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Great Expectations, Structural Limitations: Ursula von der Leyen and the Commission's New Equality Agenda

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Introduction

Exactly 40 years ago, Simone Veil was elected as the first female President of the European Parliament ... I can say with great pride that **we finally have a female candidate for European Commission President**. I am that candidate thanks to all the men and women who have broken down barriers and defied convention. I am that candidate thanks to all the men and women who built a Europe of peace, a united Europe, a Europe of values. It is this belief in Europe that has guided me throughout my life and my career – as a mother, as a doctor and as a politician. It is the courage and daring of pioneers such as Simone Veil that are at the heart of my vision for Europe.

Ursula von der Leyen (2019a).

Ursula von der Leyen's election as the European Commission's first woman president in July 2019 confirms the fundamental transformation of the Union, as well as its politics and policies since the 1950s. Her first speech to the European Parliament invoked 'A Union that strives for more', promising to make gender equality a key component of her agenda (von der Leyen, 2019b). She generated great expectations by declaring that her Commission would consist of equal numbers of women and men, a plan immediately thwarted by two member states refusing to designate female nominees. Consisting of 12 women (44 per cent) and 15 men, the new Commission fell just short of parity, but her simultaneous appointment of the EU's first Commissioner for Equality, coupled with a new Gender Equality Strategy launched in March 2020 (marking International Women's Day and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Action Platform), indicates that this Christian Democratic mother of seven is serious about advancing women's descriptive and substantive representation, by claiming a leadership position for herself, for the Commission and for the EU.

Limited to an analysis of her 'first 100 days', this study focuses on the new President's promises to 'complete, deepen and enlarge' the EU gender equality domain not only in

We pursue two arguments that, taken together, pose a 'glass half-full, glass half empty' conundrum. First, we contend that a leader's past performance is the best predictor we have when it comes to anticipating her future behaviour. Like her former boss, Chancellor Angela Merkel, von der Leyen entered German politics through the 'side door' in 1990 but quickly rose to national prominence. She is the only politician to have served in all four Merkel cabinets (2005–19), prior to her surprise nomination for Commission Presidency. Despite her refusal to label herself a feminist, von der Leyen generated a long list of gender policy achievements as Germany's Minister for Women and Family (2005–09), as Labour Minister (2009–13) and as its first female Defence Minister (2013–19), respectively. Her pro-active support for work–life balance policies, paternal leave, corporate board quotas and female mentoring in the *Bundeswehr* (armed forces) met with strong resistance within her own party, but these initiatives ultimately became the law of the land (Mushaben, 2012/2019b).

relation to substantive policies but also with regard to European institutions per se. We argue that von der Leyen has already recognized the gendered nature of leadership, linking it to more gender-inclusive policy ambitions and leadership requirements. Changes in policy performance can also affect wider perceptions of the EU's democratic legitimacy at a critical juncture. The new President will certainly face significant political-institutional obstacles. Member states inevitably place national interests above supranational politics in times of crisis, but crises also present great opportunities for exercising different kinds of leadership; Commission presidents can operate as 'policy entrepreneurs' by way of their agenda-setting power for the EU at large (Tömmel, 2013, 2019; Müller, 2017, 2020). What kind of difference could a female President make as a pro-active leader?

Von der Leyen's effectiveness at the national level provides grounds for feminist optimism, but her chances of turning her ambitious equality agenda into measurable policy outcomes are qualified by our second argument: structures matter when it comes to judging how leadership can be effectively exercised, but so do fundamental differences dividing decision makers at the national and EU levels. Each Commission sets its own goals and work-plan for advancing European integration, but von der Leyen will encounter significant challenges, owing to a fragmented European Parliament, a polarized Council, and new fault lines within the Commission itself.

These arguments fuel our efforts to incorporate a gendered leadership perspective as well. Having pursued national interests for 14 years, von der Leyen must undertake a supranational U-turn in order to champion European interests. This raises the question as to whether leadership skills accumulated at one level will automatically transfer to a multi-level governance framework. The ability to lead derives from a combination of *personal skills*, the *institutional context* and *policy-specific factors*; little EU scholarship has focused on leadership per se, much less on its gender dimensions. Prior to 2019, women accounted for 35 of 183 Commissioners, less than 20 per cent of the total across seven decades – hardly a women-friendly organization in relation to descriptive representation (Hartlapp *et al.*, forthcoming). Leading in transitional times is particularly demanding: 'great ambitions' not only raise great expectations but also greater national resistance to change. Concentrating on the transitional 100-day period, we raise the question: Would it be better for Ursula von der Leyen to aim very high, in hopes of achieving more, or should she avoid undermining her own credibility, and that of future women leaders, by overshooting the mark with promises she cannot keep?

We first consider gendered leadership, von der Leyen's successful transformation of the German gender regime, and potential disadvantages linked to her controversial nomination. Next we address the 'great expectations' she has raised, based on the bold promises of the 2020 Gender Equality Strategy, then zoom in on political-structural limitations inherent in multi-level governance. Finally, we address the imbalance between these great expectations and structural constraints, concluding with reflections on the proverbial 'glass half-full/half-empty' conundrum.

I. Leadership in EU Studies

Assessments of European governance from a leadership perspective are fairly new; even more rare are investigations of gendered leadership across all EU institutions, given

women's lack of *critical mass* outside the European Parliament until 2019. Critical mass is linked to *positional* leadership, while the gendered way in which it is exercised centres on *behavioural* leadership (Müller and Tömmel, forthcoming). At issue is the link between descriptive and substantive representation: Will more women in power produce a reconfiguration of policies essential for gender equality? Establishing a correlation between the two is not a simple process in a multi-level system. In terms of symbolic representation, the first female President is certainly an important expression of the EU's ambition for stronger gender equality.

The EU involves a 'gender-specific environment moulded by "masculinist" norms and expectations' (Sykes, 2014, p. 691), forcing us to 'unpack' the role of gendered agency across all institutions, at all levels, to determine how it interacts with other gendered structures driving European integration processes. Contemporary European integration theories are often blind to the gendered nature of leadership (Abels and MacRae, forthcoming). There is a general consensus that '[C]risis leadership differs from leadership in routine times', because its 'stakes are much higher, the public is much more attentive, its mood more volatile, and institutional constraints on elite decision making are considerably looser' (Ansell *et al.*, 2014, p. 418f.). The current, crisis-ridden EU offers a unique opportunity for analysing if, how and by whom leadership is exercised.

Existing scholarship stresses leadership crises, and/or the inability of the European states to 'lead'. The Commission President occupies a prominent place in such studies, due to the Commission's hybrid nature as a technocratic-administrative body and a political institution. Commission Presidents can exercise strategic leadership by transferring 'political ambitions of a Pan-European scope into consensual agendas ... [that] can be effectively mediated through the intra- and inter-institutional arenas of decision-making at a European level ... and gain support among European public spheres' (Müller, 2017, p. 130). Three types of leadership – 'agenda-setting', 'mediative-institutional' and 'public' – guide our analysis, which we link to representation issues.

EU leadership is clearly multi-dimensional, multi-level and complex. Commission Presidents often act as policy entrepreneurs, linked to that body's agenda-setting power; they function as brokers in inter-institutional negotiations and as top managers within the Commission, given their power to reorganize an 'administration' consisting of 33,000+ employees. Supranational agenda-setting is likely to be more successful when there is an effective outreach strategy, pushing the main agenda items at the beginning of a new term, when public attention is at its highest (Müller, 2017, p. 139). Juncker was the first to label his College a 'political Commission' (Kassim and Laffan, 2019); von der Leyen has proclaimed hers a 'geo-political Commission'. Her unique status as the first woman President, with high symbolic value, allows us to pose new questions, not all of which can be answered here. First, can a female-directed Commission provide strong leadership under crisis conditions (resurgent refugee waves, corona pandemic)? Second, what potential equality advances might we realistically expect from near-parity leadership in the Commission? Third, what particular legitimacy or credibility challenges will she face vis-à-vis the other institutions and the public?

