

My European President: Ursula von der Leyen

by Nathalie Tocci

It is a great privilege and an immense joy to introduce the recipient of the 2022 “Cercle d’Economia Award for European Construction”, President Ursula von der Leyen, a European, a woman and a human being that embodies the essence of what leadership means today.

Ursula von der Leyen is quintessentially European. Born in Belgium, the daughter of one of the first European civil servants, she attended the European School in Brussels, grew up in a German family and was raised bilingually in German and French. She then studied in the UK, in my own alma mater, the London School of Economics and Political Science, a period that she recalls – as any European student worthy of the name should – as one in which she “lived more than studied”.

Today Ursula von der Leyen heads the European Commission, the institution her father had served. Through her

leadership, the European project is undergoing a radical revival. Let me be clear: for well over a decade, the EU hobbled from one existential crisis to the next. From the 2005 constitutional crisis and the Eurozone crisis, to the so-called migration crisis and Brexit, the European project constantly appeared on the verge of collapsing.

Yet, it did not: as Europeans we were prepared to “do whatever it takes” to save our union, in the unforgettable words of the first recipient of the Cercle’s award, my prime minister, Mario Draghi. Yet the Union struggled to do more than survive in those years. Faced with external threats and an internal wave of nationalist and Eurosceptic populism, the Union muddled through but lost its mojo. It no longer seemed to have that innate ability to see and seize opportunity during times of crisis, to leap forward precisely as and when it fell.

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This article reproduces the speech delivered on 6 May 2022 during the Cercle d’Economia Award for European Construction held in Barcelona, Spain.

Through President von der Leyen's leadership, the Union has rediscovered its DNA once again. We have rediscovered solidarity – the magic word that lies at the core of our Union –, and the deep acknowledgment that despite our differences, we are fundamentally a community of fate. First through our response to the pandemic and now with Russia's criminal war in Ukraine, the Union has not simply survived; it has been revived in unprecedented ways.

Crises created context; leadership provided the ability to seize the opportunity. Because seizing the moment is never a foregone conclusion, quite the contrary. The pandemic threatened to tear us further apart, it may have been a crisis too many for the EU to endure. Thanks to President von der Leyen's leadership, we have not just navigated the crisis, but we have done so together, be it through the joint procurement and roll-out of vaccines, or through the historic decision embedded in Next Generation EU (NGEU) to rebound together from the economic crisis unleashed by Covid-19. Led by President von der Leyen, the EU has exited the pandemic crisis both by making a momentous step forward in European integration and by providing Europeans, especially youth, with a compelling green and digital narrative to pursue.

The war in Ukraine has galvanised further unity and resolve. Again, this is no foregone conclusion. Under President von der Leyen's leadership, the Union has veered towards unprecedented sanctions, the EU's first ever package of military assistance to

a third state, the first activation of the temporary protection mechanism for refugees and the revival of enlargement as a political project. It has done so while standing firm on principle: acting on the recognition that democracy and the rule of law are the unnegotiable values at the core of our Union.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, Ursula von der Leyen is not "just" a European leader, she is a woman as well. In an age of rupture and disruption, in an age of war, the value of the leadership of a woman like President von der Leyen is essential. Ursula von der Leyen was the first woman defence minister of Germany and the first female President of the European Commission. Under her leadership, the Bundeswehr underwent a radical transformation. She addressed the scandals head-on, she inverted the decline in German defence spending and she led the way to the historic decision to provide military assistance to the Peshmerga in their fight against *Da'esh*.

The decisions she took in those years are the precursors of what we see today. Without the groundwork she laid – organisationally, financially and above all in terms of political-strategic culture – Germany would have struggled to act on the epochal change we are living through, which requires a significant uptick in defence spending, defending Ukraine as a free and democratic country and recognising that all our defence efforts must be embedded in a European and transatlantic framework. Because Ursula von der Leyen has always been firm in this respect, being a passionate promoter of

European defence with an unwavering commitment of the existential value of NATO, seeing European defence and the defence of Europe as two sides of the same coin. It is that female capacity – which naturally men too can have – of embracing contradiction by reconciling firmness with flexibility, resoluteness with reflexivity, that our Europe, in the agony of war, so dramatically needs. It is the very female ability to listen, admit mistakes, apologise and change course, showing empathy and understanding, that true leadership requires. Rarely have we seen these qualities on such elegant display as when President von der Leyen apologised for the Union's initial silence towards countries on the frontline of the first wave of Covid-19 like my own, signalling its determination to decisively change course.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Ursula von der Leyen is a profoundly human leader. A mother of seven, she entered politics in her forties, and dedicated the first decade of her political career to social issues. Known as the social conscience of her party, the CDU, during her time as minister of family affairs and youth, and then labour and social affairs minister, von der Leyen was a steadfast defender of civil rights, advocating for women quotas in boards, supporting gay marriage and promoting the integration of migrants in the labour market.

Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot claim to know Ursula von der Leyen well, having had the privilege of meeting her in person only a few times over the last years. Yet I watched, like I suppose many of you, the video that went viral of

President von der Leyen's visit to Bucha in Ukraine a few weeks ago. I watched that video once, and then I watched it again and again. I saw the shock and the shame, the anger and the pain in her eyes. I saw a leader, a woman and a human being whose expression was worth more than a million words. Amidst the atrocity of war, face-to-face with wounds that this continent had not known since the second world war, in the darkest hour, I felt proud, proud that Ursula von der Leyen is my President.

6 May 2022

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