

# STRASBOURG DIARY

The latest updates from the team at FTI Consulting  
*Giving you insight to what is on the political agenda*

July 2019

## A week in Strasbourg is a long time in European politics: how Ursula von der Leyen was elected

With only nine votes to spare, Ursula von der Leyen was elected President of the European Commission by a razor thin margin. In the two weeks between her nomination and the crucial vote in the European Parliament, tensions ran high and the certainty of her electoral victory was not yet solidified.

Nothing, however, compared to the candidate's last-minute attempt to gain the critical number of MEPs in a Parliament more diverse and divided than ever before.

Yet, after all the speculation, uncertainty and suspense, Europe now has its first ever female President-elect of the European Commission. FTI Consulting witnessed the Parliament's plenary session in Strasbourg first hand. Here are our insights on how it all happened.

The last Strasbourg session before Parliament's summer recess was poised to be a thriller. The leadership of the European Commission for the next five years was to be decided on Tuesday July 16<sup>th</sup>. The nomination process certainly did not go according to the Parliament's own plan. Ursula von der Leyen emerged as the European Council's pick for Europe's top job despite the Parliament's clear preference for the lead candidates of the mainstream parties. This alone was a reason for many to anticipate an uphill battle for the now former German Minister of Defence to win the 374 votes needed (from a total of 733 votes). Adding to the challenge she faced, was a Parliament more diverse and divided than ever before and a voting procedure which required a secret ballot. Combined, these factors led to a nerve-racking plenary debate and a vote too-close-to-call.

### The build up

It was clear that there was one task and one task only for the plenary session despite other debates (mostly on foreign policy) on the agenda.

For the first time, the nominated candidate needed more than just the support of the two biggest political families – the centre-right EPP and the centre-left S&D – and this was proving tricky. It was expected that support could be found with the liberal Renew Europe (RE) and the Greens, but the reality of how many votes this would translate to was still unclear at the beginning of last week.

The Greens were first to announce that they wouldn't support von der Leyen's candidacy, deeming her proposals on climate and the rule of law not ambitious enough (these quickly became the two most controversial elements of her programme). The S&D and RE demanded numerous clarifications following meetings with her and indicated that their support was far from certain. The far-right and the far-left groups were unlikely to vote in her favour as they follow an anti-establishment line. As doubts continued to rise about the support she would be able to gather from the mainstream parties, von der Leyen decided to put her commitments in writing and sent letters to the liberals and socialist groups outlining her main proposals on Monday afternoon. Her letters signalled her willingness to adopt a large majority of their priorities and turn them into the priorities of the new Commission.

But would this be enough? It quickly became clear that the vote would come down to more than simple party politics, but to national politics as well. To this end, her position on the rule of law was central to her ability to swing enough votes from Central and Eastern European countries. Certain national delegations had ruled out supporting the candidate immediately, but rumour had it that there were just enough delegations from the S&D, RE and the ECR that would be willing to vote in favour if she said the right things in her 'pitch' to the MEPs. To help her further, Martin Selmayr, the all-powerful Commission Secretary General announced late Monday that he would step down in an effort to dismiss concerns about Germany holding too much power in

Brussels. The news reached Strasbourg quickly and was a sign for many that the EU establishment was keen to make sure that von der Leyen was approved and that the EU would avoid a mid-summer crisis.

## The speech

It was crunch time for von der Leyen on Tuesday morning and she knew it. The candidate had one last chance to manoeuvre her way into Europe's top job and she made the best of it. She might have not presented a grand vision for Europe, but she did give a carefully prepared address, tailored to appeal to the pro-EU parties in the chamber. She had clearly decided to focus on gathering support from social democrats, liberals and even greens, possibly after being accused of cosyng up to the nationalists and the Eurosceptics the days before. She tried to walk a tightrope, offering a number of policies which her own EPP party had vehemently opposed for years (some EPP MEPs could be overheard complaining about not being consulted before her speech). It was only thanks to loyal party discipline that she did not lose too much support from the ranks of the centre-right party. Her pandering did, however, ensure that she received a number of votes from the other side of the aisle.

