
Von der Leyen wins second term. Comprehensive programme: promises and omissions. Europe moves forward

(Strasbourg) Ursula von der Leyen has won the vote in the European Parliament. She has won a second term as President of the European Commission. After listening to the German politician's keynote speech on the morning of 18th July and a lively debate on her proposals, the Hemicycle in Strasbourg entrusted her once again with the helm of the executive with 401 votes in favour, 284 against, 15 abstentions and 7 invalid votes (707 voters out of 719 MEPs in office).

“The work ahead.” In theory, von der Leyen could count on 454 votes, representing the political groups that had declared their support, i.e. the People's Party, the Social Democrats, the Renew Liberals and the Greens. The pro-European majority has been confirmed, despite some defections, which refutes the scaremongering predictions of the various right-wing groups - the conservatives, the sovereignists, the anti-EU and the pro-Putin - which are fragmented, divided and therefore unable to form an alternative group and project to those of the European Union. At the press conference following the announcement of **Ursula von der Leyen's** reappointment, **Roberta Metsola**, President of the European Parliament, spoke of a “clear vote, a sign of confidence in a strong leadership”, Ursula von der Leyen took the floor, pointing out that she had received 41 votes more than the majority required for her re-election. She emphasised three points. Firstly, she expressed her "gratitude for the trust placed in me and the recognition of my work over the past five years"; secondly, she underlined "the positive experience of the election campaign, which brought me face to face with a plurality of European voices". Finally, she underlined the work ahead, starting with the request to the heads of government to name their candidates (a man and a woman) for the post of European Commissioner.

Choices, destiny. Von der Leyen appeared in the chamber of the European Parliament with a long and comprehensive speech, interrupted by numerous rounds of applause and some shouts of protest from the far right. The policy statement was accompanied by a thirty-page document setting out the guidelines of the next Commission for the period 2024-2029.

The incumbent president recalled the "five years like no other" she faced in her first mandate (Covid, Next Generation EU, Green Deal, war in Ukraine).

She then underlined “the last words of David Sassoli calling for a more united Europe.” Von der Leyen continued: “Choices are the hinges of destiny. And in a world full of adversity, Europe's destiny depends on what we do next. Europe faces a crucial choice that will determine our place in the world for the next five years. Europe "Europe cannot control dictators and demagogues throughout the world, but it can choose to protect its own democracy.”

Economy, Ukraine, Gaza. The candidate's speech flowed without much impetus, claiming a number of successes and remaining rather vague on specifics. However, it was filled with explicit goals. Von der Leyen listed a number of policy priorities: economic prosperity, support for agriculture, Green Deal, protection of democracy, security and defence, foreign policy (Ukraine, Middle East), enlargement, pillar of social rights, opportunities for young people. She promised to create a Commissioner with responsibility for 'intergenerational justice', a Commissioner with responsibility for housing and one with responsibility for the Mediterranean region.

“Our Europe sticks to the targets of the European Green Deal with pragmatism, technology-neutrality and innovation.”

As regards energy: “The European Union must ensure that the era of dependency on Russian fossil fuels is over.” On defence: “We need to invest more and we need to invest together. We need a European air shield, not only for the protection of our airspace, but also as a strong symbol of EU unity in the field of defence.” After reaffirming her full and continuing support for Ukraine, including in the military sector, she made the following remarks on the Middle East: “The bloodshed in Gaza must stop now. Too many children, women and civilians have lost their lives as a result of Israel's response to Hamas' brutal terror. The people of Gaza cannot bear any more.” She therefore called for an immediate ceasefire, the release of the Israeli hostages and to “prepare for the day after” the conflict.

Silences. In addition to the numerous promises necessary to keep four political groups together and not to alarm the heads of state and government who had named her at the end of June summit, von der Leyen's speech continued with a set of blatant silences.

No proper statement was made on peace and on the diplomatic efforts needed to restore peace in Europe;

silence continued with regard to the international context, fraught with conflicts, marked by migratory flows, undermined by Chinese competition, challenged by a possible Trump victory in the US presidential elections. Not a word about the EU budget, which is too meagre to give substance to all the proclaimed projects...

Orban and Putin. "An EU prime minister went to Moscow. This so-called peace mission was nothing but an appeasement mission," Ursula von der Leyen said in her speech, referring to Viktor Orban's initiative (without mentioning the Hungarian prime minister by name), which European Council President Charles Michel had condemned. She continued: "Only two days later, Putin's jets aimed their missiles at a children's hospital and maternity ward in Kyiv."

In her speech, the President-elect recalled the threats to democracy.

"For a long time, we took democracy for granted, but now it is under threat. Journalists - whom I thank for their hard work - are exposing espionage and disinformation by Chinese and Russian players. We must be vigilant against interference and threats to our democracy by these foreign actors. With your trust, we will be a shield for the protection of European democracy."

Ambitious reforms. "We need an ambitious reform agenda to ensure the functioning of a larger Union, to face geopolitical challenges and to increase democratic legitimacy, notably through citizens' participation." Von der Leyen added: "I believe we need Treaty change where it can improve our Union." But she failed to mention that no head of state or government wants to talk about reforming the Treaties, which the European Parliament also advocates.

A large part of her speech was devoted to economic competitiveness

(innovation, Green Deal, energy autonomy, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, investment, vocational training and skills, job opportunities for young people). After a focus on security, defence and armaments, she referred to the war on crime, cyber threats and drug trafficking. Ursula von der Leyen barely said anything about migration, except to reiterate border control and the fight against human trafficking, and finally underscore the soundness of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum (“we put solidarity at the heart of our joint response”).

The "social pillar." She went on to underline the commitment to enlargement to the Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. "This is a huge geostrategic responsibility for Europe. A bigger Union will be a stronger Union."

Finally, there was a passage in the speech devoted to the "social pillar."

She mentioned consumer protection, working conditions and collective bargaining, the housing crisis, child protection, initiatives for young people (including Erasmus). She announced “the first ever Europe-wide study on the impact of social media on young people's well-being.” She then said a few words about combating violence against women and about gender equality and reconciling work and family life. When von der Leyen concluded her speech, the leaders of the political groups took the floor, followed by a brief response from the President-elect ("united in diversity and adversity"), and by dozens of speeches by MEPs, with support from the pro-European groups and attacks from the sovereignist right and left.

What happens next? The President designate of the Commission will now send official letters to the Heads of State or Government of the Member States inviting them to present their candidates for the

posts of European Commissioner. Parliament will organise a round of public hearings of the candidates in the relevant committees after the summer. Parliament has then to approve the College of Commissioners.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhLKgXKaiG0>

Gianni Borsa and Enrica Lattanzi in Strasbourg