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Definitive political intelligence



**Ursula von der Leyen**  
President of the  
European Commission

## Introduction

Ursula von der Leyen will go down in history for being the first female European Union Commission President. This DeHavilland briefing explores her personal background, previous policy statements across a number of key sectors, and what she is likely to pursue during her Presidency over the next five years.

The main tenets of the Commission President are to give political guidance to the Commission whilst remaining as impartial as possible, in order to call and chair meetings of the college of Commissioners. The President will take part in G7 meetings and will represent the Commission at bilateral summits with third countries. Furthermore, the individual in this position will contribute to major debates in the European Parliament and between EU governments in the Council of the European Union. According to the Treaties that dictate this role, the President will determine the allocation of the portfolios to members of the Commission and can make changes to this at any time. It is one of the leading roles in the EU.

In order to become Commission President, heads of state or government of the EU 28 countries need to put forward a candidate that is then formally approved in the European Parliament. In the previous election, this was done using the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, however, this was not the case for Ms von der Leyen and this controversial appointment already tarnished her Presidency before she even won the votes. On the day of the vote this was made apparent by many MEPs referring to her as carrying “original sin” into the role, because she spoke of bolstering the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, despite not going through the process herself.

Out of the 751 MEPs elected, she needed to secure approval from 374. This crucial vote took place on Tuesday 16 July, and Ms von der Leyen won parliamentary approval by a slim number - 383 votes in favour to 327 votes against. Several MEPs abstained, four were absent, but the rest of the MEPs made their voices heard - and they are not likely to make her new role a walk in the park.

Leading up to the day of the vote, Ms von der Leyen held several meetings with various European Parliamentary groupings in order to secure their backing for her taking the role. During these meetings, she made sweeping statements and vague promises. However, her time as Commission President will not necessarily see all of her promises come to fruition. This will not be down to her political prowess alone, but the success of her promises will depend on the intricate relationship of the Council, Commission, and Parliament.

On the 1 November 2019, Ursula von der Leyen will take her role as Commission President. But where does she stand over certain issues? What is likely to be her biggest mandate in her first 100 days and for the rest of her term? This briefing will explore Ms von der Leyen’s plans, sector by sector and based on her recently published manifesto and previous statements, in order to evaluate where she stands on several issues and what is likely to take precedence.



# **Background**

## **Personal and political history**

## Ursula von der Leyen

Ursula von der Leyen is the current President of the European Commission and first woman to hold the role. She is also the first German in this position since the Commission's first President, Walter Hallstein.

Ms von der Leyen was previously the first female Federal Minister of Defence in Germany, from 2013. Ms von der Leyen announced her intention to resign from this position following her nomination to Commission President, regardless of whether she won the vote or not. From 2009 to 2013, Ms von der Leyen served as Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, and in the four years prior to this she served as Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.



From 1977 to 1980, Ms von der Leyen studied Economics at the universities of Göttingen and Münster, before relocating and attending the London School of Economics under a pseudonym following rumoured threats from the Red Army Faction. In 1980, Ms von der Leyen returned to Germany, choosing to study medicine at the Hanover Medical School, where she acquired her medical licence and graduated in 1987. In 1991, she was awarded a Doctorate in medicine, before earning a Master of Public Health degree in 2001.

Ms von der Leyen first joined the CDU in 1990 and held various Government positions in the Hanover region from 2001, before joining the Parliament of Lower Saxony in 2003. In 2005, Ms von der Leyen joined Angela Merkel's cabinet and was the longest serving cabinet minister. She had previously been tipped as the main candidate to succeed Ms Merkel as Chancellor and as a favourite to become Secretary-General of NATO.

Ms von der Leyen was proposed as a compromise candidate by the European Council as President of the European Commission on 2 July. However, her appointment drew criticism from many for bypassing the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and Germany was the only of the 28 member states to abstain from the vote to nominate her – perhaps to avoid controversies at home.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* process is designed to connect Commission appointments to an electoral process by having parties propose their lead candidates, however, there is no legal or treaty obligation to give the top jobs to a *Spitzenkandidat*. In this case, the appointment of Ms von der Leyen to the top job was viewed by some as a failure of pan-European democracy, with former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker lamenting the lack of transparency and labelling himself the “first and last *Spitzenkandidat*”.



