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Can Ursula von der Leyen save Europe?

The European Commission chief is secretive, controlling, and faces an in-tray from hell over the next five years.

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Ursula von der Leyen has been rewarded with another five-year term. | Photo-illustration by Liv Martin/POLITICO

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BY NICHOLAS VINOUCUR AND BARBARA MOENS

BRUSSELS — Centrist Europe has punched back.

After the far right rattled the political establishment in a Continent-wide election last month, those same, bruised mainstream party leaders dusted themselves down and

delivered a resounding rebuke, reappointing their own veteran centrist to the most powerful position in the European Union.

Ursula von der Leyen, a 65-year-old former German defense minister, has been rewarded for steering the EU through a tumultuous period of pandemic and war with another five-year term at the head of the bloc's executive arm, the European Commission.

During her pitch for five more years, she sought to play up her family status, embodying the traditional center-right conservative values that generally define the Brussels orthodoxy.

But with populist and nationalist forces now ranged against Europe's political mainstream gathering momentum across the Continent — and over the Atlantic — she shouldn't count on a honeymoon.

By the time her second term ends in 2029, another Donald Trump U.S. presidency could have come and gone, far-right leader Marine Le Pen could be running France, and any number of other populists could be perched at the EU's summit table alongside Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

“It will be an extremely difficult five years for her,” said a senior EU official.

For one thing, everyone in European politics knows von der Leyen already. And they are not all fans.

She will have to deal with critics who point to her controlling, secretive and distant leadership style. She generally consults with just a few trusted advisers — who are usually German — and even sleeps in her office, on the 13th floor of the Commission's HQ in Brussels.

When the pressure is greatest, she tends to take the most serious matters into her own hands, an instinct that can cause her trouble.

At the height of the pandemic, for example, von der Leyen hinted that she had personally negotiated a massive vaccine contract with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla via

text message on her mobile phone, leading to an ongoing lawsuit alleging she breached the EU's transparency rules.

More recently, after Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel last year, she badly misjudged the political mood in EU countries by meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. That prompted a major political crisis, threatening to undo her credibility just as she geared up to launch her campaign for reelection.

On the right wing of European politics, she faces critics who castigate her embrace of "progressive" policies such as action to combat climate change.

It will be harder to ignore all that noise now that the right wields more power.

Trump vs Queen Ursula

Von der Leyen's often stilted demeanor has won her the moniker "Queen Ursula" in Brussels. European leaders and lawmakers gave her a second term in part because they had no other viable option. The alternative would have been an unthinkably chaotic scramble, at a critical time for the EU's 450 million citizens.

But how will von der Leyen, Europe's safe pair of hands, fare in the years to come? With Trump's return to the White House in November looking more likely than ever, she will be hard-pressed to keep the transatlantic relationship on an even keel. The past four years have seen what's widely described as a "golden age" for the EU-U.S. relationship under Joe Biden.



Ursula von der Leyen has been rewarded with another five-year term at the head of the EU's executive arm. | Johannes Simon/Getty Images

Her aide Björn Seibert has worked closely with Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to coordinate policies on everything from financial and military support for Ukraine to China policy.

Trump, however, famously relished antagonizing EU leaders, such as former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, during his first presidency.

Now, with the isolationist Ohio Senator JD Vance as his running mate, Trump could well go further by acting on his threats to downgrade America's investment in NATO — a terrifying prospect for many European governments that lack their own robust defenses.

While EU leaders took comfort in the fact that Trump didn't actually undermine the NATO alliance in any significant way as president, this time around they're braced for Trump and Vance following through on their threats by severing the 80-year-old transatlantic bond.

Vance's appointment is particularly worrisome for Europe and for von der Leyen. Indeed, the 39-year-old Senator's assertion that he "couldn't care less what happens in Ukraine" threatens to leave her and the rest of Europe's pro-Ukraine leaders alone to face Russian aggression.

In addition to potentially jeopardizing the transatlantic security order, Trump has set the stage for a formidable economic clash with the EU by announcing his intention to slap a 10 percent tariff on all imported goods.

Von der Leyen is “going to be hit with more economic nationalism, trade war and protectionism from a Trump administration,” said Majda Ruge, a policy expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank. “Where she might be able to establish a positive relationship is on China, by playing a big role in promoting economic security and export controls.”

It will be up to the poised German conservative to fend off an all-out EU-US trade war.

With the U.S. and Europe potentially parting ways over policy toward Russia, if Trump wins in November, von der Leyen would do well to drill down on the one area where Brussels and a Republican White House could see eye-to-eye — namely China, according to Ruge.

“Getting to the Americans and convincing them that she is not a rival on China and that hitting Europe with tariffs is not in their interest, that’s one thing where she can have leverage and lead,” Ruge said.

Trouble close to home

Von der Leyen’s job will be no easier on the home front, where she has to deal with rogue Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán.

While von der Leyen has won a key battle for centrist forces, stalwart allies such as French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, normally the twin engines that propel the EU, are politically weakened following dismal election results in their respective countries. Macron’s France is especially febrile following his decision to call a snap election in recent weeks after dissolving his country’s parliament.



With the isolationist Ohio Senator JD Vance as his running mate, Trump could well go further by acting on his threats to downgrade America's investment in NATO. | Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

“We have a very weakened Macron. We have at least for probably another year a rather weak German chancellor ... So the question is: How much can von der Leyen fill in at this point?” asked Nicolai von Ondarza, a political scientist at the German Institute for International & Security Affairs.

Compounding the lack of support she's being given by her traditional EU allies is open hostility from within the bloc via right-wing populists such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Le Pen in France. Orbán is styling himself as the leader of von der Leyen's opposition.

The hard right leaders promise to resist as von der Leyen tackles the number one challenge of her second term: making huge amounts of EU money available to reindustrialize and re-arm the EU.

Aides to von der Leyen insist she has the benefit of experience to deal with what's coming. But, in a town known for speaking in *bureaucratese*, other EU officials are surprisingly blunt about her challenges

“Everything that costs anything — for example, Ukraine defense,” will prove “problematic” during von der Leyen's second term, said one senior EU diplomat, who was granted anonymity to speak freely.

Her experience of navigating politics didn't come until later in life. Before entering German politics for the first time in her thirties, von der Leyen had a stint in California, as she focused on obtaining a medical doctorate and raising seven children with her husband, Heiko von der Leyen.

Overcoming initial skepticism both at home and in Brussels, she established herself during her first term as a no-nonsense leader, running an institution with some 32,000 staff with a firm grip.

However, her reliance on a small cadre of aides angered many EU leaders who felt they should have been consulted more.

The coming five years promise to test this approach. Will she need to build more alliances with other EU leaders if she's to resist the forces of populism and keep the bloc united in the face of the challenges ahead? Is she even capable of reaching out to bring more people inside the tent in that way?

Von der Leyen will also be tested in areas where she is arguably weakest: Her ability to shout as loud as Trump and Orbán and strike deals with leaders who want to undermine her agenda.

Nevertheless, there was never any real alternative to von der Leyen as Commission president. After tense negotiations with political factions in the European Parliament, which she led — as usual — by herself, accompanied by Seibert, she sailed to a larger majority than she had in 2019.

After winning the vote to confirm her second term, von der Leyen gave a press conference at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. It had been an intense day after a long campaign, following a five-year period that few Western leaders survived with their credibility intact.

Perhaps it wasn't surprising that she stumbled while giving an answer to a journalist's question about the future of the combustion engine. "Sorry," she said. "I'm tired."

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