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Setting Course for the Next Five Years: Three Steps to Start an Effective EU Commission Presidency

by Julian Rappold

The designated European Commission President is busy putting together her team of Commissioners, which will face Parliamentary scrutiny at the end of October. Now is when Ursula von der Leyen is laying the basis for the success or weakness of her presidency. This task goes far beyond assigning names to portfolios.

Ursula von der Leyen has already mastered her first challenge: On July 16, the European Parliament (EP) elected her to be the next European Commission President with only a narrow majority. However, her weak electoral result in the EP will not necessarily translate into a weak presidency. To transcend this, she will have to face many more hurdles in the weeks to come. First, she will have to win over the more critical Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and flesh out an ambitious work program in order to receive a strong mandate for her Commission in the next five years. Second, to take office on November 1, she will have to build a strong, coherent, and efficient team of Commissioners to be approved by the EP at the end of October while taking into account the demands of the member states and political groups in the EP. Third, von der Leyen will ultimately have to build on the unanimous support she received from the European Council and establish close working relations with future European Council President Charles Michel. Only if she is able to rally all three institutions behind her will the EU be able to tackle the challenges that come with Brexit, great power competition, new security threats, climate change, and the technological revolution.

Convince the European Parliament

With 383 votes, von der Leyen was elected with only a narrow majority of nine votes. Even though the conservative

European People's Party (EPP), the Socialists & Democrats (S&D), and the liberal Renew Europe group (formerly ALDE) had officially endorsed her candidacy, a significant number of at least 59 MEPs from these groups did not vote for her (in total, all three parties amount to 442 seats in the EP). These pro-European MEPs, alongside the Greens, opposed von der Leyen mainly because of the nomination process in the European Council, which had disregarded the so-called "Spitzenkandidaten process".

In the coming weeks, nominated Commissioners will face intense scrutiny in the hearings in the EP before requiring official approval at the end of October. Von der Leyen will have to use the remaining time to turn fragile parliamentary support into a robust mandate for her presidency. This is even more so, because Eurosceptic governments in Poland, Hungary, and Italy have already claimed credit for delivering the decisive votes to bring her into office, and they expect something in return – certainly both a curse and a blessing that she would like to shrug off. Indeed, failing to gather a strong majority behind her would mean that von der Leyen would be off to a bumpy start with a more-than-ever fragmented EP in which decision-making will slow down as the EPP and the S&D no longer command a majority.

Thus, it should be a priority for her to form a strong pro-European majority in the EP that she will be able to rely on in the next five years. To do so, she should closely cooperate with the pro-European groups in the EP to flesh out the political guidelines she presented during her first speech in the EP. This is certainly a challenging task. She has to walk the thin line between appealing to Social Democratic and Green MEPs, while at the same time providing reassurances to her own EPP so that her political program does not further lose conservative credentials.

A clear commitment to her agenda to push European democracy might swing the pendulum in von der Leyen's favor as this is a topic of broad consensus among the pro-European forces in the EP. First, von der Leyen should reinforce her willingness to strengthen the role of the EP, working toward empowering MEPs de facto to initiate legislation. Second, after the failure of the 2019 experience that left so many MEPs frustrated, von der Leyen should quickly agree with the EP on a reform of the lead candidate system, including transnational lists of candidates backed by stronger trans-European party structures. This should also include a common position on jointly pushing the European Council to commit to a binding procedure that leads to an agreement way ahead of the next EP elections 2024. Third, von der Leyen should invest in strengthening the partnership between the Commission and the EP. On the one hand, she should enhance the visibility and responsiveness of her Commissioners vis-à-vis the EP in EU decision-making at all levels. On the other hand, she should seek close working relations not only with the new EP President – the Italian Social Democrat David-Maria Sassoli – but also with the leaders of the different pro-European groups, given the increased fragmentation in the EP.

Re-Organize the European Commission

Parliamentarians will closely watch the setup of von der Leyen's future team of Commissioners, as it will illustrate her ambitions on policy substance. She already successfully managed to deliver on her promise of a gender-balanced College. Now, she will have to distribute the portfolios to the candidates proposed by the 26 member states in a way that ensures her team has enough experience and expertise to give it political weight. Von der Leyen is officially free to tailor the portfolios according to her preferences and distribute them among the nominees. In addition, she can also reject nominations of the member states. However, she will have to try to accommodate national interests, forcing her to make some tough choices

and stand up to the member states, as not everybody can have a weighty portfolio.

In particular, von der Leyen faces the challenge of dealing with an increasing number of Eurosceptic governments nominating potentially uncooperative Commissioners. Geographical balance will matter, too. After the EP elections, all top positions at the helm of the EU leadership were filled only with personnel from Western Europe, leaving Central and Eastern European member states marginalized.

As important as distributing the portfolios is structuring the future Commission in a way that reflects the priorities of her presidency and that ensures the consistency of decision-making in order to live up to the political promises she has so far made. In that regard, von der Leyen should build on the structural changes introduced by the Juncker Commission, with project teams delivering on policy priorities. Learning from the past experience, these teams should be structured even more hierarchically with powerful Vice-Presidents overseeing cross-cutting policy priorities such as climate action, the single market, or foreign and security policy and coordinating small teams of Commissioners with relevant portfolios. The Vice-Presidents should have sufficient resources to develop proposals on their own and the right to veto those made by Commissioners in their teams. Such a structure could also mitigate unconstructive positions from Eurosceptic Commissioners. At the same time, von der Leyen should try to engage them as much as possible in weighty but politically non-sensitive portfolios such as agriculture or transport. These topics are of interest to Eurosceptic governments and would thus also strengthen their ownership in the overall work of the Commission.

Closely Coordinate with the European Council

Von der Leyen emerged from the EU leadership struggle with the unanimous backing from the European Council (with only Germany abstaining). This is an asset she should capitalize on. Yet, the clash over the EU top personnel has illustrated that the fragmentation between member states in the European Council persists or will even increase in the future. Progress on some reforms – i.e., on the Eurozone or the Dublin system – have stalled because of a lack of political will of the member states. As a result, individual member states will face a strong temptation to pursue specific objectives in smaller coalitions of the willing. The challenge, then, is to ensure that such initiatives are embedded in the overall EU framework and follow official EU processes involving the Commission,

rather than being decided through intergovernmental backroom deals.

Thus, it is especially important to build very close working relations with all heads of states and governments and particularly the new European Council President, Charles Michel. The rivalry between Juncker and Michel's predecessor, Donald Tusk, often impaired the smooth cooperation between both institutions – a luxury von der Leyen cannot afford. With its Strategic Agenda for 2019–2024, the European Council has already set out the priority areas that will steer the work of the European Council in the next five years, providing direction for von

der Leyen's work. For the priorities of her Commission, she should take this document as a point of orientation and closely consult with the European Council, as well as with the EP, to ensure that in the next five years all three institutions pull on the same string. Only if von der Leyen manages to have a solid pro-European majority in the EP and sufficient backing in the European Council will she be able to deliver on her political priorities and manage future crises.

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