

The EU's American Queen

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Ursula von der Leyen is retooling the bloc for war

Ask most Europeans what they think about the EU, and they'll tell you it's relentlessly dull. It's all bureaucrats in statement eyewear overseeing arcane regulations about the curvature of cucumbers; impenetrable corridors in the staid outposts of Luxembourg and Strasbourg; and a multiplicity of councils, commissions, parliaments and courts — the precise remit of each entirely mystifying to the layman.

Yet this dullness is integral to the union's purpose as a peace project. As political philosopher Luuk van Middelaar [observed](#) in *Passage to Europe*, the EU was supposed to represent a "flight of history into bureaucracy" — an attempt to swap the "unpredictability and pathos" that had long characterised relations between European states with "sober interweaving interests". Wars would be replaced with consensus, law and tedious regulations; potentially incendiary political and ideological divisions would be blunted by heavy technical jargon and compromise. The resulting facelessness was embodied in an apocryphal question attributed to Henry Kissinger: "Who do I call if I want to call Europe?"

But all is changing. The EU is becoming less boring and less democratic, and it has acquired a face: European Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen, who last month [confirmed](#) that she will seek another five-year term.

The "Queen of Europe" has been described as "Napoleonic", "dictatorial", and "imperious" by detractors, impressions that have been aggravated by her personal idiosyncrasies and flamboyant, patrician air. She is, after all, the wife of Heiko von der Leyen, a scion of an aristocratic family that made its fortunes in silk. She is also a dressage rider and performs in equestrian events, her equine passion inherited from her late father, Ernst Albrecht, one of the nascent EU's first civil servants and a prominent politician in Germany's CDU. When Von der Leyen's pony was mauled to death by a wolf in 2022, the Commission [announced](#) that it would downgrade their protection status to allow for culling, much to the horror of wildlife conservationists. An energetic mother of seven, she allegedly sleeps in a modest 25-square-metre room on the 13th floor of the Commission's Berlaymont building. She is also said to maintain an ascetic discipline in other areas of life, refraining from both alcohol and meat.

Yet such eccentricities fail to capture the transformations within the EU since she came to power. Indeed, her reign is defined by the re-dramatisation of European politics — something which will continue if she manages to secure another term in June, which she probably will.

Von der Leyen's tenure has been marked by an acceleration of what Perry Anderson has [termed](#) "European coups" — the gradual agglomeration of power in Brussels. Even the manner in which she became Commissioner in 2019 represented a break with a procedure designed to lend the EU executive greater democratic legitimacy. In 2003, a Franco-German agreement [established](#) the foundations of what would become the *Spitzenkandidaten* ("lead candidate") process, whereby the

political family with the most votes in the European Parliamentary elections would secure the office of Commissioner for its pre-chosen candidate. But in 2019, Von der Leyen was not the *Spitzenkandidat* of her European People's Party (EPP) — instead, she was handpicked by EU leaders Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. The EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*, Manfred Weber was thwarted by Macron, who viewed him as unqualified. Von der Leyen, on the other hand, was a long-time Merkel loyalist and, as Macron noted, spoke French exceptionally well. The then-German Defence Minister was also amenable to closer military cooperation with France and had spoken of the need to create “an army of Europeans” — another point in her favour for Macron.

In other words, Von der Leyen's very rise constituted a quiet coup. Beyond the pretty verbiage about defending democracy, it amounted to what Anderson has described as “the quiet settling of affairs between elites *in camera*, above the heads of an inert populace below”. Perhaps as a result, Von der Leyen has started to rewrite her origin story, claiming that she “ran in 2019” — referencing a campaign that never happened. For the Queen of Europe, both reality and democracy are malleable.

Yet Von der Leyen's weightiest revisionism concerns the EU's foreign policy. In 2019, she [identified](#) the creation of a “geopolitical commission” as one of her main priorities as Commissioner. The EU, she asserted, needed to become a major “geopolitical” actor “to shape a better world order”. Chaos and crisis demanded that it “learn to speak the language of power”. Then came the twin threats of Russia and another Trump administration, both of which lent these aims a greater urgency. The result is that Von der Leyen's EU is gradually being retooled for war.

Two years ago, EU officials [broke the taboo](#) on financing lethal weapons when they decided to fund the provision of lethal military aid to Ukraine. As article 41.2 of the Treaty of the European Union explicitly [prohibits](#) “expenditure arising from operations having military or defence implications”, this move required some creativity to circumvent. Towards this end, the EU [mobilised](#) the European Peace Facility (EPF), a misnomer for a tool engineered to finance military engagements abroad. To get around the proscription on the financing of war, the EPF has been designed as a €5 billion “off-budget” instrument.

Nor does the drumbeat of war stop there. On Tuesday, the Commission is set to unveil a “sweeping” European [defence industry strategy](#), which will shift the EU's defence industry to a war-footing, while “upending the way it finances and sells arms”. Von der Leyen has said it will aim to “turbocharge our defence industrial capacity over the next five years”, with a focus on joint procurement.

This approach draws on the Commission's precedent-setting joint procurement of Covid vaccines, an effort now being touted as a model for success but still mired in major controversy: Von der Leyen's private text message exchange with Pfizer Chief Executive Albert Bourla — hammering out the details of the April 2021 deal for 1.1 billion doses of the vaccine — has been [shrouded](#) in secrecy, with both journalists and the European Court of Auditors stonewalled in their attempts to gain access to the conversation. Suffice it to say such a precedent does not bode well for transparency in the massive new defence procurement process.

