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‘A Union that Strives for More’: Von der Leyen’s All-inclusive EU Narrative

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REVECCA PEDI AND ARETI VASMADA, SEP 5 2019

The President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (VdL) has been elected with a thin majority of only nine votes. However, “majority is majority” as she put it, and the critical question now is: what can we as European Citizens expect from VdL’s Commission? Although such a question haunts every single newly elected leader, in VdL’s case, it is even trickier for many reasons. She was nominated by the European Council as a compromise effect and was elected by the most fragmented European Parliament in the history of European integration. Therefore, the new President has to find common ground with her voters, but also with the rest of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who did not vote for her—at least the pro-European ones. Moreover, she is a German, while her predecessor, Jean Claude Juncker, and the one before him, José Manuel Barroso, came from smaller member states—as the majority of the European Commission Presidents did—and thus they were able to play the role of a mediator and an honest broker more easily. VdL has to act as a mediator and as an honest broker among all member states, between her own country and France—whose perspectives diverge when it comes to the future of European integration—and between those two leading powers in the EU and the smaller member states. Furthermore, she is the first female President of the Commission and in addition she takes up one of the top EU jobs at a critical time for the future of the Union.

To this background, our goal is to point out VdL’s Narrative about European integration. With this in mind, we draw on the work of Manners and Murray on EU Narratives (2016) and investigate VdL’s opening statement (OS) before the MEPs and the document of her political guidelines (PG) for the next European Commission. We argue that *VdL endorses an ‘all-inclusive EU’ Narrative*. We suggest that this approach might be useful to the President-elect and EU integration itself. In what follows, we first present the different EU Narratives, as introduced by Manners and Murray. Then, we look at VdL’s perspective on each one of them, in order to finally discuss her all-inclusive Narrative and its value for the EU project.

EU Narratives

Strategic Narratives matter, they shape the experience of living and confer legitimacy. Manners and Murray note that “the processes of European integration are always narrated as sense-making activities—stories people tell to make sense of their reality”. They have identified six different Narratives:

- The ‘*Nobel Narrative*’ was named after the 2012 award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU. Democracy, peace, prosperity, the EU’s “holy trinity” of values, lie at the core of this Narrative which has been coherent, popular and sustainable for the most part of EU integration. However, the ‘Nobel Narrative’ has been weakened due to the recent crises, the enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe, and also a new generation of leaders, who haven’t experienced the horror of WWII and even the sterile Cold War era and therefore take the EU’s success as a given.
- The ‘*New Narrative for Europe*’ was introduced by a group of artists, scientists, and intellectuals convened by President Barroso. Barroso’s Commission sensed that the EU integration was starting to lack a powerful Narrative. The Declaration on the ‘New Narrative’ for Europe calls for a paradigm shift, it highlights the importance of sciences, arts, of our common heritage and emphasizes the need for the EU to be not only an

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economic success, but also an effective political body. However, this approach suffers from many contradictions and lacked engagement and legitimacy.

- One of the best attempts to introduce a new Narrative for integration was the ‘*Economic Europe*’ Narrative which became the “justification for the EU as it sought to manage globalization” as Manners and Murray put it. The power of this Narrative stems from the fact that economic integration is the *raison d’être* of the EU. The creation of a single market or markets as well as the European Monetary Union has been the holy grail for both European leaders and citizens.
- The ‘*Social Europe*’ Narrative has existed as long as the ‘Economic Europe’ Narrative. According to Manners and Murray, this Narrative has faced strong opposition in the post-Cold war era and gained impetus during the recent economic crisis when there was a strong need to fight unemployment and restore social cohesion. However, this Narrative is far from being the dominant Narrative of EU integration despite some progress towards a more ‘Social Europe’.
- An idea for a ‘*Green Europe*’ accompanied by environmental decision-making at the European level emerged as a promising Narrative in the 1980s and has incrementally flourished since then. Although this Narrative has been re-emerging from time to time, it hasn’t been consolidated, among other reasons, due to the hardships that followed the economic crisis. However, the results of the recent European elections reveal that the ‘Green Europe’ Narrative holds good potential for gaining ground, as more and more European citizens are engaging with it.
- Last but not least, the ‘*Global Europe*’ Narrative reflects the growing significance of global issues for European integration as well as the EU’s role as an important actor in the international system. The ‘Global Europe’ Narrative has been vulnerable to many internal contradictions, successive crises, as well as changes in the international system itself.

Von der Leyen’s all-inclusive EU Narrative

Nobel Narrative

It seems that the ‘Nobel Narrative’ lies at the core of VdL’s convictions and vision for the EU. She refers to “a Europe of peace, a united Europe, a Europe of values” (OS). She spares no words for the founding mothers and fathers who “created something powerful out of the rubble and ashes of the world wars. Peace” (OS). Manners and Murray suggest that one of the weaknesses of the ‘Nobel Narrative’ is the disengagement of the younger generation of EU member state leaders for whom European integration is taken for granted. However, VdL seems to be directly and deeply associated with the Narrative of reconciliation, prosperity, and democracy. Born in Brussels and brought up in Germany, VdL uses her father’s words to describe the success of the Union: “We are trading with one other again and when countries trade they build up friendships, and friends do not shoot one another” (OS). Furthermore, VdL notes that “...we can count on one another both in good times and bad. Because we know that we may argue but we can make up again. Because we never forget why we entered into the Union in the first place” (OS). VdL holds the EU’s ‘holy trinity’ of peace, prosperity, and democracy in considerable respect and emphasizes the need to fight the democratic deficit, and uphold the EU’s values and the rule of law (PG). As the first female president of the European Commission, she also refers to the election of Simone Veil, the first female president of the European Parliament, and expresses her ambition to lead in the same spirit of reconciliation and unity (OS).

A Global Europe

VdL notes that the EU has an important role to play in the international system. She suggests that “the world is calling for more Europe”(OS). The President-elect argues that when she says that “some are turning towards authoritarian regimes, some are buying their global influence and creating dependencies by investing in ports and roads. And others are turning towards protectionism...” (OS). Yet, according to her, the EU responds to uncertainty and global challenges in a distinct way, namely the “European way” which supports multilateralism, fair trade and a rules-based global order. In a similar vein, she refers to the importance of the transatlantic partnership and notes that NATO remains “the cornerstone of our collective defence”(OS). Yet, she underlines the need for further integration in the defence sector, because “we have to become more European” (OS). VdL emphasizes that the EU’s approach to security and defence is comprehensive and a step by step process.

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Green Europe

VdL came up with an ambitious plan for a ‘Green Europe’. This includes her commitment to meet the Paris Agreement goals as well as the 2030 targets. She also pledges to introduce a ‘Green Deal for Europe’ in the first 100 days in office and turn parts of the EU Investment Bank into a “Climate Bank” (OS). The most ambitious and challenging guideline in her climate change agenda, though, is to make Europe the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

Economic Europe

Moreover, the ‘Economic Europe’ Narrative constitutes part of VdL’s overall Narrative. In her speech, she appears optimistic about the prospects of the European economy, after years of recession and monetary crisis, and presents some ideas in order to stimulate it (OS). Some of VdL’s expressed priorities to overcome barriers to European integration are: completing the Capital Markets Union, a plan for fair taxation of tech companies and greater support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (PG). The economy has always been a focal point for integration, and VdL appears willing to make the most of it.

Social Europe

VdL argues that “it’s the economy that serves our people” and not the other way around (OS). Thus, the President-elect’s Narrative draws on ‘Social Europe’ too. She introduces a series of policy proposals as part of the European Social Pillar, as an insurance against national and EU economic deficiencies (PG). Among her policy proposals one can find a European *Unemployment Benefit Reinsurance Scheme*, a *framework for a minimum European wage* and *measures to fight youth unemployment* (PG).

In addition, VdL devotes a special part of her social agenda to gender issues. She introduces the motto “Europe is a woman” to highlight her commitment to gender issues and policies (OS). VdL pledges to add violence against women to the list of EU crimes, achieve full gender equality in her college of Commissioners and introduce a new *European Gender Strategy* that bridges the gap in terms of payment between genders. Last but not least, she paves the way for women in leading positions (PG).

