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'Von der Leyen cannot rely on a stable balance of power'

Ursula von der Leyen's new Commission has ambitious goals, but will face an uphill battle, Renate Tenbusch argues

Read this interview in German.

After some delay, the new European Commission under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen was confirmed yesterday by the European Parliament. What can we expect in the first 100 days of the new administration?

In her Agenda for Europe, von der Leyen announced some concrete legislative proposals for the first 100 days of her term. She proposed measures for a European minimum wage, for wage transparency and an unemployment reinsurance, as well as for defining a framework for artificial intelligence and digitalisation. Moreover, the specifics of a European Green Deal – a comprehensive European climate policy – will be presented. The progressive groups, including the Social Democrats in the European Parliament, had pushed for this before von der Leyen's confirmation. They want to make climate policy a priority for the new legislature.

In addition, von der Leyen announced her intention to convene a Conference on the Future of Europe. Its aim would be to discuss, as close to EU citizens as possible, a democratisation and new programmatic orientation for the EU. This was the demand made by French President Emmanuel Macron at the beginning of the year. Von der Leyen is thus reacting to the growing tensions between Germany and France. Macron has been vehemently committed to strengthening the EU for a long time, while Germany put on the brakes.

Recently, Germany and France surprisingly presented a joint blueprint for this two-year Conference, which is to be voted on at the European Council meeting in December. Its two phases (institutional and programmatic changes) are to be voted on under the Council

presidencies of Germany 2020 and France 2022 respectively. EU Treaty changes – for instance a right of legislative initiative for the European Parliament, transnational lists and the system of *Spitzenkandidaten* – are no longer to ruled out.

The organisational structure of the new Commission will be different from that of the previous administrations. While von der Leyen emphasises teamwork, numerous topics do overlap. What conflicts can we expect within the new Commission?

Jean-Claude Juncker had already introduced clusters in his last term. In his case, seven Vice-Presidents plus the High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs each lead a specific area of responsibility to which several Commissioners were assigned. The idea behind introducing this cluster system was the Council's constant refusal to agree to a downsizing of the cabinet, which is oversized with 27 commissioners and therefore often ineffective.

What's new with von der Leyen is the principle of the three Executive Vice-Presidents as *primi inter pares*. Initially the plan was to only have two, Margrethe Vestager as coordinator for digitalisation and Commissioner for Competition and Frans Timmermans, responsible for the new comprehensive climate policy. These, together with the President, should form the Commission's leading trio. But then, surprisingly, the former Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis was appointed as the third Executive Vice-President. Dombrovskis is a conservative politician known for his austerity policy. He will now be responsible for developing a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan and transforming parts of the European Investment Bank into a climate bank. Critics from the progressive camp now fear that he will dilute the Green Deal.

Which challenges await von der Leyen in particular?

Unlike her predecessor, von der Leyen cannot rely on a stable balance of power at EU level. Above all, this applies to the Parliament, where the Conservatives and Social Democrats no longer represent the majority. If she wants to generate majorities in Parliament for her ambitious programme, she will have to rely on the willingness of all larger groups to compromise. The political balance in the Council has also shifted considerably. Overall, the political situation at EU level and in the member states is far more unstable. Von der Leyen therefore needs to negotiate much more than her predecessors.

Never before have MEPs rejected so many staff proposals in the process of finding a new Commission. Will Parliament demand more

from the Commission in the future than it has previously?

There have already been rejections of individual Commissioners in the past. The fact that this time, three candidates were rejected, including one from an important member state such as France, is certainly new. However, the political environment has also changed considerably. The Parliament simply fulfilled its role as a watchdog for the Commission.

The Social Democrats in particular were able to link their approval of the candidates to a number of important programmatic demands. These include the implementation of the SDGs via the European Semester under the responsibility of a social-democratic Commissioner. Moreover, von der Leyen promised an action plan for the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights, which includes above all the European minimum wage demanded by Social Democrats, unemployment reinsurance and a minimum corporate tax, which is the responsibility of the Social Democrat Nicolas Schmit as Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.

The Socialist S&D Group in the European Parliament is much smaller than previously. Will it nevertheless be able to realise its ambitious agenda?

The Social Democrats have nine Commissioners in the cabinet. If the European Social Democrats are united, they can achieve the goals they set themselves in the election campaign. There's currently a unique window of opportunity. The implementation of a sustainable climate policy, more social justice and the fight against inequality are demands by the majority of citizens and various political camps in the EU member states. The progressive forces now have the chance to spearhead the implementation of these demands and present themselves as representatives of social interests. Above all, this way they can push back the right-wing populists and nationalists, who have also put social policy on the agenda.

In the second half of 2020, Germany will hold the rotating EU Council Presidency. What does Brussels expect from the German government's work on European policy?

Adopting the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) sits on top of a long agenda. All other topics depend on their financial viability and thus on the MFF, such as the new comprehensive climate law, the implementation of a strategy on China and the technological and trade policy challenges, the question of strategic autonomy, a partnership with Africa, to name but a few.

Neither the Finns, who are currently holding the Presidency nor the Croats, who will replace the Finns in January 2020, have the political weight and experience to complete this difficult project. Both the overall volume of the financial framework, the level of contributions from individual member states and the prioritisation of the certain areas remain controversial. The central lines of conflict are between old and new challenges, agriculture and cohesion versus digitalisation, climate, autonomous security and migration. There are also differences between North and South; East and West, net contributors and recipients. If we want to avoid a financing gap in 2021, which would be a disaster in the current situation, Germany must work towards an agreement.

Why is an agreement so difficult to reach?

The Commission's proposal for the MFF has been available since May 2018. Parliament has commented on the draft and submitted its own proposals and comments. Now, it's up to the Council to reach agreement. That's no easy task because of the many challenges, starting with Brexit, the unwillingness of some net contributors, especially in the North, but also some recipient countries in the East and South, to make a greater contribution while, at the same time, there's a higher need for contributions. Then, there's von der Leyen's push for geopolitical strategic autonomy of the EU towards the US, China and Russia.

All other issues and reforms depend on these negotiations and their conclusion. Germany finds itself in the uncomfortable position of a regional, economic hegemon that must never be too dominant, but at the same time has to demonstrate leadership and assertiveness, which is constantly being challenged by France. However, it's not only France that expects Germany to give Europe a clear impetus.

In order to fulfil these expectations, Germany needs an active and motivated pro-European government. This is not the case under the leadership of outgoing Chancellor Merkel. In general, one has the impression that Brussels and the EU are not at the top of the German government's list of priorities. This is where the Social Democrats in government have to step in.

This interview was conducted by Manuel Gath.



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