

REZENSIONEN

ERRATUM

In Heft 2/2025 der *Femina Politica* waren in der von Angela Wroblewski verfassten Rezension der Studie „Multidimensionale Geschlechtergleichheiten im akademischen Mittelbau: Arbeit, Karriere, Perspektiven“ (Wiesbaden 2024) von Lisa Mense, Ulla Hendrix, Sophie König, Heike Mauer und Jennifer Niegel die Namen der Herausgeberinnen Ulla Hendrix und Jennifer Niegel falsch geschrieben. Das ist uns in der redaktionellen Arbeit nicht aufgefallen, so dass die Fehler sowohl im Inhaltsverzeichnis als auch im Titel, in der Rezension selbst und bei der bibliografischen Angabe erscheinen. Wir bitten um Entschuldigung!

Gabriele Abels, Johanna Kantola, Emanuela Lombardo, Henriette Müller (Eds.)

The European Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen: Gender, Leadership, Policies, and Crises

PETRA DEBUSSCHER

In their edited volume, *Gabriele Abels, Johanna Kantola, Emanuela Lombardo and Henriette Müller* offer the first systematic feminist analysis of the first von der Leyen Commission (2019-2024). The volume carefully bridges feminist institutionalism, leadership analysis, and EU studies to unpack how gender and equality policies have evolved – and sometimes stalled – during the first Commission presidency led by a woman. Through the lens of what the editors term “critical actorness” the book interrogates both the transformative potentials and limitations of the Commission’s commitment to gender and intersectional equality.

The von der Leyen presidency was marked by unprecedented challenges and compounding crises, prompting important questions about the Commission’s imprint on European integration and governance. While von der Leyen’s broader agenda and crisis management have been widely studied, her deliberate push for a “Union of Equality” remains understudied. Yet it marks an innovative shift in EU governance: it advances a distinct vision for Europe, sets an orientation for action, and reframes equality as central to the Union’s legitimacy. The editors stress that the historical significance of her presidency extends beyond the symbolic importance of being the first woman in this powerful role, as it symbolizes a crucial normalization of women’s presence in historically male-dominated EU leadership positions, even as the complexities of translating symbolic representation into lasting transformative policies remain significant. While von der Leyen does not identify as a feminist,

her Commission nonetheless made notable feminist interventions in practice, albeit uneven or fragmented. This volume documents the successes and difficulties of translating intersectional feminist principles into concrete policies within political institutions that often resist transformative equality.

Organized into five coherent sections, the volume begins with a theoretical introduction, adopting the conceptual framework of “critical actorness” highlighting the importance of institutional and individual agency in equality policymaking. The concept recognizes both von der Leyen and her Commission as critical actors in advocating gender and other equality policies and advances feminist institutionalist debates by foregrounding not only the actors’ agency but also the structural institutional constraints shaping their actions. The “critical actorness” framework allows to understand and critically assess, from a gender perspective, the Commission and its president’s policy entrepreneurship in equality policymaking, its impact on institutional relations and organizational structure, its policy results in terms of change or continuities, and its capacity to respond to crises.

Building on this “critical actorness” framework, the empirical chapters collectively offer an unprecedented gender analysis of the Commission’s internal dynamics and external policy responses. Part I of the volume zooms in on conceptual and biographical approaches to understand and contextualize von der Leyen’s presidency and her Commission. Its first chapter by *Agnès Hubert* and *Sophie Jacquot* frames the “Union of Equality” as a new and distinct “*political doctrine*”, strategically positioned as a normalized extension of existing EU values and treaty obligations. *Emanuela Lombardo* and *Lucrecia Rubio Grundell* offer a critical analysis of the challenging context in which the von der Leyen Commission pursues a “Union of Equality” against the background of rising anti-gender opposition, highlighting the complex gap between rhetorical commitment and practical implementation in politically polarized contexts. *Joyce Mushaben* takes a compelling deep dive into von der Leyen’s unconventional pathway to power, emphasizing her late entry into politics, her atypical personal and professional background, and the impact of her outsider status within the conservative CDU/CSU. This well-researched background explains how von der Leyen developed a leadership style characterized by bold, public-facing policy entrepreneurship rather than party-driven consensus, influencing her later approach to European leadership and equality policies. Part II investigates the gendered organization and interinstitutional dimension of the Commission as well as von der Leyen’s leadership. Notably, *Sara Connolly*, *Hussein Kassim*, *Josefinde Lynggaard*, *Andrew Thompson* and *Pierre Alayrac* contribute a comprehensive analysis of gender representation within the Commission, demonstrating that while von der Leyen’s initial College was historically gender-balanced, deeper institutional gendering persisted in the distribution of prestigious and “masculine” portfolios. Attention to how von der Leyen actively promoted women to leadership positions within the Commission, despite resistance and the structural difficulty of achieving sustained gender balance, is a strength of this book. The chapter by *Gabriele Abels* and *Johanna Kantola* explores the gender dynamics of interinsti-

tutional relations within the EU, particularly the Commission's interactions with the European Parliament and Council. The authors argue that von der Leyen exhibited "critical actorness" and "presidential leadership", shaping these relationships to advance gender equality. The analysis includes specific case studies, such as the negotiations around the pay transparency directive, illustrating how seemingly neutral interinstitutional dynamics often entail significant gendered implications.

Part III examines the six priorities set out in the Commission President's 2019 political guidelines. Chapters exploring specific policy areas – such as the Green Deal, digitalization, migration, and foreign policy – further reveal crucial tensions. *Gill Allwood* and *Annica Kronsell*, for instance, argue that the Green Deal, despite rhetorical claims of inclusivity, remains notably gender-blind.

Part IV explores how the von der Leyen and the Commission have responded to polycrisis. The chapter by *Ingeborg Tömmel* zooms in on von der Leyen's leadership in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a crisis that significantly reshaped the EU's geopolitical landscape and highlights her decisive actions and rhetorical framing aimed at strengthening European solidarity. While specific equality measures are not discussed in the context of this chapter, it demonstrates how the crisis strengthened von der Leyen's position and push for EU unity, thereby indirectly advancing her broader equality agenda through greater cohesion within EU institutions. The chapter by *Maryna Shevtsova* explores the Commission's proactive stance on LGBTIQ equality in Eastern Partnership countries, highlighting how equality principles are diplomatically promoted beyond the EU's borders.

In Part V, the concluding chapter by *Henriette Müller* and *Michael W. Bauer* introduces the concept of a "differential von der Leyen effect", capturing the asymmetry in the Commission's leadership effectiveness across different policy areas and types of crises. They compellingly argue that while von der Leyen's entrepreneurial leadership style and adept crisis management significantly strengthen her political capital, these same dynamics paradoxically also seem to undermine sustained equality mainstreaming efforts.

Overall, this volume provides an indispensable feminist review of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission, contributing to EU studies and feminist institutionalism alike. The book succeeds on three fronts: it documents a historic presidency in real time, it refreshes the conceptual toolkit of EU studies by placing gender at the centre rather than the margins, and it reminds us that equality agendas advance in fits and starts as Europe navigates ongoing and emerging crises. Its methodological rigor and conceptual innovation make it essential reading for political scientist interested in the intersections of gender, leadership, policy, and institutional power dynamics. Its core insight – that agency is path-dependent yet contingent – will outlast the current institutional cycle.

Gabriele Abels, Johanna Kantola, Emanuela Lombardo, Henriette Müller (Eds.), 2026: *The European Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen: Gender, Leadership, Policies, and Crises*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 400 S., ISBN 978-0-198-95366-1