
NEW EU CHIEF SEEKS 'SMART ADVICE' ON FIRST TRIP TO BRUSSELS

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EU Commission president-elect Ursula von der Leyen on Thursday (4 July) made her first trip to Brussels since being nominated, as senior officials sought to shore up support for her appointment in the European Parliament.

After talks with Jean-Claude Juncker, the man she is to replace as European Commission president, current German defence minister von der Leyen tweeted she had come to seek smart advice as she prepares her plan for the next five years.

She must win the approval of the highly fragmented European Parliament, where there have been grumblings about the deal to appoint her □ which was cooked up by EU national leaders over three days of tortuous summit wrangling.

My priorities will be to seek smart advice, listen to all parliamentary groups and together work out the best plan for the future of Europe, von der Leyen tweeted, a day after talks with MEPs at the parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France.

In Brussels and straight off to the first meeting with @JunckerEU. My priorities will be to seek smart advice, listen to all parliamentary groups and together work out the best plan for the future of Europe.

The multilingual von der Leyen □ the first woman to be named to lead the EU's executive arm □ sent out the same message in English, French and German after a warm welcome from Juncker at commission headquarters in Brussels.

Juncker, whose five-year term has been marked by Brexit and the migrant crisis □ two of the biggest upheavals ever to hit the EU - tweeted that he was delighted to receive von der Leyen.

A true European, we are on the same page when it comes to speaking up for EU interests, he wrote.

Juncker's spokesman Margaritis Schinas described it as a friendly meeting between two true Europeans who have known each other for years.

The quiet rise of Ursula von der Leyen

German defence minister Ursula von der Leyen, a compromise name for the next European

Commission President, is a non-divisive political figure on EU stage and quiet tactician hardly known outside Germany. But her career at home has often been marked by scandals.

The parliament vote on von der Leyen is scheduled for mid-July, and she would take over on November 1 – the day after Britain is currently due to leave the bloc, meaning she could be facing a chaotic no deal Brexit on her first day in office.

Other key challenges will include a simmering trade row with US President Donald Trump, the Iranian nuclear crisis, the challenge of an increasingly assertive Russia and China – not to mention trying to pep up Europe's sluggish economy.

Charm offensive

But first von der Leyen needs approval from the parliament – by no means a given.

Her nomination has drawn the ire of fellow German politician Manfred Weber who failed to win the backing of EU national leaders for the commission job. The Bavarian MEP on Thursday said von der Leyen's selection was the result of a backroom deal done by France and Hungary.

But Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council of member states, urged MEPs to back von der Leyen and avoid a messy tussle between EU institutions.

We must respect each other and cooperate with each other, because only then can we build trust and change Europe for the better, Tusk told the parliament in Strasbourg on Thursday morning.

EU leaders agree on top job picks but trouble already looms

The European Council finally agreed on a pick for the Commission presidency and rallied behind Germany's Ursula von der Leyen on Tuesday (2 July). But it sets up a potentially ugly encounter with the European Parliament, which might not sanction her appointment.

Tusk – who led the summit talks that eventually installed von der Leyen – later met the 60-year-old for separate talks in Brussels.

Afterwards he tweeted that she was an excellent candidate for Commission President, a friend of Central and Eastern Europe, dedicated to the rule of law, and with a vision to keep the EU united.

Von der Leyen herself wasted no time in her campaign to court MEPs, travelling to Strasbourg on Wednesday, less than 24 hours after winning the leaders nod, for talks with her centre-right European Peoples Party (EPP) bloc.

European parliament elections in May left the EPP – long the dominant force in EU politics – weakened, and while it remains the biggest single bloc in the assembly, von der Leyen will need the backing of other groups as well, such as the socialists and the liberals.

After a major electoral breakthrough by environmental parties, Tusk also called for the Greens bloc to be fully involved in the nomination process.

I am fully confident that cooperation with the Greens and their presence in the EU decision-making

bodies will benefit not only the governing coalition, but Europe as a whole, Tusk said.

For now von der Leyen has signed a temporary contract as a special advisor to the commission, entitling her to an office and up to eight staff, but she will not receive any salary initially as she is still being paid as a German government minister.

Kaynak/Source: