

Will von der Leyen succeed in maintaining the balance of power in the institutions?

Blog post by Senior Associate Ana Martínez, 23 October 2019

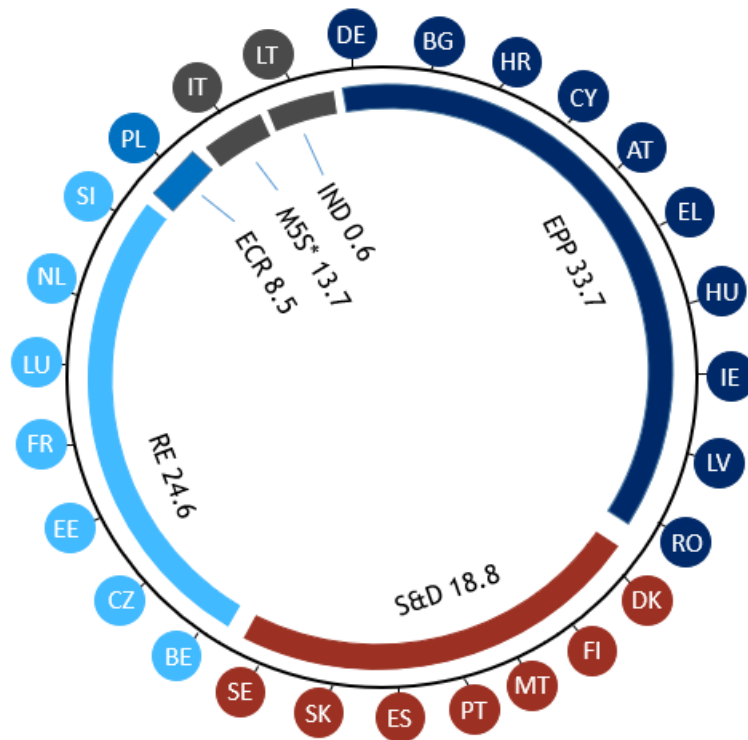
Ursula von der Leyen is a President already in some ways defined by compromise and balance. When member states were unable to agree on the principle of nominating one of the European Parliament's Spitzenkandidaten, she was chosen to fill the role. Margrethe Vestager and Frans Timmermans hold the highest positions in her team in order to broadly balance the interests of von der Leyen's European People's Party with those of the Renew Europe coalition and the S&D group. Von der Leyen has shored up her EPP backers by giving Valdis Dombrovskis - from her fellow EPP group - a third executive vice president post.

This juggling points to an important challenge for von der Leyen: managing the diverging dynamics in the EU institutions. The European elections resulted in a more fragmented European Parliament, with no EPP-S&D majority. Groups have been keen to keep their cohesion and the expanded roles and influence in the Parliament that come with it, but they have certainly become more heterogeneous. The liberal RE, for instance, encompasses France's integrationist party En Marche and Germany's Freie Demokratische Partei who have a strong streak of scepticism on integration, especially in areas such as debt mutualisation or social and labour policy such as the European unemployment insurance. Both the S&D and EPP parties are also balancing nationally shared ideological platforms with perceived tensions between national caucuses.

Party lines are therefore likely to become blurrier and majorities trickier, or at least requiring more leg work. Groups such as RE and the Greens will become increasingly relevant as the large groups become less cohesive. Meanwhile the groups von der Leyen will have to work hard to overcome all of these barriers. Her efforts so far with the Greens have not been fruitful. She has also been criticised for decisions such as categorising migration policy under 'protecting our way of life'.

The European Council will be another test for von der Leyen. The Council already reflects and often fails to manage significant divides in the EU and euro zone. Elections in Spain, Poland and Portugal, and perhaps also in Germany, will also hinder compromise on issues where national competences mean it has to take the lead among the institutions, for example on sanctions, the euro zone budget, migration, or enlargement to the Western Balkans. Von der Leyen's preference will no doubt always be compromise. The question may be if this is possible.

The European Council by political group



Source: European Council
*5 Star Movement (M5S)

Party balance in the institutions by percentage and seats

