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A CLOSER LOOK INTO VON DER LEYEN'S "TEAM FOR EUROPE"

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Former German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen, who emerged as a surprise nomination for European Commission President and managed to get the approval of the highly fragmented European Parliament (EP) by a slim margin, unveiled the structure and allocation of portfolios in the incoming Commission. The von der Leyen Commission, which will be subject to approval from the EP, is set to take over from the Juncker Commission on 1 November 2019. Since the UK whose departure from the EU is scheduled a day before the new Commission takes office has refused to nominate a Commissioner, von der Leyen's College of Commissioners consists of 27 members (see the table below). However, according to the treaties, in the event of a new extension - which seems the likely scenario- the UK would have to nominate a commissioner.

Von der Leyen's "Balancing Act"

With 13 female commissioners, von der Leyen, who herself will come to office as the first female Commission President, has managed to achieve virtually the perfect gender parity- another first in EU's institutional history. Moreover, the fact that female commissioners have been assigned portfolios dealing with crucial issues is worth mentioning.

Furthermore, von der Leyen Commission's organisational chart has been hailed for striking the right balance between the eastern-western and northern-southern member states as well as different political families. In terms of political groups, the College of Commissioners consists of 10 members from the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D), 9 members from the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), 6 members from the newly rebranded liberal Renew Europe (RE), one member from the greens and one from conservatives (ECR). In comparison with the Juncker Commission, in which half of the College comes from EPP, the von der Leyen Commission seems more politically balanced.

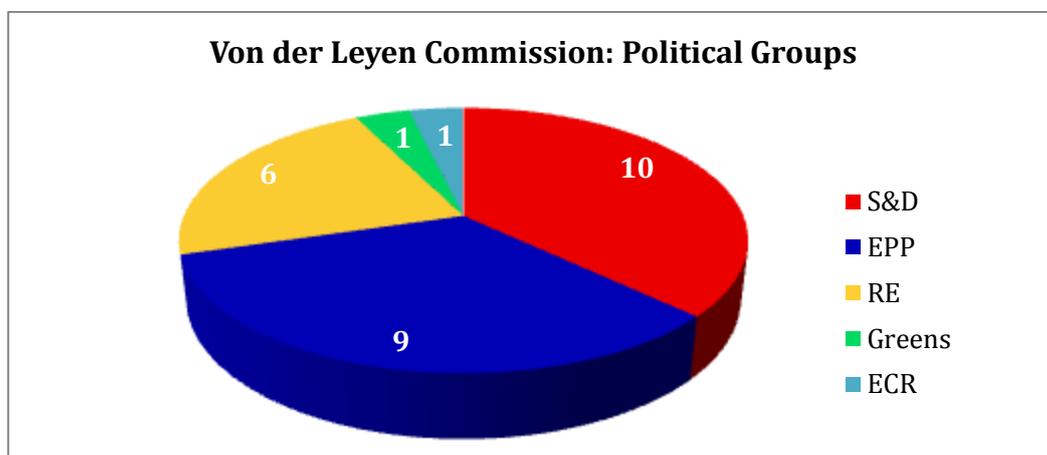


Table - Von der Leyen Commission: Distribution of Portfolios

Title	Commissioner-Designate	Portfolio	Member State	Political Group
President	Ursula von der Leyen		Germany	EPP
Executive Vice-Presidents	Frans Timmermans	European Green Deal	Netherlands	S&D
	Margrethe Vestager	Europe fit for the Digital Age	Denmark	RE
	Valdis Dombrovskis	An Economy that Works for People +Commissioner for Financial Services	Latvia	EPP
Vice-Presidents	Josep Borrell	High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy + A Stronger Europe in the World	Spain	S&D
	Věra Jourová	Values and Transparency	Czechia	RE
	Margaritis Schinas	Protecting our European Way of Life	Greece	EPP
	Maroš Šefčovič	Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight	Slovakia	S&D
	Dubravka Šuica	Democracy and Demography	Croatia	EPP
Commissioners	Johannes Hahn	Budget and Administration	Austria	EPP
	Didier Reynders	Justice	Belgium	RE
	Mariya Gabriel	Innovation and Youth	Bulgaria	EPP
	Kadri Simson	Energy	Estonia	RE
	Jutta Urpilainen	International Partnerships	Finland	S&D
	Sylvie Goulard	Internal Market	France	RE
	László Trócsányi	Neighbourhood and Enlargement	Hungary	EPP
	Stella Kyriakides	Health	Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus	EPP
	Phil Hogan	Trade	Ireland	EPP
	Paolo Gentiloni	Economy	Italy	S&D
	Virginijus Sinkevičius	Environment and Oceans	Lithuania	Greens
	Nicolas Schmit	Jobs	Luxembourg	S&D
	Ylva Johansson	Home Affairs	Sweden	S&D
	Helena Dalli	Equality	Malta	S&D
	Janusz Wojciechowski	Agriculture	Poland	ECR
	Elisa Ferreira	Cohesion and Reforms	Portugal	S&D
	Rovana Plumb	Transport	Romania	S&D
Janez Lenarčič	Crisis Management	Slovenia	RE	

