
VON DER LEYEN'S COMMISSION: MORE PRESIDENTIALIST, MORE PARLIAMENTARIAN

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The College put forward by Ursula von der Leyen builds on lessons learned from the sometimes negative experience of the Juncker Commission, writes Robert Stüwe.

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President-elect Ursula von der Leyens proposed College of Commissioners stands out in EU history as it achieves gender parity. At the same it is chaired by a female president. Nevertheless, von der Leyen builds on the legacy of her incumbent predecessor Jean-Claude Juncker, who established a more politicised decision-making system in the European Commission. Her approach mirrors this groundwork by making the institutional set-up of the Commission more hierarchical. The planned redesign is mainly the result of lessons learned from the Juncker Commission. Power struggles between Vice Presidents and ordinary Commissioners have at times inhibited the legislative machinery or even reflected existing divisions between member states – for example on budget deficits in the euro area as in the case of the fiscally dovish Frenchman Pierre Moscovici and the rather hawkish Latvian Valdis Dombrovskis. Therefore, creating the role of Executive Vice President Commissioners and providing them with a direct authority over a policy-related Directorate General (DG) is a lesson learned from the experience between 2014-2019. This newly arranged double function sustains a trend toward a more presidentialist Commission. Similar to Juncker, von der Leyen will assign them the job of chairing one of the six Commissioners Groups to advance her headline ambitions.

At the same time, the party political background of the Executive Vice Presidents reveals that von der Leyen has taken account of the new power balance in the European Parliament. The elevation of Margrethe Vestager to Executive Vice President along with assigning her the digital policy coordination, whilst keeping her prerogatives as competition commissioner intact, is the most visible consequence of a strengthened ALDE party with 108 MEPs and seven heads of government. In a similar vein, placing the DG Climate Action under the watch of Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans is an upgrade of the issue, which reflects the growing demand for bold measures among EU citizens. Both nominations are an expression of a de facto parliamentarisation of the EUs executive. The fact that the European Peoples Party (EPP) will be over-represented in the Commissions leadership due to the nomination of the Latvian Valdis Dombrovskis as Executive Vice President for Finance (in addition to von der Leyen) does prove this statement wrong. Instead, it displays von der Leyens wish to integrate the post-socialist hemisphere into the EUs top level.

Her approach on the rule of law topic affirms this stance and highlights her presidential ambition. Entrusting the responsibility of guarding the rule of law to Czech Commissioner Věra Jourová as Vice President, who helped push through the European Public Prosecutor Office in the last term, and to Belgian foreign minister Didier Reynders is an attempt to overcome frictions with the Visegrád countries Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. Both member states have restricted fundamental rights such as press and academic freedom as well as curtailed the independence of their judiciaries. Likeminded member states such as Germany and Belgium that have issued proposals on strengthening the rule of law along with the European Parliament will press the Commission to follow through on sanctioning rule of law breaches by cutting cohesion funding.

Another noteworthy development that highlights von der Leyens presidential ambition to leave a mark as a geopolitical Commission is the establishment of the new Group for External Coordination (EXCO) as a preparatory body to make the Unions external action more coherent. It will be chaired by the Diplomatic Advisor to the President and the Deputy Head of Cabinet of the High Representative Josep Borrell. Furthermore, von der Leyen plans to strengthen the EUs hard power capabilities by introducing a DG for Defence and Space. Here the Commission enters the arena of core nation state powers as this marks a first step towards moving the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) for joint defence projects to the supranational level. This will be a tricky job. So it is no surprise that it might go to the heavyweight member state France and Macron-ally Sylvie Goulard.

As for the upcoming hearings in the European Parliament, von der Leyen will not run the risk of an outright rejection of her entire proposed team of nominees. Yet she may well see a few of her candidates rejected. The most controversial figure appears to be the former Hungarian justice minister László Trócsányi, who might be stripped of his proposed role in enlargement policy due to his questionable record in undermining the rule of law. Similarly, Romanian Commissioner-designate for transport policy Rovana Plumb, the French Sylvie Goulard or the Polish nominee Janusz Wojciechowski are expected to face tough questions. Moreover, the Parliament might push for changing the ill-defined, Orwellian job titles such as Commissioner for Protecting our European Way of Life for the designated Vice President in charge of migration policy, the Greek Margaritis Schinas, or the hollow assignment of Democracy and Demography. Both are a disservice to the visibility and transparency of supranational European politics. Parliamentary scrutiny will be far from being an easy ride for von der Leyen.

Kaynak/Source: