

Laying the foundations for a successful Commission presidency

19 July 2019

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The European Parliament (EP) has elected Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission with a slim majority of 383 votes. However, this narrow victory, which according to some she only accomplished with the support of Eurosceptic parties, does not have to result in a weak presidency. Von der Leyen has until the confirmation of her college in October to convince the more sceptical Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and gain more support from the pro-European political groups in the EP. To make her presidency a success, von der Leyen should flesh out her programme, work towards forming a strong pro-European majority and secure a binding mandate for reforming the process of (s)electing the EU's leadership.

Fleshing out the political programme

During a marathon European Council meeting early July, the heads of state and government decided not to nominate one of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, and surprised almost everyone by proposing the German defence minister Ursula von der Leyen as the first female Commission President. Since then, President-elect von der Leyen has been on a remarkable journey, step by step formulating an entire political programme from scratch. She engaged in hearings with all political groups (except for the right-wing Identity and Democracy (ID) group) in an effort to listen, introduce herself and discuss a first set of rather sketchy 'political guidelines'. Her subsequent letters in reply to the demands of Renew Europe and the S&D group provided more clarity. Finally, in her first speech in the EP on the day of her election, she presented the cornerstones of her political programme.

However, this is not enough. Von der Leyen needs to become more concrete if she wants to implement the ambitious agenda she has set out. She will have to use the next few months to refine her programme and substantiate her proposals before the EP votes on her college in October.^[1] She will have to live up to the political promises she made to the Parliament. In doing so, she must walk a fine line: she needs to be as concrete and ambitious as possible, while avoiding raising expectations that she and her Commission might not be able to deliver on in the end.

As a first step, when setting up her team, she will have to fulfil her promise of ensuring a gender-balanced Commission. To achieve this objective, she might very well have to reject some national nominations, given that some governments are still hesitant to come forward with female candidates.

Forming a strong pro-European majority

With a narrow win of only nine votes, the Parliament's support for von der Leyen is fragile at the moment, to say the least. However, her election confronts her opponents with a new reality. The next three months should be used to turn this slim majority into a strong support base in the EP for her presidency. To get there, she will have to work together with the different pro-European forces in the EP as part of a broad coalition-building process.

So besides organising her college of Commissioners, President-elect von der Leyen should elaborate her strategic priorities in close cooperation with the pro-European political groups in the EP. This will enable her to form a strong coalition that supports the implementation of her goals. The pro-European groups in the EP should use this opportunity and engage in intense talks with von der Leyen on the Commission's strategic priorities for the years to come. If this process proves successful, it is likely that a higher number of MEPs will vote for the von der Leyen Commission in October.

At the same time, von der Leyen must not lose sight of the member states. For her presidency to be successful, she needs the backing of both the EP and the (European) Council. The fact that she was nominated unanimously by all heads of states or government (with only Germany abstaining) is a very promising start. She needs to maintain this support and develop good personal relations with all members of the European Council, and especially its new president, Charles Michel. A strong link across Rue de la Loi will be essential in the next five years to deliver ambitious policies and master future crises, which are sure to come. Cooperating closely with

both institutions, the European Council and the EP, will be crucial for the success of the von der Leyen Commission.

Reforming the process of (s)electing the EU leadership

Forming a strong pro-European coalition will be an important first step, but President-elect von der Leyen should go further. In her letters to the S&D and Renew Europe groups she stated that she would “be the European Parliament’s greatest advocate.”^[2] Supporting a de-facto right of initiative and proposing a “Conference on the Future of Europe” are important steps to live up to that promise. In more concrete terms and having in mind the experience of recent weeks and months, there is clearly a need to adapt and reform the (s)election process of the EU’s leadership configuration. The sentiment that the process that led to the nomination of von der Leyen was not ideal is shared by the European Council as well – even if the heads of states or government do not agree on the consequences of this insight.

To make sure that things move in the right direction, von der Leyen and the EP should jointly exert pressure on the European Council to obtain concrete and binding commitments to improve the process, taking into account the lessons learnt from the 2019 experience. A binding, inter-institutional mandate to reform the procedure should be delivered for the next European elections in 2024. The EP should use the fact that it still needs to confirm the Commission College as political leverage to obtain concrete assurances from the heads of state or government. In other words, the college should not be confirmed as long as there is no credible and binding reform mandate.

After being elected Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen said that “the work starts today. My message is, let us work constructively for a united, strong Europe!” It will not be easy to live up to such ambitious aspirations. But it is possible if the President-elect further reaches out to the European Parliament and takes advantage of the strong support she received from national governments in the European Council.

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^[1] For recommendations how to concretise, see European Policy Centre (2019), *Yes, we should! EU priorities for 2019-2024* (Challenge Europe vol. 24), Brussels: EPC.

^[2] Hutchinson, Lorna, “Von der Leyen offers groups concessions ahead of key Parliament vote”, *The Parliament Magazine* (accessed 18 July 2019).