# Policy statements and stances

## Policy statements and stances

### ***Energy and environment***

Ms von der Leyen set herself a lofty goal of making Europe a '**climate neutral continent**', a result of being inspired by the younger generations and their efforts to bring climate change to the forefront of political debates.

Her solution - investment in innovation and research, redesign of economy and an update to the industrial policy. To start the process, the Commission President has committed to proposing a **European Green Deal** in the first 100 days of her office; an homage to the United States' Green New Deal, an economic stimulus package that aims to address climate change and economic inequality. The package would include the first **European Climate Law**, which would set in stone the 2050 climate neutrality goal into law. Ms von der Leyen wants to reduce emissions by at least 55% by 2030, which by any account is an ambitious undertaking. A plan is expected by 2021, but at the moment it is unclear what path will be taken to achieve this.

Another target is the introduction of **Carbon Border Tax**, a proposal that has for far proved to be controversial and as such, avoided in legislation. The target would be introduced at the border and, according to Ms von der Leyen, would help EU companies to compete on a level playing field. Initially, the tax would be introduced to a limited list of industries that would be expanded with time.

On energy, Ms von der Leyen only briefly mentioned that she will seek to review the **Energy Taxation Directive**. Industry can expect to see a new industrial strategy, action on strengthening circular economy and clean technologies, and, finally decarbonisation of energy-intensive industries.

Environment received less attention. Nonetheless Ms von der Leyen will seek to cut biodiversity loss and aim for the EU to lead the world at the 2020 Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Pollutants will also get attention as the Commission President aims to put forward a strategy on environmental degradation and pollution, addressing air and water quality, hazardous chemicals, industrial emissions, pesticides and endocrine disruptors.

In regard to EU-ETS, it seems that the number of sectors covered by the scheme may **increase to include maritime, traffic and construction**, while taking away allowances from the airlines. However, reopening of the file may be a contentious issue and prove a difficult undertaking if previous revision is anything to go by.

Although Circular Economy has been completed just June last year, Ms von der Leyen is already committing to presenting a new **Circular Economy Action Plan** that will focus in particular on resource-intensive and high impact sectors such as textiles and construction. Microplastics were also mentioned as a priority though without introducing any legislative specifics.

Perhaps what is most surprising is that fact that, despite playing a central role in the policies laid out in her manifesto, Ms von der Leyen has previously never discussed issues relating to energy and the environment.

## **Digital**

Ms von der Leyen's program has, unsurprisingly, a relative large section dedicated to digital proposals. While some of them are more detailed than others it appears clear that she has adopted some of the policies from the manifestos of the EPP (the Cyber Unit), the Greens (Digital Tax and liability for platforms) and Renew Europe (digitisation and digital skills).

Of all the listed proposals, the digital tax and revamping of corporate taxation rules for the digital age seem to be her priority. These were also quoted in her speech at the European Parliament, receiving a strong round of applause from assisting MEPs. It is expected that she will probably try to revamp the current **Council proposal on corporate digital tax**, especially if the currently discussed **international agreement spearheaded by the OECD** should not materialize any time soon.

On the other topics, she gave less details over the course of her speech and the manifesto was relatively less detailed. However, we can expect that the issue of cybersecurity and digitalisation will be top priorities on her agenda. In previous **interviews and public statements**, Ms von der Leyen stated that more needs to be done in those fields, often defining these two issues as top priorities. In the field of cybersecurity she went as far as to openly attack **Russia and China**, the former for its attacks on the cyberspace and fake news, while the second one has been a target for its policy of digital investment and control. In this area we can also add her position on 5G networks standards and to "achieve technological sovereignty in some critical technology areas". In fact, as Minister of Defence, Ms von der Leyen often stated the need for Germany, and Europe, to raise their standards on cybersecurity, including their infrastructure, as highlighted by recent cases of espionage and infiltration amongst supposedly **safe German military and political cyberspace**.

In regards to the cyber unit proposal, as Minister of Defence she spearheaded the creation of the **Cyber and Information Domain Service (CIDS)**, a command centre that oversees a vast team of soldiers and civilians defending and protecting the Bundeswehr's critical networks and information systems. Although the current German centre has been criticised for being less effective, and more expensive than expected, her commission will be probably willingly to set out a proposal to boost coordination and effectiveness of cybersecurity measures and counter cyber-hack strategies.