A Compromise EU Narrative?

The core of VdL’s Narrative reflects the agenda of the European People’s Party. Yet, VdL goes beyond the EPP agenda. We suggest that she has articulated an ‘EPP plus’ plan for the future of the EU. It seems that as her nomination was the outcome of a compromise, so are her political guidelines. On the one hand, as someone would have expected even from the EPP’s Spitzenkandidat, Manfred Weber, VdL supports further integration in economic terms, for example with a *Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness* for the euro area and a focus on completing the *European Banking Union* (PG). On the other hand, VdL leans towards more social policies, such as the implementation of a *minimum European wage* and the *taxation of big tech companies* (PG); measures that are highly endorsed by the Social Democrats and the Liberals.

Moreover, to attract the Greens, VdL’s guidelines include elements from the ‘Green Europe’ Narrative, that go beyond the EPP’s green agenda. She advances an effective pricing on CO₂ to incentivize emission reductions, technological solutions to low carbon mobility and a “*true energy Union*” (PG). In addition, VdL emphasized the need for a circular economy model, the introduction of a *Carbon Border Tax* to prevent carbon leakage, the extension of the *Emissions Trading System* in order to refer to the maritime sector, traffic and construction and last but not least, a *European Green Deal* in her first 100 days in office (PG).

She also adopted a synthetic approach in the field of foreign policy by supporting, for example, a substantial and strong partnership with Africa and by calling for EU member states to step up their investments in the defence sector (PG). That said, VdL has promoted the EPP proposal for “a joint Cyber Unit to speed up information sharing”, as part of the agenda for the EU’s adaptation to the new digital age, despite the objections of the Eurosceptic parties (PG).

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VdL’s ‘EPP plus’ proposals with regard to EU borders safety and migration provide a good example of her will and ambition to synthesize different positions (PG).

Can Von der Leyen’s Narrative Succeed?

VdL’s ‘all-inclusive’ Narrative reflects the circumstances under which she was nominated and elected. Yet, it also mirrors the complexities of our era and those of the EU itself. Given the complex nature of a Union of 28 member states and the levels of uncertainty in the international system, an inclusive and even fluid EU Narrative might be what we should expect rather than a paradox.

According to Manners and Murray, EU Narratives should be assessed in the light of six perspectives: structure, identity, engagement, change, (in)security and norms. To fit in with the criteria of engagement, change, and (in)security, an EU Narrative for our times has to match responses to current challenges, which are relevant to the ‘Social’, the ‘Green’ and the ‘Global’ EU Narratives. It should also match the structure, identity and norms of the EU ‘Nobel Narrative’ and that of ‘Economic Europe’. In other words, the EU’s mission remains the same. The EU is expected to act as a guarantor of peace and security, stability and prosperity, democracy and progress across the EU member states and at a global level. Yet, for the EU to fulfil its role, it has to refresh and enrich its ‘Nobel Narrative’, to fit with the challenges of our era. To preserve peace, prosperity and democracy, the EU has to respond effectively to the aftereffects of the liberal order of which the EU is a by-product and a constituent part. The EU now has to worship its ‘holy trinity’ of peace, prosperity and democracy through fighting for a more ‘Green’, more ‘Social’, and more ‘Global’ Europe.

Therefore, VdL’s ‘all-inclusive’ Narrative could increase engagement with the EU project, provide a remedy to a fragmented Union and attract youth’s interest in EU integration. In addition, it is possible that it could bring all of the pro-European forces aboard, and, if successful, it could mitigate Euroscepticism. That said, it also runs the risk of being a victim of its broadness and contradictions and lead the EU to paralysis. However, the foundations of European integration lie on the reconciliation of differences and contradictions and on creating new spaces for compromise and cooperation. To this background, an ‘all-inclusive’ Narrative is a compromise Narrative and fits well with the European project that has always proceeded through compromises.

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