

The “Leftover” Portfolio: Gender Equality at the Onset of von der Leyen’s Second Term

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Introduction

Gender equality (GE) policies depend on active advocacy (Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021), hence, their prominence on the political agenda is paramount. Against this backdrop, the agenda of the re-elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, raises important questions. The agenda for her second term creates concerns about the future of GE with regard to the European Union’s (EU) agenda, mainly as it appears to show little to no innovation in her policy priorities (von der Leyen 2024a). The president may prioritise GE as a central issue for the Commission or, like some of her predecessors, adopt a more gender-blind approach (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020).

It is evident that although the Commission President holds limited formal power, she influences the political direction of the EU. Consequently, one of her primary political functions is to serve as a policy entrepreneur (Müller 2020), making the ambitions and blind spots surrounding her agenda all the more interesting in terms of assessing the Commission’s policy outcome during her second term. The central assumption of this article is that the decision of von der Leyen to prioritise, or not, GE for the Commission will have a future impact.

This article addresses the ambiguities surrounding the role of GE by touching upon the bigger question: What can we expect from GE in von der Leyen’s second Commission (VDL II Commission)? Building on the importance of the president as an agenda-setter, the central research question is: How is GE featured in the agenda of the VDL II Commission? I employ a theory-guided descriptive analysis, which focuses on a set of key VDL II Commission documents. To identify what kind of GE policy the VDL II Commission agenda proposes, the article draws on three main goals an agenda-setter typically pursues to move an issue from the deliberation phase to the decision-making stage in any political system (Müller 2020): firstly to define the issue and refer to it on the agenda; secondly to consider the way in which it is presented; and thirdly to outline specific solutions, in this case, which instruments will be employed in promoting GE.

The article is structured as follows: first, it reviews research on von der Leyen’s leadership for GE during her first and second presidency; second, in the theoretical framework I outline GE policies and their application in the agenda; third, the methods section presents a typology of GE concepts used to analyse the agenda using document analysis. I then present a quantitative assessment of GE’s prominence on the Commission’s agenda, a qualitative evaluation of the promoted GE model and the corresponding instruments used. Finally, the discussion and con-

clusion summarize the findings and explore reasons for a shift in von der Leyen's GE agenda.

Von der Leyen's Leadership

Von der Leyen has been recognised as a capable and strategic leader, effectively exercising her leadership powers with varying impact across key policy areas (Mushaben 2025). Accordingly, she has demonstrated strong ambitions in areas such as European values, the European Green Deal, the Single Market, Digitalisation, and Europe's Geostrategic Role. She has guided the EU through critical crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, all while pursuing ambitious goals (Müller/Tömmel 2022). To push for these policy objectives, her priorities have shaped the Commission's agenda and structured the College of Commissioners to ensure their execution, achieving a successful policy performance despite occasional setbacks (Kassim 2022).

Given the complexity of GE policies as a horizontal issue open to diverse policy solutions, Commission Presidents have generally exerted significant influence on EU action, either by advancing or constraining GE policies (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020; Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021; Jacquot 2015). Von der Leyen demonstrated strong ambitions for GE from the start of her first term (Debusscher 2022). Her "Political Guidelines 2019–2024" (von der Leyen 2019) refer to gender nine times and emphasise that equality extends beyond gender, paving the way for the "Union of Equality" (UoE). This was mentioned under one of her flagship initiatives "An economy that works for people" (ibid., 8) and published within her first 100 days in office. The UoE emphasises equality as a central element of the agenda for the 2019–2024 legislature (European Commission 2020; for an outline of the UoE see Hubert/Jacquot 2025). The strategy uses a contemporary feminist concept, intersectionality, recognising its role in addressing multiple forms of discrimination. Its use sparked academic debate by introducing language that reflects more inclusive and complex views of inequality (Abels/Mushaben 2020). Yet it has been criticised for lacking analytical depth and for employing the concept in a superficial manner, with gender remaining the dominant frame of reference (d'Agostino 2024). In institutional terms, von der Leyen established the most gender-balanced College of Commissioners to date (Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021). She appointed Helena Dalli as the first Commissioner for Equality (Abels/Klöckner 2025) and created a dedicated Task Force on Equality within the Secretariat-General to coordinate initiatives across all directorates (European Commission 2019).

In 2024, von der Leyen ran for re-election and secured a second term for 2024–2029. While her first election in 2019 was portrayed as a "fundamental transformation" (Abels/Mushaben 2020, 121) for GE, the beginning of her second Commission was described as a "deep disappointment" (Gender Five Plus 2024). Significant concerns about the inadequate representation of women and marginalisation of GE, par-