“Executive VPs” and Mortals

A major novelty in the organisational chart of the von der Leyen Commission is the creation of the “executive vice-president” post, adding another layer of administration below the Commission presidency and thus making the new Commission more hierarchical. The so-called “super VPs” have two hats; they are both VPs and they act as Commissioners overseeing the work of directorates-general related to their portfolios.

The three executive VPs have been carefully chosen to represent each major political family in the EU namely; the centre-right EPP, the centre-left S&D and the liberals. Juncker Commission’s First VP responsible for the rule of law and the socialist contender for Commission presidency Frans Timmermans as well as competition commissioner and the liberal contender for Commission presidency Margrethe Vestager were the two names initially agreed by EU leaders to take up senior positions in the incoming Commission. The appointment of the two former “lead candidates” (*Spitzenkandidaten*), who have campaigned all across Europe in the run up to the EP elections, to the new Commission’s top management level could be perceived as an attempt to provide democratic legitimacy to the new Commission by addressing criticisms directed at the way EU leaders agreed on von der Leyen for Commission Presidency as result of intense closed-door bargaining defying the *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

While presenting her team, which is set to steer the EU through the 2019-2024 period, von der Leyen has highlighted that the incoming Commission’s work would be mainly directed at dealing with the major phenomena transforming contemporary societies namely; changes in climate, technology and demography. As an indication of the importance attributed to tackling these phenomena, climate change and digital transformation are to be dealt with at executive VP level. In line with this, Timmermans, in his new role as the executive VP responsible for implementing a “European Green Deal” will lead the EU’s efforts in becoming the first climate-neutral continent. Meanwhile, as the executive VP for “Europe fit for the Digital Age” Vestager will take on digital policy and continue to oversee tech giants’ compliance with EU’s competition rules as commissioner.

Former Latvian Prime Minister and the current VP responsible for the Euro, Valdis Dombrovskis, has joined Timmermans and Vestager as an executive VP in the von der Leyen Commission. In his new role as an executive VP for “An Economy that works for People” Dombrovskis, will try to ensure that social justice and economic growth are pursued as complementary goals. The Centre-right Latvian politician’s promotion to an executive vice-presidency post is seen as an attempt at overcoming previous criticism addressed to the top jobs package agreed by EU leaders where Central and Eastern European member states were virtually non-existent.



VPs and Strange Job Titles

This top management team is accompanied by five vice-presidents whose job titles and portfolios reflect the political guidelines earlier declared by von der Leyen such as “Protecting our European Way of Life” and “A stronger Europe in the World”. Von der Leyen’s fancy and ambitious wording of the new portfolios has created confusion and controversy. Critics argue that the fancy wording of job titles is a far cry from the political realities in the EU. On top of that, the portfolio assigned to former Commission Chief Spokesperson senior Greek Eurocrat Margaritis Schinas named “Protecting our European Way of Life”, which mainly covers migration and security, has caused widespread criticism. Aside from the conceptual difficulty of defining a homogenous European way of life, von der Leyen’s choice of wording has come under fire for giving credit to far-right rhetoric viewing migration as a threat to EU values. The reaction to the name of the portfolio has varied from “unacceptable” to “appalling” with increasing calls for renaming the dossier.

Von der Leyen’s “Team for Europe”: Old and New Faces Together

Von der Leyen’s “Team for Europe” as she puts it, consists of a combination of existing commissioners and new faces. Apart from Timmermans, Vestager and Dombrovskis, Vice-President for Energy Union Maroš Šefčovič, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Equality Vera Jourová, Commissioner for Agriculture Phil Hogan and Commissioner for the Digital Agenda Mariya Gabriel from the outgoing Juncker Commission will be joining the von der Leyen Commission to serve another term. Slovak Šefčovič will serve as the VP in charge of interinstitutional relations and foresight. Meanwhile as commissioners, Austrian Hahn will be responsible for budget and administration while Bulgarian Gabriel will be in charge of innovation and youth. In charge of the trade portfolio, Irish Hogan will oversee the EU’s trade talks with third countries. By giving the trade portfolio to Hogan known for his anti-Brexit stance, von der Leyen has made it clear that in any future trade deal to be negotiated with the post-Brexit UK, Ireland’s interests will always have priority over those of the UK.