And nor do its other components. The new strategy will, for instance, reportedly include the opening of a Defence Innovation Office in Kyiv and the establishment of a new defence commissioner role. It is very likely that the new defence tsar will hail from Poland or one of the Baltic States; Radosław Sikorski, Poland's current foreign minister, is viewed as the top candidate. If this does happen, we will see Europe's centre of gravity shift East, with the more hawkish rhetoric and policies of what George W. Bush once called “new Europe” overtaking that of “old Europe”. In other ways, too, the Commission's new defence strategy would also make the EU more American: one proposed measure copies the US Foreign Military Sales scheme, the programme that allows Washington to sign

contracts with foreign capitals directly, thus streamlining arms sales.

Elsewhere, Von der Leyen is also seeking to strengthen her “geopolitical commission” by reinvigorating the EU’s dormant enlargement process. Or so she claims. Effectively dead since Croatia joined the bloc in 2013, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has supposedly brought it back to life. In June 2022, the EU extended candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, with Von der Leyen championing the move: only recently, she said she was “working our own reforms to prepare for a Union of 30-plus member states”.

There was, of course, no mention of the fact that accession is notoriously lengthy and tortuous: Serbia has been a candidate country for 12 years and Montenegro for 14. Meanwhile, Turkey was officially extended candidate status at the end of the last century. But Von der Leyen believes she knows how to make it work. And naturally, it would mean breaking more taboos.

Critics of enlargement fear the new member states from Eastern Europe would wield their veto in foreign policy decision-making, paralysing the union and eroding its cohesion. Von der Leyen is thus [pushing to scrap unanimity](#) in foreign policy decision-making, which would see “qualified majority voting” take its place — a move that opponents suggest will undermine national sovereignty, depriving member states of their cherished veto.

Yet even if Von der Leyen gets her wish, which would also undercut intransigent Hungary, it is unlikely to mean a fast-track to membership for Ukraine. As a result, EU insiders have dismissed her renewed enlargement talk as “virtue signalling”, while others point out that absorbing an agricultural powerhouse such as Ukraine would be extraordinarily costly and risks provoking more farmers’ protests across the continent. Poland, which has seen months of demonstrations over a glut of cheap Ukrainian grain, is currently among the [most outspoken](#) supporters of preserving the unanimity rule in EU foreign and security policy decision-making. Other defenders of the veto say unanimity encourages harder negotiations and promotes consensus. Middelaar agrees, noting that “it is the psychological certainty of being able to block a resolution if you truly oppose it that makes consensus possible”. Besides, as Anderson writes, “the alchemy of the Union is to achieve unanimity through the threat of majority.”

In the end, while an independent European defence industry and foreign policy may very well seem prudent in the current geopolitical context, Von der Leyen’s approach is not. At present, her rhetoric and actions do little more than mimic the kind of stale neoconservatism favoured by some in Washington. She does not seek to articulate her own vision or supply a real alternative, but rather aims to fill the theoretical vacuum left by a withdrawing US with the fading empire’s own logic.

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Yet the muscular approach to defence also serves a more self-interested political purpose. Ahead of this June’s European Parliamentary elections, Von der Leyen is courting the European Right. This marks a departure from 2019, when she was regarded as something of a CDU liberal. Back then, she championed gender issues, such as childcare for working mothers, as well as green policies. Come June, however, it is the populist Right who are projected to prosper.

Significantly, Von der Leyen is only making overtures to [a specific segment](#) of the European Right: the faction that is pro-Nato. The dividing line here is clear, with Von der Leyen criticising the AfD, Marine Le Pen, and Geert Wilders of the Identity and Democracy group (ID), but embracing members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which includes Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy and Poland’s PiS. There is little substantively different between the two groups on

anything other than Nato: the ID is critical of the alliance, while the ECR is comprised of some of its most ardent supporters.

For those on the hard-Right now embracing Nato, the adoption of an Atlanticist foreign policy makes a certain sense: it offers a sort of purifying absolution, and a ticket to the political mainstream. Consider the Sweden Democrats and the Finns (formerly the True Finns), both now members of the ECR. Both parties were once against Nato membership, but dropped their opposition in recent years as it became clear power was on the horizon. Sweden's centre-right coalition relies on support from the Sweden Democrats for its majority in parliament, while the Finns are now part of the conservative governing coalition. In both cases, a sufficiently pro-Nato stance is political gold dust; all other supposed principles and values, it would seem, are negotiable.

And crucially, this runs both ways. In recent months, as the two became cosy, Von der Leyen has embraced Meloni's hardline stance on immigration: last year, the pair travelled to Tunisia to reach an agreement on limiting migrant departures and toured the migrant reception centre on Lampedusa together. Both trips embodied a shift at the heart of the EU — that, as segments of the populist Right move towards the mainstream on foreign policy, the centre is sliding to the Right on most other matters, particularly migration.

Just like Von der Leyen, then, the EU as a whole is a creature of ideological plasticity, constantly mirroring developments on the other side of the Atlantic. Over in the US, a nation bracing for its own election, many of the liberals who once decried "[kids in cages](#)" as evidence of Trump's fascism now support bipartisan [proposals](#) to beef up border security in return for continued military aid for Ukraine. A less boring EU thus seems to be a more American one, ruled by an imperious queen taking her cues from Washington. In pursuit of a bloc that has "learned to speak the language of power", Von Der Leyen risks slowly turning a bureaucratic peace project into a prisoner of its own militarism.

Lily Lynch is a writer and journalist based in Belgrade.

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