In a speech of roughly half hour, von der Leyen promised it all. She had a new Green Deal for the Greens, a youth and child guarantee as well as unemployment reinsurance scheme and fair taxation, particularly for digital businesses, for the S&D (some of which was previously unthinkable for the EPP) and a 'Conference on the Future of Europe' for the liberals. She promised a new Pact on Migration and a complementary mechanism for the rule of law in the Member States. Von der Leyen had numerous crowd-pleasers with her commitment to improve the Spitzenkandidat system (understandably met with a healthy dose of scepticism and laughter immediately after it was mentioned) and her support for the right of legislative initiative for the Parliament. Even the Greens called the speech a step in the right direction, albeit not a sufficient one. Naturally, she also sprinkled her speech with some personal remarks, including the fact that she was born in Brussels as her father was an EU official, and her family providing a home to a Syrian refugee.

The debate which followed took more than three hours and uncovered a deeply divided Parliament along both party and national lines. The S&D group as well as the Eurosceptic ECR appeared to have no conclusive view on von der Leyen's candidacy. On the contrary, the liberals were persuaded that she was the right candidate. It was all up in the air as criticism mounted that not only was the process which resulted in her nomination compromised, but her policy proposals were too vague and insufficient. The plenary adjourned and the overall feeling in the chamber was that despite a good performance, it was all still hanging in the balance.

## The vote

The socialists delayed their decision to the late afternoon and eventually decided to support von der Leyen. The news came only an hour before the vote but fueled rumours that she would only just be able to make it. Assistants and journalists were predicting a close win, but the sense of suspense was thick in the air. Everything could go wrong as no political group was full-heartedly standing behind the Council's pick, not even her own EPP.

MEPs gathered at 6 pm to begin the (time consuming) secret voting procedure. MEPs lined up to cast their vote, but it wasn't for another two hours that the decision was announced. As David Sassoli, the European Parliament President, announced the result, von der Leyen placed her hands over her heart and exhaled deeply in a display of relief. MEPs applauded her but there was a visible lack of excitement with only the EPP group giving her a standing ovation.

## The reactions

Post-vote, many quickly began to speculate on what the outcome would mean. There was a sense that only the secrecy of the vote allowed her to gain the necessary majority.

Some said she would not have made it without the support of British MEPs who will soon be leaving the Parliament. Others noted that she was confirmed thanks to the support of EU-sceptic populists from the 5Star Movement and Polish and Hungarian nationalists. A number of the latter MEPs boasted about casting the decisive vote. Others, mostly from the socialists and the liberals, made it clear that they will hold von der Leyen accountable for the promises she made. The Greens, previously considered the new kingmakers of the new Parliament, doubled down on their decision not to support her but clearly stated their openness for cooperation.

With the vote over, all eyes are now on von der Leyen's prospects and priorities. In 2014, current Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker was confirmed with 422 votes. Von der Leyen's narrow victory of less than 400 (traditionally considered the politically acceptable threshold) immediately sparked questions as to her legitimacy and the durability of her mandate. She ended up having the backing of the three mainstream, pro-EU groups but she also needed the support of some other Eurosceptic parties as well. At the end of the day, it might be that the Parliament is the big winner from the Spitzenkandidaten debacle as they were able to influence her agenda much more than they would have, if one of the lead candidates had been nominated. The changing of the guard will officially take place in November, but rest assured the European Parliament will not forget to call in their promised favours when they need them. This fact of the next term will be particularly true on climate policy

which clearly emerged as the defining issue of the next European Commission.

### Author



Vesela Mincheva  
Strategic Communications,  
Brussels  
Vesela.Mincheva@fticonsulting.com



EXPERTS WITH IMPACT

### About FTI Consulting

FTI Consulting is an independent global business advisory firm dedicated to helping organisations manage change, mitigate risk and resolve disputes: financial, legal, operational, political & regulatory, reputational and transactional. FTI Consulting professionals, located in all major business centres throughout the world, work closely with clients to anticipate, illuminate and overcome complex business challenges and opportunities. Connect with us at [www.fticonsulting.com](http://www.fticonsulting.com) or on Twitter (@FTIConsulting), Facebook and LinkedIn. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and not necessarily the views of FTI Consulting, Inc. its management, its subsidiaries, its affiliates, or its other professionals, members of employees.

©2019 FTI Consulting, Inc.. All rights reserved.

[www.fticonsulting.com](http://www.fticonsulting.com)