The European Council's nomination of von der Leyen's in July 2019 contravened efforts to democratize the presidential selection by way of a *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates) system. That mechanism's democratizing effect was viewed with scepticism when it was introduced in 2014 (Hobolt, 2014). While the conservative Manfred Weber

(EPP) proved unacceptable to France, the Visegrad countries rejected social-democrat Frans Timmermans (PES), who had initiated infringement proceedings against Poland for rule-of-law violations. Margrethe Vestager's party group (RENEW) had too few votes to cobble together a majority. The Parliament failed to rally behind any of the candidates. Christian Democrat von der Leyen did represent the EPP's winning plurality, as foreseen in Article 17 TFEU. Greens and social democrats refused to support her, requiring her to solicit votes from Europhobic MEPs as well as from right-wing rulers in the Council. She squeaked by with 383 of the 733 votes cast.

Progressives should have reviewed von der Leyen's policy-record regarding gender equality and social inclusion in Germany. Her promulgation of a national anti-discrimination law and monitoring agency in 2006, her 'radical' calls for family-work reconciliation policies, and a 40 per cent female quota on corporate boards subjected her to criticism of her content and style within her own male-dominated party. Her push for guaranteed child-care for infants and toddlers, paternal leave and internet regulations against child-pornography was closely aligned with EU mandates vetoed by chancellor Gerhard Schröder under an SPD–Green government (1998–2005).

Even as defence minister, von der Leyen established child-care portals, part-time/telework options and time-off 'savings accounts' for deployed parents. Basic training for all soldiers now includes modules on human rights, cross-cultural competence, diversity, equal treatment, sexual harassment, unconscious bias and other forms of discrimination. Mocked by military hardliners, she moreover upgraded family accommodations, introduced new uniforms for pregnant soldiers and ensured that family re-deployments would not occur in the middle of a school year, reforms that are quite popular among the troops (Bulmahn *et al.*, 2014; Kümmel, 2015; Richter, 2016; Wullers, 2016). These reforms underlie our argument that a leader's past performance is the best predictor available for anticipating her future behaviour. Von der Leyen's first speech as the presidential *candidate* emphasized the need for a 'Union of Equality', according gender equality a strategic, visible place on the supranational agenda and highlighting her ambition for more inclusive, gender equal leadership.

II. 'The Glass Half-Full': Mainstreaming the EU Gender Equality Agenda

The evolution of EU gender equality policies has been well documented, emphasizing three stages dating back to the 1957 adoption of Art. 119 EEC ('equal pay for equal work') (Abels and Mushaben, 2012; Jacquot, 2015; Ahrens, 2019). The Commission promoted multi-year Action Plans, Strategies and Road Maps, moving from equal treatment to positive action, to gender mainstreaming, codified in the 1996 Amsterdam Treaty, though the practice failed to live up to the theory.

Equality policies rarely enjoyed priority status among the Commissioners, despite lofty speeches and EU boasting about its status as 'one of the most gender-equal' institutions in the world (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, p. 496). Engagement by previous presidents was modest at best, with the exception of Jacques Delors (1985–95). His presidency saw a flourishing of equality initiatives linked to the single market project, and the creation of the European Women's Lobby. According to MacRae (2012, p. 310), Romano Prodi at least understood 'the rhetoric of balanced participation', explicitly encouraging member states 'to put forward women's names for consideration to the College of

Commissioners'. José Manuel Barroso 'downsized' women's strength in the Commission (Hartlapp *et al.*, forthcoming), eliminating its High Group on Gender Equality. He orchestrated administrative reforms weakening existing gender equality institutions, shifting the equality portfolio from DG Employment to DG Justice (Hubert and Stratigaki, 2016, p. 28). European Parliament efforts to restructure competencies, institutionalize resources/expert networks and alter policy framing often met with Council resistance (Ahrens, 2019; Jacquot, 2020).