There is not much information on the position on AI, limited to few statements related to the use of AI in the military. Nonetheless, the fact that she put in her manifesto that her Commission will put forward legislation for a coordinated European approach on the human and ethical implications of Artificial Intelligence within her first 100 days showcases that at least she will continue with the current discussion and policy making process already **on-going in the EU over AI policy**.

## **Transport**

Transport received less focus in the manifesto, with fewer specifics available at the moment. What is known is that aviation sector will be a target for the Commission as well, likely as a result of pressure from Greens/EFA during the elections. The Commission President will seek to extend **Emissions Trading System** to cover

the maritime sector, while also gradually reducing the free allowances allocated to airlines. This is in line with the plans of Greens/EFA and ALDE to tackle aviation emissions through the **taxation of kerosene**. Traffic and construction are also in line to be included in the scheme at a later date. The goal here is to bring the various industries and systems together to expedite progress toward carbon neutrality by 2050.

### ***Brexit***

On Brexit, Ms von der Leyen has previously signalled that she would not reopen talks with the next British Prime Minister. In her speech on Tuesday, she insisted that the current withdrawal agreement was the “best and only deal possible for an orderly withdrawal” but that she would **support an extension** of the UK’s membership beyond 31 October “if good reasons are provided”. Ms von der Leyen has also stressed that the “precious” Irish backstop must be defended, while also emphasising that Brexit was the “beginning of future relations”.

### ***Financial services***

In a bid to win over MEPs from the S&D and Greens, Ms von der Leyen’s manifesto calls for the creation of a strategy for **green financing** and a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan in which the European Investment Bank (EIB) will play a vital role. By 2025, Ms von der Leyen wants the EIB to dedicate 50% of its total financing to climate investment. She also aims at refocusing the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the UN SDGs.

With little or no prior comments from Ms von der Leyen on the economy and the financial services sector more specifically, it is no surprise that her manifesto mainly mimics the **EPP’s party manifesto** which it stood on during the European Parliamentary elections in May of this year.

As a first priority, Ms von der Leyen mentions the **support extended to SMEs**. To achieve this, she wants to put forward a dedicated SME strategy aimed at improving market access as well as removing red tape. Additionally, focussing on the Capital Markets Union, Ms von der Leyen aims to create a private-public fund specialising in Initial Public Offerings of SMEs.

On the **Economic and Monetary Union**, Ms von der Leyen promises to deliver a Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness for the euro area, make full use of the flexibility allowed within the Stability and Growth Pact, implement the common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund, and create a European Deposit Insurance Scheme. In 2011, Ms von der Leyen however **caused quite a stir** when she backed a Finnish demand for collateral regarding bailout payments to Greece. “Several states are making big efforts to service their debt. This must be honored. But to keep up those efforts in the long term, collateral is needed”. Whether this will become part of a Commission proposal going forwards is unclear.

Finally, on **taxation**, it seems that Ms von der Leyen will try and break the deadlock in the Council for both digital taxation and a common consolidated corporate tax base. She will likely make use of the provisions already in the Treaties to force the Council to vote with a qualified majority rather than with unanimity.



***Defence and foreign affairs***

Coming from her role as German Defence Minister, Ms von der Leyen is well versed in the defence world. However, she has not managed to evade complete controversy in her previous role, where some opponents have accused her of **shrinking** the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] budget to the barebones. However, before her successful placement as the President of the Commission, the *Financial Times* quoted her claiming that: “the [military] budget has risen by more than a third, the number of soldiers is growing again, we have ordered modern material and equipment worth billions of euros and it has already reached the troops”.

She has been a clear proponent for **EU states centralising their militaries**. However, she has made it clear that individual countries should continue to be responsible for their own forces. In this, she has made a distinction between an “army of Europeans” as something she strives for, rather than a “EU army” which many perceive as a body that would challenge NATO. Ms von der Leyen has made it clear that she supports a **closer cooperation** on questions of arms, military equipment and mission coordination. This military-level cooperation, she has made clear, is something she wishes to strengthen in a post-Brexit world.

