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# A slap to the left, a kiss to the right

## With Raffaele Fitto as Commission Vice-President, Meloni is positioning a confidant in Brussels. The shift to the right also helps von der Leyen

The new European Commission is now in place and will soon be voted in by the European Parliament. Its composition testifies to the change in the political field at the continental level. This time it was especially difficult to establish a balance of European powers, as there were so many different and contradictory demands to be met by the EU Commission.

The German and French governments are in deep crisis and, as such, have an even larger number of explicit requirements. Spain has increased in importance and is keen to exert more influence. With the end of the right-wing PiS government, Poland, now under the leadership of former President of the European Council Donald Tusk, is a country we need to take notice of again. The geopolitical tensions prevailing in Eastern Europe demand attention, too. Yet, as the third strongest economy in the EU, Italy is also asking for its piece of the European power pie. The question is: How does Ursula von der Leyen plan to reconcile all these different demands?

## Newfound confidence

In 2019, von der Leyen assumed the position of president of the European Commission quietly, almost apologetically — she was not the intended candidate for the post and had to first seek a suitable majority in the Parliament. Keen to please everyone, she sought to bring the Greens on board and deliver the Green Deal, too. Now von der Leyen has decided to change her style in order to resolve the dilemma facing the Commission. She has abandoned the diplomatic approach and is on the attack — with the left her main target. This is a sign of the new self-confidence of the European People's Party (EPP). With von der Leyen as the lead candidate for a second term as President of the EU Commission, the EPP has won the European elections and is now the strongest group in the European Parliament. Moreover, the conservative group envisages that, in a year or so, the CDU will be governing Germany — Europe's

heavyweight. Von der Leyen and the EPP are pinning their hopes on the conservatives becoming the dominant force in Europe once again.

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This hegemony project is something that the Chair of the EPP group in the European Parliament, Manfred Weber, in particular, has been working on intensively over the last few years. While, up to now, the EPP has had to make significant compromises to be able to govern with the Social Democrats and the Greens, with the 'support' of the European right, an entirely different type of politics would be possible. For Weber, the shift to the right in the June 2024 European elections was therefore a chance to test out new options.

Cooperating with the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) remains a taboo. On the one hand, this is because, historically, Weber's CSU has not tolerated any competition further to the right than they are. On the other hand, the AfD will be classified as a 'proven right-wing extremist' group in the foreseeable future and could be facing a ban. In other words: hands off!

The fragmentation of the right-wing political spectrum in the EU Parliament offers other options for power, however. For instance, not only have Marine Le Pen and the Spanish *Vox* party distanced themselves from the AfD as 'too extreme right-wing' and excluded them from their Patriots for Europe (PfE) group. They have also spoken out against Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's 'reformist course' and ultimately turned their backs on her, leaving Meloni and her European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR) midstream. That said, the group, with its 78 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from 18 countries, is still the fourth largest in the European Parliament. Should, at any point in the future, the centre-left allies become too uncomfortable with certain draft laws, they could always ally with the ECR instead.

## A European centre-right

And this is the hand von der Leyen has decided to play. The condition for this was, however, that Italy's government not only gets a post in the Commission that acknowledges the country's demographic and economic importance, but is also given the prestigious position of vice-president. No sooner said than done. The members of the von der Leyen majority in the EU Parliament now have to bite the bullet. The test phase of the cooperation with Meloni is to serve as a blueprint for the future

development of the centre-right coalition on the European level.

The importance of the European centre-right coalition project is something the candidates of Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* party vociferously promoted throughout the EU election campaign. And now the plan is coming to fruition, at least in part. This is a relief to Rome's current head of government. After all, Meloni desperately needed a success story. In the last few months, the conflict between Italy's three governing parties – Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia*, Matteo Salvini's *Lega* and Silvio Berlusconi's successors in *Forza Italia* – has escalated. The Italian prime minister's unwritten coalition agreement saw each party pushing through its own signature project: *Fratelli d'Italia* wants to transform Italy into a presidential system of government; *Lega* has its so-called 'Regional Autonomy Law', involving a substantial reduction in Italy's interregional fiscal equalisation with tax revenues from the industrial regions of northern Italy no longer being distributed across the country; and *Forza Italia* seeks a judicial reform that would see an end to the democratic separation of powers and make the judiciary subordinate to the executive.

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Since the polls showed *Lega* to be losing ground, Salvini had already pressed ahead, insisting that his autonomy project get through parliament first. Not only did this plan revive the opposition, which launched a very successful petition for a referendum against the law. There was also a complaint of unconstitutionality from the regions expecting to be disadvantaged by the new legislation, which resulted in delays and conflict between the partners on the right. Finally, the power struggle between Meloni and the heirs of Berlusconi's media empire has been a source of constant trouble. The family's TV channels took on numerous employees who, after Meloni's election, had been pushed out during her 'purges' of the country's public broadcasters and who are now exploiting a slew of personal scandals from within the prime minister's closest circle.

In the midst of these ruins, in which the opposition and trade unions are preparing to go into battle in the autumn in view of the shortfall in the upcoming budget, von der Leyen's appointment of Raffaele Fitto as Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms is a ray of hope for Meloni. He symbolises the future majorities on the EU level, which Meloni and von der Leyen have set their sights on. Like his father before

him, Fitto was a member of parliament for the Italian Christian Democrats, *Democrazia Cristiana*, then becoming a long-standing member and MP for Berlusconi's party. When, in 2014, the latter formed a centre-left government in coalition with the *Partito Democratico*, Fitto left the party and, with his grouping, joined Meloni's newly founded extreme right party. Fitto personifies the turn to the right that awaits Europe under von der Leyen and Meloni.

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