Pressured by the European Parliament, Jean-Claude Juncker tried, but failed to raise the number of female Commissioners, due to national governments' resistance (Dinan, 2015, p. 99). His gender-blind austerity policies undermined earlier initiatives (for example child-care provision) intended to level the playing field between women and men. Juncker floated ideas for a Road Map involving equal pay, public consultations and pay transparency in his Action Plan for 2017–19, but most were blocked by the Council. The work–life balance proposal (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) was his only real success, compared to his failure to recast the maternity leave directive. These developments at least 'tilled the policy field' (Hartlapp, 2017) for von der Leyen's plan for a Commission strategy on anti-discrimination. But Juncker's idea for the future of gender equality in the EU were, at best, very limited (Ahrens and van der Vleuten, 2019).

Encountering her first hurdle in attempting to secure parity representation in the College, the individual Cabinets, and across Commission services, the new President designated Helena Dalli the first Commissioner for Equality; her appointment offers another test-case for the argument that past performance is the best predictor of future leadership. Dalli displayed great tenacity as Minister for European Affairs and Equality and as Minister for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties in Malta. Her successful push for progressive LGBTQTI legislation turned conservative, Catholic Malta into a 'gold standard' and 'beacon of hope' (Martin, 2017). Von der Leyen increased the number of Commission vice-presidents to eight, including three Executive Vice-Presidents charged with ensuring a holistic approach to policy formulation by linking dossiers. She placed long overdue reforms from Juncker's Action Plan on the priority list for her first 100 days, including pay transparency and the criminalization of domestic violence.

The fanfare marking the new Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2020–25 (European Commission, 2020), launched to mark International Women's Day, came to a screeching halt with the onset of the corona-virus pandemic. All EU events involving 'external visitors' were cancelled in March. The urgent need for gender equality initiatives is documented in the 2019 Gender Equality Index (<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019>), issued by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). It attests to the persistence of equality across all member states. Against the EU average (67.4 of 100 points), Sweden, scored 83.6, in contrast to Greece and Hungary, registering only 51 points at the time von der Leyen assumed office on 1 December 2019.

The GES recognizes the promotion of equality between women and men as 'a task for the Union, in all its activities'; it foresees the use of a dual approach, combining targeted measures with effective gender mainstreaming and the application of intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle. Gender equality experts display real excitement regarding its detailed contents (Iratxe *et al.*, 2020), which parallel many of the pledges outlined in von der Leyen's July speech. Combatting violence against women is paramount, because,

as Dalli declared, '[n]obody can be free if they are under the threat of violence and impedes [sic] on their right to thrive in life'.¹ The GES commits the EU to 'doing all it can' to combat gender-based violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, compulsory abortions or sterilizations. It promised to codify gender-violence as a 'Eurocrime' (to ensure prosecution) and calls for a Victims' Rights Strategy in 2020, to strengthen the Victims' Rights Directive. The GES aims to combat gender stereotypes, by bolstering women's participation in the arts, the media and the Artificial Intelligence domain. The Strategy specifies methods for closing persistent labour market gaps: measures include full implementation of the Work-Life-Balance Directive; using the Social Scoreboard and the European Semester to monitor adherence to the European Pillar of Social Rights (for example gendering structural reform programmes); mainstreaming gender in public administration, state budgeting and financial management; reforming taxation and social protection systems to end financial disincentives for second earners.

