

WILL URSULA VON DER LEYEN GET A SECOND TERM?

by
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Between June 6-9, 373 million voters across 27 member-states will head to the polls to elect 720 lawmakers to the [European Parliament](#). In turn, those lawmakers will vote for the next EU Commission for the coming five years. Having announced her candidacy in February, incumbent Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (VDL) is vying for a second term at the helm of the Berlaymont, seeking the EU Council's renomination and the new Parliament's subsequent confirmation.

For many onlookers, her renomination has been a nearly [foregone conclusion](#) since before campaigning began. Since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, EU Commission Presidents have by informal convention been selected from the largest Parliamentary group, VDL's own center-right European People's Party (EPP), which is set to [remain the largest](#) after the elections also. Moreover, even after [two rounds](#) of televised debates, the other seven leading so-called '[Spitzenkandidaten](#)' – each representing a parliamentary group – are all lesser-known quantities in European politics. Some critics have pondered that the [entire](#) process is mere [political charade](#), noting how VDL – handpicked by the EU Council – [never ran](#) for the position in the first place.

Still, the EU's institutional democratic functioning aside, it has become clearer in recent weeks and months that the next Commission looks increasingly uncertain. Growing frictions over major Commission policy files, possibly razor-thin margins in the Parliament, disgruntled member-state leaders, and a surging far-right all cast shadows over the nomination process.

Bridging Already Thin Margins

EU Commissions have historically been selected through grand parliamentary coalitions between

center-left and center-right party groupings, with a cordon sanitaire against far-right parties. The VDL Commission was confirmed in 2019 by a internally divided [coalition](#) of MEPs from the EPP, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and Renew Europe (RE). However, while 410 MEPs made public pledges to endorse VDL, fewer still followed through, resulting in the slimmest nine-vote majority margin in EU history – only possible with last-minute support from a few populist independents and Polish Law and Justice (PiS). Amid declining [approval ratings](#) as well as past party [defections](#) and [suspensions](#), these groups are even smaller now compared to five years ago, leaving VDL [scrambling to gather the required 361 majority](#).

Two national delegations have already pledged to outright oppose her candidacy, with French [conservatives](#) criticizing her as too left-leaning and Romanian liberals citing her weakness on [defending rule of law](#). Similarly, there are also lukewarm sentiments from within the EPP. While she won the party's renomination unopposed at the March [Bucharest conference](#) by 400-89, about one-third of eligible voters chose to not even participate. To [placate these frustrations](#), VDL has quietly been [shelving](#) green and progressive Commission files, although this has, in turn, aggrieved the rest of her coalition.

Still, the most vocal objections relate to her pragmatic olive-branch to sections of the Euroskeptic hard right. Already, hard-right parties are present in seven center-right [member-state governments](#), while they rank either first or second in the polls in eight additional states. At the April Maastricht debate, VDL notably signaled that while she refused to cooperate with the most extreme rightwing Identity and Democracy (ID), she was considering the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), albeit depending “on how the [composition of the Parliament](#) is, and who is in what group.”

Such an opening met swift pushbacks in Parliament and from member-states. The second-largest EU group, the S&D, has pledged to [entirely withdraw](#)

[support](#) for a Commission that depends on the “far right and radical parties at any level.” In early May, all the traditional parties except for the EPP also signed a [letter condemning](#) far-right violence against politicians and calling for a maintained cordon sanitaire against the hard-right. They point to the ECR’s notable inclusion of Spain’s [dictatorship-nostalgic](#) Vox, Italy’s [scandal-ridden Brothers of Italy](#), and France’s Le Reconquete, whose leader called for a Franco-Russian [alliance](#) after Russia invaded Ukraine. Nevertheless, some EPP officials downplay the pledge as [pre-election posturing](#), betting that S&D will back down.

A Potential 2019 Repeat

It is also known that ties between the Commission and parts of the EU Council remain tense amid ongoing [cronyism](#) and [transparency](#) probes into VDL’s conduct, accusations of [Commission overreach](#) on foreign policy matters regarding Israel-Palestine, and [controversial migrant deals](#) with Northern African governments. These tensions have heightened scrutiny from two essential backers – Germany and France.

As a German national, VDL cannot be a commissioner without an active nomination from the German government, which since 2019 has shifted from Angela Merkel’s conservative CDU to a center-left “[traffic-light](#)” [coalition](#). German Chancellor Olaf Scholz warned in late May that the next Commission must not rest on support that includes [right-wing extremists](#), implying a red line. Concurrently, a close ally of French President Emmanuel Macron has signaled Paris would [prefer seasoned technocrat and former ECB President Mario Draghi](#) at the helm of the Commission.

Though this may be a mere negotiation tactic, it could also signal willingness to repeat the 2019 procedure of entirely sidelining the Spitzenkandidat process to handpick a third-party nominee behind closed doors in the EU Council. While there are [plenty of other hypothetical](#) candidates, Draghi could potentially court support from the entire EU-3, having already received backing from some [senior German Social Democrats](#), maintaining ties to Rome as a former

Prime Minister, and being broadly aligned with [Macron’s fiscal spending agenda](#).

A Consolidating Hard Right

Though a [far-right surge](#) has been predicted by pollsters for many months, it has been less clear how much the parties can influence the European agenda. The ECR and ID are [notoriously divided](#) internally – on NATO and Russia-Ukraine; free trade and protectionism; and soft vs hard Euroscepticism, with some nationalist parties resisting pan-European policy positions by principle. These divisions also engender [splits within the wider movement](#). For instance, the Sweden Democrats have threatened to [leave the ECR](#) if Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán’s Fidesz is allowed to join. Meanwhile, French National Rally (NR) has disavowed German counterpart [Alternativ für Deutschland](#) (AfD), following Nazi apologia, Russian cash-for-influence scandals, and China-related spying charges.

Yet, there is latent potential amid the divisions. After officially breaking with the AfD, NR made a gamble to [unify the two hard-right groups](#) which, albeit unlikely, could emerge as the [second-largest parliamentary grouping](#). While such a merger has been [ruled out](#) before, [Polish Law and Justice](#) and Brothers of Italy have been less categorical about NR’s advances ahead of the elections. Though Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said there is no ID-ECR “[unification in sight](#),” she added there was room for collaboration on illegal immigration, the green transition, and defending European identity.

Citing her pro-European and anti-Putin credentials, VDL has courted Meloni’s Brothers of Italy as [potential partners](#) in the next Parliament. However, as a [potential kingmaker](#), Meloni has kept her options open, stressing that the principal objective is to build a grand “[alternative majority](#) [...] a centre-right majority ... that will send the left into opposition.” Notably, MEPs from the combined far-right – including currently unaffiliated parties – are set to [outnumber the EPP](#), even as they remain a disunited voting bloc.



Mounting Legal Obstacles

Even if VDL navigates through the political horse-trading ahead – solving the parliamentary arithmetic, building bridges in the Council, and warding off a far-right consolidation – mounting legal challenges could endure well into a second term. European prosecutors are continuing the [Pfizergate investigation](#) into allegations of VDL’s “interference in public functions, destruction of SMS, corruption and conflict of interest,” with trials set to [commence](#) in December. Though exceptionally rare, [cronyism investigations](#) has forced Commission resignations in the past. Finally, after the International Criminal Court (ICC) [requested arrest warrants](#) against the leadership of Hamas and Israel in late May, European human rights organizations made legal submissions to the ICC requesting an investigation against VDL for complicity in [aiding and abetting war crimes and genocide](#).

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