would withhold its vote from von der Leyen. The promises made by von der Leyen in her guidelines for the next five years were not enough, said Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, leader of the five German liberal MEPs, through her spokesperson. Von der Leyen had not clearly rejected common European debt.

The Greens were also frustrated. “If you ask me: Is Ursula von der Leyen a green commission candidate, has she given us the necessary political green guidelines? Then I can tell you: no”, said Terry Reintke, co-chair of the Greens in the European Parliament. Von der Leyen had also held intensive negotiations with the Greens in

the previous weeks. The result was disappointing for Reintke, who said her group had made “many compromises”. She hinted that her group would vote for von der Leyen—but rather out of a sense of duty: “What is crucial for me is that there must be a majority of prodemocratic groups in this house. We must prevent the far right from gaining power.”

Reintke put her finger in the wound: in order to stay in office, von der Leyen had sought the approval of both the far-right Fratelli d’Italia (of Italy’s Prime Minister Georgia Meloni) and the Greens. As there is no whip or party discipline in the European Parliament, von der Leyen had to expect many dissenters in her informal

coalition of Conservatives, Liberals and Social Democrats—as well as persuading some members of other parties.

One member of Meloni's Fratelli party is Nicola Procaccini, co-leader of the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. During the debate, Procaccini warned von der Leyen against relying on the “losers”—the Greens, Liberals and Social Democrats. He deliberately withheld any endorsement and any recommendation for the parties in his group. This sounded relatively conciliatory—after all, he did not rule out supporting von der Leyen for a second term. As the vote was secret, in the end no one could check whether the Greens or the Fratelli—or some of them—had voted for von der Leyen. In fact, both were possible, despite warnings from both sides.

Indeed, von der Leyen attempted to win over all parties with her programme. Her offer to Meloni's party: greater commitment to tackling migration into the EU. She promised to triple the staff of the EU's border and coast guard agency, Frontex, from 10,000 to 30,000 employees. She also set her sights on concluding more migration agreements for efficient returns—a key demand by Meloni's. Von der Leyen also proposed a special commissioner post for cooperation in the Mediterranean—a special concession to the Fratelli, who could possibly fill this portfolio. In recent weeks, Meloni had repeatedly demanded a Commission portfolio for one of her party friends.

Von der Leyen also praised the migration pact adopted this spring as a “big step forward”. The Greens had opposed the pact, on mainly humanitarian grounds. They reject Meloni's strict asylum policy.

Climate protection in a business-friendly way

For the Greens, von der Leyen had something else: the “Clean Industrial Deal”, which she intends to present within the first 100 days of her second term in office. It will ensure a business-friendly implementation of the ambitious EU “Green Deal” climate agenda. “This will help cre-

ate lead markets in everything from clean steel to clean technology and it will speed up planning, tendering, and approvals”, said von der Leyen. At the same time, she sent reassuring signals to her conservative European People's Party (EVP), which has accused her of making too many concessions to the Greens in her policies. Von der Leyen stressed that the “Clean Industrial Deal” was about reconciling climate protection and a thriving economy.

The Social Democrats also got some sweeteners, including a new Commissioner for housing. And there was a gift for all the groups in the political centre: For the first time, von der Leyen used one of her speeches to attack Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán. Orbán had infuriated his European partners by paying an unscheduled surprise visit to Russian President Vladimir Putin right at the start of his EU Council presidency without prior consultation.

Orbán ostensibly advocated “peace”, but what he really meant was Putin's peace diktat, which would amount to the capitulation of Ukraine. “Two weeks ago, an EU prime minister went to Moscow. This so-called peace mission was nothing but an appeasement mission”, said von der Leyen. In recent years, Liberals, Greens, Social Democrats and even members of her own EVP had urged von der Leyen to exert more pressure on the Russia-friendly Orbán. Now, members of the ultra-right and other Russia supporters were explicitly excluded from von der Leyen's broad embrace.

Promises and suggestions

Ursula von der Leyen made a number of promises in line with the demands of the main political groups in the EU Parliament. She spoke at length about boosting competitiveness, cutting red tape, investing in defence and protecting farmers to satisfy her Conservative “political family”. She promised to tackle the housing crisis and mentioned collective bargaining and women's rights to satisfy the Social Democrats. She reiterated the need to respect fundamental rights in return for receiving EU funding—a must for the

Liberals. And she promised to stick to the goals of the European Green Deal, which the Greens are committed to upholding.

“The last five years have shown what we can do together. Let us do it again. Let us make the choice of strength. Let us make the choice of leadership”, she said.