The GES further calls for gender-equal participation in start-up and entrepreneurial innovation initiatives, management of private equity and venture capital funds, and the Digital Education Action Plan (using the 'Women in Digital' scoreboard). Beyond demanding binding pay transparency measures, the Strategy mandates efforts to 'close the gender care gap', to free women for decision-making roles in business, industry and on corporate boards (40 per cent). The Commission moreover hopes to reach gender balance (50 per cent) at all levels of EU management by late 2024, by setting quantitative targets for female appointments and leadership development programs. Von der Leyen welcomes the very high bar established by the new GES; she has promised additional funding, as well as hard law, not merely soft law recommendations, in several fields, combined with strict monitoring. It would constitute a curious kind of 'reverse discrimination' for equality activists to expect the President to accomplish all of this on her own; given the principle of collegiality, she expects strong support from all Commissioners.

III. 'The Glass Half-Empty': Structural Limitations for an Ambitious President

Despite this ambitious agenda, von der Leyen and her Commissioners will encounter major structural constraints. The post-2019 landscape is imposing new limits on strong presidential leadership, owing to stronger polarization and fragmentation within and among the three bodies comprising the legislative triangle: the Commission, Council and European Parliament. Indeed, the growing use of 'trilogues' has weakened the Commission's ability to broker compromises, with detrimental effects for equality interventions (Mushaben, 2019a). In addition, developments linked to EU 'poly-crises' have enhanced the Council's prominence in EU governance and crisis-management. This has marginalized both the Commission (with few exceptions) and the Parliament in key areas, for example economic governance, in line with resurgent, intergovernmentalist conceptions of European integration. It will be more difficult for the new Commission to navigate the already complex inter-institutional dynamics and for the President to meliorate the inter-institutional tensions generated by the *Spitzenkandidaten* fiasco.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_413.

While von der Leyen aimed for gender parity, some national governments refused to nominate male and female candidates, forcing her to choose from an unbalanced list; several published their nominee names before consulting with her. Two female nominees were then rejected outright by the Parliament, following their hearings. Though she could not secure full parity, von der Leyen has appointed the largest number female Commissioners to date, reaching 44 per cent. Committed to ‘leading by example’, her Mission Letters urged her Commissioners to seek parity in their personal Cabinets, while appointing more women to top positions in the Directorates-General. The final list of Cabinet members falls far short of parity: While women occupy 53.4 per cent of the Cabinet positions they account for only 16 per cent of the cabinet heads but 63 per cent of deputy heads – characterized by some commentators as ‘gender-washing’ (Foote and Fortuna, 2019).

The Commission itself is more fragmented politically; its members now hail from five, instead of three political party groups, which will affect its decision-making dynamics. Party politics will presumably play a larger role. This is very likely in a self-declared ‘political’ (Juncker) or ‘geo-political’ (von der Leyen) Commission, though its President is always a political actor (Dinan, 2016). The President has the power to (re)organize this complex institution. Von der Leyen took immediately advantage of this prerogative by assigning key Commissioners to new positions as ‘Executive Vice-presidents’. Several are likely to support her innovation agenda, including the new Equality Commissioner (Dalli), vice-president Timmermans (a self-declared feminist), three female Scandinavian Commissioners (Vestager, Johansson and Urpilainen), and second-term Commissioner Jourová, with whom Dalli jointly presented the GES.

Introducing an Equality Commissioner counts as another major innovation: Dalli is responsible for ‘inclusion and equality’ ‘in all of its senses, irrespective of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation’, required since the Amsterdam Treaty.² While responsible for relations with EIGE, Dalli lacks her own Directorate-General, however, and enjoys limited access to equality-relevant units of the DG Justice and Consumers and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Sharing could prove problematic, in view of likely conflicts with Commissioner Reynders over DG Justice and Schmit for DG EMPL; it also raises problems of accountability and the risk of hollowing out the agenda from within. Yet, Dalli chairs a new Taskforce on Equality, ‘composed of experts from the Commission services’ (European Commission, 2019, p. 8). This cross-cutting, gender mainstreaming approach has yet to prove its effectiveness (since previous attempts for mainstreaming at this level were less successful).

Insisting on ‘collegial leadership’, von der Leyen has further established ‘clusters’ of Commissioners jointly responsible for specific tasks. Dalli is member of two such clusters: ‘Promoting our European way of life’ and ‘A new push for European democracy’.^vFor a Commission President used to a degree of top-down control in German ministries (resort principle), holding disparate functional and partisan groups together and motivating them to rally around her agenda will pose a real challenge – especially

²https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/dalli_en.

with two strong executive vice-presidents, Timmermans and Vestager, who might position themselves to run for President again in 2024.

A Commission ally in the past, the European Parliament has also become more polarized since the 2019 election; it often requires a centre-left majority to pass equality legislation. Although the EP is poised to enter the ‘gender-balanced zone’ (40 per cent female), gains in descriptive representation are a mixed blessing.³ Women’s enhanced presence owes partly to a greater number of female MEPs allied with the new Eurosceptic, far-right Identity & Democracy (ID) group, now the fourth largest in the EP. Populist parties usually embrace traditional gender roles and anti-equality agendas. Eurosceptic groups like the ECR and ID have gained more seats. The EPP and S&D will need the support of other groups to muster a working majority and ensure party cohesion in an increasingly politicised policy field (Warasin *et al.*, 2019). The centre-left, inter-group coalition capable of adopting equality policies in the past is no longer sufficiently strong (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustín, 2016).

In addition, numerous MEPs still resent the European Council and certain national leaders for failing to abide by the *Spitzenkandidaten* model. Their actions precipitated von der Leyen’s out-of-the-blue nomination, though she announced during her July 2019 speech that she would strengthen Parliament’s role in initiating legislation and help to reform the lead-candidate selection model. Such expectations regarding institutional change also be hard to fill.

As to ‘mediative-institutional leadership’, von der Leyen will have to bridge gaps within the Council dating back, in part, to the big-bang CEE expansion of 2004/05. Eurosceptic and nationalistic leaders can now block Council actions; intensified conflicts stemming from the Euro and Schengen crises are now re-manifesting themselves by way of member state responses to the Corona pandemic. New mini-lateral groups are forming and flexing their muscles. The Council is not only polarized over austerity policies, migration/asylum, the EU budget and Corona issues but also over questions as to how much and what kind of integration to pursue *per se*, as witnessed during the nomination processes for top EU jobs or in the recent July 2020 European Council summit.

Finally, times of crisis also require exceptional displays of ‘public leadership’. The Corona pandemic initially marginalized the Commission in relation to its co-ordinating role, given Council fights over the financing of assistance measures, while – as recent 2020 Special Eurobarometer data illustrate – the majority of Europeans are supportive of more EU competences and bigger budget to deal with crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, the Commission appears to be little more than a bystander, despite the pan-European nature of the threat, as governments attempt to seize the wheel in setting a common course. The long-term effects on European integration could prove dramatic.

Conclusion: Future Prospects for the von der Leyen Commission

What lessons can we derive at this early stage by adopting both a leadership and representational perspective? As of this writing there is not sufficient evidence to judge whether von der Leyen’s pro-active agenda-setting will result in successful policy change. The

³Initially, 40.6 per cent of MEPs were women, after UK withdrawal the number dropped slightly to 39.6 per cent.

ability of EU actors to generate concrete policy outputs depends on the institutional setting and contextual factors, which are shifting dramatically as a consequence of the corona pandemic. Leaders constitute a select group of actors; although mainstream studies neglect its impact, we believe that ‘the little difference’ can hold ‘big consequences’ (Schwarzer, 1975), but this says nothing about the direction or degree of change. There is empirical evidence inferring that descriptive and substantive representation are interlinked, albeit not in a straightforward manner. Significant changes require not only ‘critical mass’ but also ‘critical acts’ and ‘critical actors’. Traditionally associated with certain types of masculinity, leadership is a gendered concept, even in the peculiar environment constituted by the EU.

