



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Von der Leyen and the politics of appeasing the far-right



How can European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen end up in the unlikely company of leaders such as India's Narendra Modi and South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa? By becoming the face of a post-election-shock business-as-usual approach.

Granted, von der Leyen actually won her race but as French president Emanuel Macron realised, something has to give. The EU, though, is unlikely to go down that route and is all set to reconfirm von der Leyen.

Elections are supposed to give us a chance to 'throw the bums out', at least in an admittedly rather bare-bones interpretation of democracy.

With polls taking place this year in an unprecedented number of countries, involving more than half the world's population, you'd expect some house-cleaning on a grand scale.

Yet, having passed the half-way mark, it seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

## The dangers of a far-right surge

In populist- or semi-authoritarian-run countries, such as India or Hungary, that might not matter. In presumed liberal democracies, this perceived imperviousness to change fuels discontent and the **rise of populism** and extremism on both sides of the political spectre.

Whether Macron, after the European parliament election results, acted out of a realisation that the system needed to prove itself or whether it's political manoeuvring, is a moot point. At least something was done.

Other EU leaders ominously blivate on the dangers of a far-right surge but rather than confront it, they, and von der Leyen, pretend they can continue as usual and even co-opt some of its ideas wherever it suits them.

## As von der Leyen said, the centre holds, and she feels she can blithely sail into a second term as Commission president

Some will argue that the European leaders are fully within their rights. Von der Leyen and her European People's Party, EPP, after all won the elections. This in **contrast** to the BJP in India and the ANC in South Africa (Yet, Modi and Ramaphosa hanging on through coalition deals, is also democratic).

More than that, even the coalition that the European Commission relies on in parliament retained its majority, albeit much reduced.

The EPP gained but the Socialists and Democrats, S&D, lost slightly and the Liberal Renew bloc got hit hard. The Greens, also seen as a pro-European relatively centrist bloc, lost heavily as well.

Still, as von der Leyen said, the centre holds, and she feels she can blithely sail into a second term as Commission president.

## Von der Leyen has moved toward appeasing the far-right

There is a case to be made for not letting the rise of the far-right dictate the political agenda, for not panicking and carrying on. If only.

There are very few countries where the far-right has not succeeded in dominating the political agenda on its core issue, migration.

In France, Macron earlier this year pushed through a much tougher migration law, even after many of its most draconian provisions were struck off by the constitutional court.

In Denmark, the Social Democrats rule only because they too adopted a much tougher immigration platform. In the Netherlands, the centre-right moved towards Geert Wilders' anti-migration positions, only to see him

triumph in elections last year.

The same has happened on a European level, with the Commission and parliament adopting tough new migration rules and implicitly allowing such controversial practices as 'pushbacks' in the Mediterranean and elsewhere.



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Along the way, von der Leyen has in effect moved toward appeasing the far-right, rather than confronting it.

Von der Leyen's chumminess with Giorgia Meloni of the far-right Brothers of Italy, and Prime Minister of that country, quite rightly caused outrage on the left.

Now, there are even suspicions that she's delaying publication of a report critical of Italy's erosion of media freedom under Meloni. This is in a sense what it's all about.

Whereas migration policy **places** the centre parties between a rock and a hard place, that does not have to be so on all the other attendant issues that form the agenda of the far-right.

Undermining the rule of law, media freedoms and independent institutions is part and parcel of that platform. But once you start blurring the lines on migration, i.e. making the far-right's exclusionary ideas acceptable, you open the door to all the other parts of its authoritarian agenda.

Von der Leyen is not just appeasing and legitimising the far right, if she continues along this path, she's paving the way for it to take power.

## Berlusconi of Brussels

She's not operating in a vacuum. Her political home is the German, Christian conservative CDU party, which did very well in the recent European elections.

The party of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, of the *wir schaffen das*, we can do this, approach to admitting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, has now taken a strongly anti-immigration turn.

The argument that better the CDU than the far-right AfD in power after the next German elections, doesn't wash. That approach has been tried now in several countries, like Italy and the Netherlands, and the result has been a take-over by the far-right.

On a European level therefore, von der Leyen could shape up to be the Berlusconi of Brussels, albeit without the charisma.

It would be churlish not to admit that she's had to deal with several extraordinary crises and has acquitted herself reasonably well in doing so.

On COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine there can always be quibbles about her approach, but it has overall been solid, and that is no mean achievement.

**Advance of the far-right in Europe calls for inspired leadership that can call out its lies and counter its narrative**

But in terms of providing a vision for a continent that is faced with multiple difficulties, from the rise of the far-right to an aging population and declining competitiveness, she has signally been

lacking.

Many of the policies that deal with some of the bloc's biggest challenges, such as financial stability and even migration, were set in motion before she took over.

Brussels and the Commission are still seen in much of Europe as the preserve of the grey-faced bureaucrat. And in general, there are good reasons to be wary of charismatic leaders.

But the sometimes creeping, and at other times hurtling, advance of the far-right in Europe calls for inspired leadership that can call out its lies and counter its narrative.

It's doubtful von der Leyen will be the one to provide this and maybe she should make way for someone who can. Not because the far-right should now dictate the shape of the next Commission but in order to make sure it will not be able to do so in the future.