The speech combined initiatives from her first term, such as the signing of multi-billion dollar deals with neighbouring countries to curb irregular immigration, with others hinted at in public speeches, such as a “European Shield for Democracy” to prevent manipulation and interference by foreign powers.

But the incumbent also presented brand new proposals to dispel any suspicion that she would lack ambition in her second term of office. Her “guidelines”, a manifesto published ahead of her speech, announced a “Clean Industrial Deal” to mobilise investment in net-zero technologies, a Commissioner for the Mediterranean, an EU-wide inquiry into the impact of social media on the well-being of young people, and a radical overhaul of the EU's common budget with a stronger focus on reform.

According to von der Leyen, these ideas are a response to a world of “fear and insecurity”, in which families are being crushed by the cost-of-living crisis, polarisation is dividing societies and climate change is wreaking havoc and depleting natural resources.

“Europe cannot control dictators and demagogues around the world, but it can choose to protect its own democracy. Europe cannot decide elections around the world, but it can choose to invest in the security and defence of its own continent,” she said.

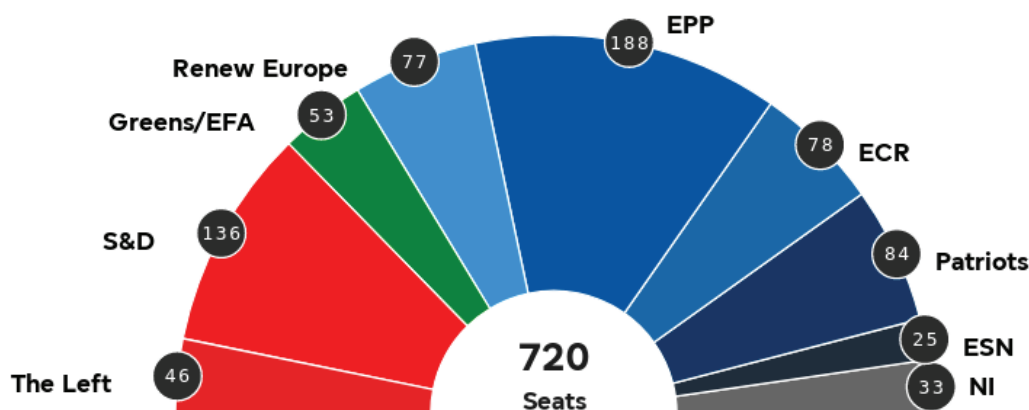
“Europe cannot stop change, but it can choose to embrace it by investing in a new age of prosperity and improving our quality of life.”

Ukraine and Gaza

The EU Commission President promised to “give Ukraine everything it needs to resist and prevail” and to “unwaveringly” support Kyiv's ambitions to join the European Union.

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Source: Provided by Verian for the European Parliament



Von der Leyen also mentioned the war between Israel and Hamas, whose leadership she had criticised. In her speech, she sought to rebut accusations of pro-Israeli bias, saying her executive would present a “much larger multi-year package to support an effective Palestinian Authority”.

“I want to be clear: the bloodshed in Gaza must stop now. Too many children, women and civilians have lost their lives as a result of Israel’s response to Hamas’ brutal terror. The people of Gaza cannot bear any more” she said to applause from the audience. “We need an immediate and enduring ceasefire. We need the release of the Israeli hostages. And we need to prepare for the day after.”

Von der Leyen’s speech lasted almost an hour and touched on a wide range of policy issues, giving a strong indication of what her second mandate, if approved by the European Parliament, could entail in the coming years.

Overview of the main initiatives

- A European Shield for Democracy to prevent foreign interference and manipulation
- A European Housing Plan to examine “all the causes” of the housing crisis and a Commissioner with “direct responsibility” for housing
- An overhaul of the EU budget to make it more responsive to the needs of the individual member states
- A Vice President to coordinate work on competitiveness and SMEs
- A “Clean Industrial Deal” to mobilise investment and help energy-intensive industries become carbon-neutral
- A European Savings and Investment Union to unlock capital for local start-ups
- A European Defence Fund for investment in high-quality defence capabilities, a European air defence

shield and a new Commissioner for Defence

- A tripling of Frontex, the EU’s border guard, to 30,000 members
- A Commissioner for the Mediterranean and a new agenda to develop “comprehensive partnerships” with neighbouring countries
- An EU-wide study on the impact of social media on the well-being of young people
- A roadmap on women’s rights

Sources: Euronews, ntv

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