Among the VPs, Czech Commissioner for Justice Věra Jourová will be in charge of the values and transparency portfolio, and together with former Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders, who will assume Jourová’s former dossier, will oversee the protection of the rule of law. The fact that the rule of law will be split between a western European and an eastern European deserves attention.

The appointment of Jourová could be seen as a way to reach out to the two Visegrád countries; Hungary and Poland which have accused the Commission for unfairly focusing on the region. By appointing someone from a Visegrád country, who could be



seen as an insider, von der Leyen might be aiming for the new Commission to have a more effective role in addressing democratic backsliding in these countries and hoping that the Commission's concerns regarding rule of law would be taken more seriously by Budapest and Warsaw. On the other hand, the appointment of Belgian Reynders, who since 2016 has been advocating creating a new mechanism linking the receipt of EU funds to compliance to the rule of law criteria, should not come as a surprise.

Well-known figures to join the von der Leyen Commission include former Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and former French Defence Minister and MEP Sylvie Goulard. Nominated as the Commissioner for Economy, Italian heavyweight Paolo Gentiloni will be responsible for overseeing the Stability and Growth Pact. Despite his strong political credentials, Gentiloni's designation has received criticism not only due to his limited experience in this field, but also due to his home country's huge public debt. Meanwhile a long-time ally of French President Emmanuel Macron, Sylvie Goulard will be in charge of the Internal Market and will oversee the newly created Directorate General (DG) for Defence Industry and Space. The creation of a new DG dedicated to defence is seen as a key step for realising the EU Defence Union by 2025. Goulard's appointment to the helm of this newly created DG implies that EU defence cooperation will move in the direction envisioned by Macron allowing for more strategic autonomy.

Controversial Pick for the Enlargement Dossier

Highly anticipated in Turkey and the Western Balkans alike, was von der Leyen's nomination for the enlargement portfolio -which just like under the Juncker Commission is taken up together with the European Neighbourhood Policy- with albeit a slight change under the name "neighbourhood and enlargement".

Von der Leyen has come under fire especially from liberal circles for assigning the neighbourhood and enlargement portfolio to Hungary's former Justice Minister László Trócsányi. Trócsányi's assignment to the enlargement portfolio has raised eyebrows mainly due to his role in the controversial laws leading the Commission to launch the infamous "Article 7" procedure against Hungary which has become a textbook case of "illiberal democracy". A close Orbán ally known for his anti-immigration rhetoric, Trócsányi in his capacity as Justice Minister from 2014 to 2019 has been instrumental in implementing the controversial reforms weakening the independence of the judiciary.

Given his involvement in undermining of the rule of law under Orbán, critics argue that it would set a bad example for the Western Balkan countries and Turkey which clearly need to improve their performance in the area of the rule of law. In addition, the way in which Trócsányi could support the enlargement countries to aspire for higher rule of law standards is questionable. As things stand, he is likely to be grilled by the members



of the EP's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) and given boiling discontent over his nomination, a reshuffle of portfolios or a replacement could be on the cards.

Next Test: EP Committee Hearings...

Following the presentation by von der Leyen, the College of Commissioners was approved by the Council. Now it is the MEPs' turn to assess each commissioner based on their suitability to assume the designated portfolio. Before the vote scheduled for 23 October when the entire von der Leyen commission will get the ultimate seal of approval from the MEPs, each commissioner-designate will need to go through "the ultimate job interview" at the EP committees relevant to their portfolios. During the three-hour committee hearings set to take place between 30 September and 8 October, they will try to convince the MEPs that they possess the right qualifications for the job. Success in committee hearings is in no way guaranteed. Previously, due to their poor performance in the hearings; in 2014 former Slovenian Prime Minister VP-designate Alenka Bratušek was replaced whereas in 2010 former Bulgarian foreign Minister commissioner-designate Rumiana Jeleva had to withdraw.

As mentioned earlier, the EP committee hearings will be off to a tough start for former Hungarian Justice Minister and commissioner-designate for the neighbourhood and enlargement portfolio László Trócsányi. Other names which are likely to be grilled by MEPs due to ongoing inquiries over allegations of misuse of EU funds or other irregularities include; former French Defence Minister and commissioner-designate for the Internal Market portfolio Sylvie Goulard, former Romanian Minister and commissioner-designate for the transport portfolio Rovana Plumb as well as Polish MEP and commissioner-designate for the agriculture portfolio Janusz Wojciechowski.

The parliamentary hearings will be a decisive step in shaping the von der Leyen Commission. Since the EP will vote on the College of Commissioners as a whole, in order to avoid the fate of the Santer Commission, which had to resign following the EP's no confidence vote in 1999 due to a corruption scandal involving a commissioner, von der Leyen may choose to replace the commissioners-designate which receive no support in the committees. Therefore, it remains to be seen which commissioners-designate would actually take up their offices in the Berlaymont building in the 2019-2024 term.