Our assessment of von der Leyen’s performance during the first 100 days comprises only a small slice of a larger study, examining the extent to which woman leaders might transfer lessons and approaches from one level to another. Despite her weak performance during the preliminary party-group hearings, von der Leyen demonstrated a capacity for rallying to the equality cause during her first speech to the European Parliament, which qualifies as a ‘critical act’. Mindful of women’s long march through the institutions in pursuit of equality, her opening tribute to Holocaust survivor Simone Veil revealed her grasp of the significance of symbolic and descriptive representation. ‘Strategically setting Europe’s agenda’ constitutes a Commission President’s ‘primary political opportunity’ to demonstrate leadership (Müller, 2017, p. 139), but keeping gender equality high on the integration agenda, to foster a ‘Union of equality’, will require even greater active leadership.

Regarding our own expectations, we welcome von der Leyen’s assertive, ambitious start – for example, her effort to seek parity representation among the Commissioners and their Cabinets. We value her pledge to hold her Commissioners individually and collectively responsible for securing equality and diversity in everything they undertake (as outlined in her Mission Letters), as well as her public embrace of the Gender Equality Strategy. Her use of the first 100 days to take visible steps towards legislative action on a long list of overdue gender reforms (equal pay, domestic violence) illustrates her recognition that leadership begins with agenda-setting, linking symbolic to descriptive and substantial representation.

But will she be able to deliver the goods? In fact, nobody is born a leader; leadership derives from learning-by-doing in different contexts. Von der Leyen is still learning how to ‘become Madam President’ and how to master the ambivalent expectations accompanying this role. Unforeseen in 2019, the Corona pandemic is concurrently challenging and accelerating the need for ambitious leadership. To the extent that ‘past performance is the best predictor of future performance’, von der Leyen’s record to date evinces a long list of gender policy achievements, and the stamina to achieve them in the face of strong resistance, during her respective terms as a long-serving German minister. She also acquired substantial experience in dealing with the peculiarities of supranational policy-making in her various ministerial capacities. As Commission President she has made more equality promises than all of her predecessors combined, perhaps more than she will be able to keep over the next five years, but in the words of the great Canadian ice hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, ‘you miss 100 percent of the shots you never take’.

Von der Leyen and her Commissioners must nonetheless anticipate major structural constraints at the EU level as she moves to fulfil those promises. Administrative reforms

undertaken by her predecessors weakened the Commission's own institutional structure with respect to gender equality policy, which she aims to remedy with her own changes. Add to this greater partisan fragmentation within the College of Commissioners per se, along with possible tensions defining its relationship to the Council and the European Parliament, coupled with tense relations between the Parliament and the Council.

Von der Leyen's ability to engage in 'mediative-institutional leadership' also amounts to a key challenge. Party-political fragmentation is changing the political climate inside the European Parliament, afflicted by Europhobic parties; the Council is also facing internal divisions, owing to Eurosceptic heads of government and states. She must suddenly address a universal economic crisis already kicking in as a result of the corona-virus epidemic; this crisis is beyond her control, notwithstanding her professional training as a doctor. This could precipitate even bigger fault lines within the Council, exacerbating a break-down in historical consensus regarding European integration as a whole. Under these conditions, perhaps, she should not be making promises that will be very hard, if not impossible to keep. Would it be better for her to avoid the risk of undermining her own credibility, and that of future women leaders, by overshooting the mark?

Von der Leyen's (s)election as the first female Commission President provides us with an experimental setting for studying gendered leadership in the EU, along with the linkages among different dimensions of representation. At the symbolic level, the task of serving as the first woman will always pose new challenges in a still gendered environment, but von der Leyen appears willing to tackle this challenge as 'critical actor'. At the descriptive level, the fact that she heads the first ever Commission to boast of near-parity, coupled with her declared emphasis on gender equality and her first 'critical acts', at least opens the door to stronger substantial representation, as illustrated her outspoken support for the GES during the first 100 days. It is still too early to assess the linkage between a more 'feminized' Commission, the President's authority and leadership style, as well as the Commission's policy effectiveness. At least, we have realistic grounds to hope that this President will exercise strong leadership in striving for a more gender-equal Union.

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