Giving the **keynote speech** at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, she made it apparent that she sought a **greater European military integration and sharing**. “We Europeans need to throw more weight in. The American call for more fairness in burden-sharing is justified,” von der Leyen said in Munich. She also has a proven record of international cooperation which is also likely to shine through in her new role. Under her leadership as German Defence Minister, the Bundeswehr launched several new international missions and greatly expanded on ongoing deployments. She took on new NATO responsibilities and increased cooperation with the new **European Defence Initiative, PESCO**.

A key example of this is when she **initiated military support** in Mali, where she kept a keen eye on stemming the flow of migration to Europe. Before the votes took place on Tuesday 16 July, she referred several times to the **European Migrant Crisis** in her opening speech and how there is a great need to focus on improving foreign policy in order to find a solution to this crisis.

In her manifesto, Ms von der Leyen proposes a **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, including the relaunch of the Dublin reform of asylum rules. She also advocates for a reinforced **European Border and Coast Guard Agency** and more **Frontex** border guards. Modernising the asylum procedure with a **Common European Asylum System** is a priority, and emphasis was placed on sharing the burden.

Ms von der Leyen is likely to seek to enable a qualified majority voting to become the norm around external action, including **Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)**. There is also a target of an additional 30% to be spent on external-action investment in the next long-term EU budget. Furthermore, more money is being promised to strengthen the **European Defence Fund** to support research and capability development. The positioning of the EU will also focus on making the union a global player in the UN, and a much closer partner of Africa. Hybrid threats have become a buzzword within the defence industry in the last decade or so yet Ms von der Leyen has yet to pass comment on this rising challenge. She also seeks to give the **European Public Prosecutor's Office** greater power and authority to investigate and prosecute cross-border terrorism.

**Health and social affairs**

Within Ms von der Leyen's manifesto, protecting the European way of life features as a central aspect - striving for more when it comes to protecting citizens and their values. Ms von der Leyen highlighted that the European Union is a **Community of Law** and that there should be **no compromise when it comes to defending core values**. As such, she is supporting an **additional comprehensive European Rule of Law Mechanism** with annual reporting and monitoring.

Additionally, Ms von der Leyen advocates for an action plan to fully implement the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, supporting both those in and out of work, while supporting education and opportunities for young people. She has also called for the labour conditions of platform workers to be improved and for every worker within the EU to have a fair minimum wage. Other key economic aspects proposed include a **European Unemployment Benefit Reinsurance Scheme** and a **European Child Guarantee**, while Ms von der Leyen has also committed to fully implementing the **Work-Life Balance directive**. She has also stated that she plans to put forward a **European plan to fight cancer**, which is significant given her background as a physician.

Ms von der Leyen has previously lobbied for the **barriers to immigration to be lowered** for some foreign workers, in order to fight skill shortages in Germany and in 2013, she concluded an **agreement** with the Government of the Philippines that aimed to encourage Filipino healthcare professionals to gain employment in Germany. Ms von der Leyen also introduced the Kinderförderungsgesetz in 2008, which **expanded the level of childcare** provided for children between the ages of one and three, and a **paid parental leave** scheme which reserved an additional two months for fathers who go on parental leave too. Ms von der Leyen has **attracted criticism** from more traditionalist members of the CDU for her social policies, however she has been pivotal in moving the CDU to the political centre-ground.

On equality, Ms von der Leyen has proposed a new **anti-discrimination legislation** and a new **European Gender Strategy** to enshrine the principle of equal pay for equal work and promote the same opportunities for all. Ms von der Leyen has **supported** Germany's introduction of same-sex marriage, against the CDUs majority, and has come out in favour of **equal adoption rights for same-sex couples** too.

In 2013, Ms von der Leyen unsuccessfully campaigned for a **statutory quota for female participation** in the supervisory boards of companies in Germany - which would have required boards to be at least 20% female by 2018 and rising to 40% by 2023. However, in her manifesto, Ms von der Leyen has bounced back and is again calling for quotas to be set for gender balance on company boards and has said that the Commission will lead by example by forming a **fully gender-equal College of Commissioners**. Ms von der Leyen is also planning to table steps to introduce **binding pay-transparency measures** within her first 100 days.

Finally, Ms von der Leyen has also reiterated that the Istanbul Convention on fighting domestic violence would remain a key priority for the Commission - stating that the EU should do all it can to prevent domestic violence, protect victims and punish offenders. She has proposed **adding violence against women to the list of EU crimes** defined in the Treaty.



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