

THE GUARDIAN OF EU'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Europe, European Union (EU) and India

Illustration:r. rajesh

In the second week of April, soon after the Istanbul peace talks between Ukraine and Russia broke down amid reports of the 'Bucha massacre' — an alleged war crime involving abuse and killing of Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces — European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (63) became one of the first European leaders to visit the Ukrainian city. After seeing the bodies exhumed from a mass grave, she condemned "Russian cruelty" and vowed to speed up Ukraine's membership of the EU — part of a long pattern of visits, statements and tweets through which she has gradually positioned herself as the preeminent guardian of Europe's strategic autonomy in the face of Russian geopolitical overreach.

On May 4, she proposed a phase-out of all Russian crude oil imports within six months and of refined petroleum products by the end of the year. It is the EU's toughest measure yet against Russia. The objective here is not merely to stop the flow of Russian oil into Europe but goes much farther — to prevent Russia from selling the oil meant for Europe to other, non-European markets.

As Ms. von der Leyen elaborated in her address to European legislators, the new ban would also prohibit any firm with a base in the EU from offering "technical assistance, brokering services, financing or financial assistance... transport, including ship-to-ship transfers, to third countries" for crude and petroleum products that originate in Russia. Financing, insurance and shipping of global oil is mostly controlled by European firms. So if these measures — which require the consent of all the 27 member states — get passed, they could throttle Russian attempts to reroute its crude to other markets in Asia.

Against a background of Russia 'weaponising' Europe's dependence on its energy supplies, Ms. von der Leyen's initiative seeks to turn the tables by 'weaponising' Russian dependence on oil revenues. The move is seen as a befitting counter to Russia cutting off gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria, and with her proposal, Ms. von der Leyen may have stolen the thunder from U.S./NATO in retaliatory measures against Russia. This is unusual.

Of the four major stakeholders in the conflict — Russia, Ukraine, the U.S./NATO, and the EU — Russia and Ukraine have found high voltage personifications in Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky, respectively. Popular discourse is replete with parallels likening Mr. Putin to Hitler and Mr. Zelensky's bravado to Winston Churchill's wartime leadership. U.S. President Joe Biden, many say, lacks the charisma to embody the West's crusade in defense of the "rules-based international order". It would now appear that in Ms. von der Leyen, Europe has found a personable wartime chief who leads from the front and is not afraid to venture into unknown territory. But then, as her critics never tire of pointing out, there is also no getting away from the fact that she is, all said and done, an unelected functionary of the EU.

The President of the EC is not directly elected by EU citizens or their representatives (Members of European Parliament) but nominated by the European Council and approved by the European Parliament. In the case of Ms. von der Leyen, it has been widely reported that her appointment, in July 2019, was the outcome of a 'backroom deal' between the heavyweights of the European Council, France and Germany, brokered by Donald Tusk, the then European Council President. When she eventually took charge as the EC's first ever woman President on December 1, 2019, it was a triumph that not many would have expected, given her political trajectory up to that

point.

Early years

In one sense, it could be said that Ms. von der Leyen was born for her current job. She, after all, grew up in Brussels, the seat of the EU bureaucracy, and attended the elite European School. Her father, Ernst Albrecht, was himself a European Commission civil servant who would go on to have a successful political career in Germany, serving as Minister President of Lower Saxony province. But Ms. von der Leyen, who studied economics at the London School of Economics before switching to medicine, seems to have followed her instincts rather than work strictly toward pre-decided career goals.

After getting a PhD in medicine in 1991, she gave up her medical career and followed her husband — a physician hailing from an old aristocratic family of silk merchants — to Stanford where he had joined as a faculty. In America, she became a full-time housewife. In her case, the term ‘full-time housewife’ merits elaboration: she became a mother of seven children. Germany’s fertility rate, incidentally, is 1.54 and is considered a problem.

Ms. Von der Leyen returned to Hanover in Germany in 1996. She began to teach and got involved in local politics. Following her father, she became a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and kick-started her political career by getting elected to the Parliament of Lower Saxony in 2003.

Once she became the Federal Minister of Youth and Family Affairs in Angela Merkel’s Cabinet in 2005, her political graph rose steadily. Her unstinting loyalty to Ms. Merkel earned her the deputy leadership of the CDU in 2010, and the Defence portfolio in 2013. This was a phase when she was tipped to succeed Ms. Merkel as Germany’s Chancellor, and if not that, then take charge as NATO Secretary General.

‘Poisoned chalice’

In German politics, however, the defence portfolio is considered a ‘poisoned chalice’ and Ms. von der Leyen would discover why. She failed to establish rapport with the influencers in the male-dominated military ecosystem. Her tenure was wracked by allegations of corruption and nepotism in the handing out of lucrative contracts to consultants, one of whom was McKinsey, which happened to be the employer of one of her sons. It is widely acknowledged that the battle-readiness of the Bundeswehr deteriorated under her tenure.

Procurement scandals apart, in 2015, German researchers claimed that her doctoral thesis had 43.5% plagiarised content. When the university investigated the allegations, it found that there was indeed plagiarism but let her off the hook on the grounds that intention to deceive could not be proven. These scandals, and her unremarkable performance as Defence Minister, caused a dip in her popularity, and by the time Ms. Merkel announced, in late 2018, her decision not to contest another term, Ms. von der Leyen had dropped out of contention.

In early 2019, when her political career in Germany appeared to be heading nowhere, came the call to head the EC. Interestingly, by then, Ms. von der Leyen’s unpopularity was such that when the European Parliament voted to approve her nomination, Germany abstained — and it was the only country to do so. But her candidature got confirmed by a narrow margin (384 of 747 votes, with 374 needed).

Her return to Brussels is a kind of homecoming for the multilingual (she is fluent in French, German and English) daughter of an EC bureaucrat. As the father traced a path from the EU

bureaucracy in Brussels to a political career in Germany, the daughter seems to have traversed the same path in reverse — from a political career in Germany to a seat at the table among the EU's power brokers.

For now, with the EU looking to outwit, if not oust, the decidedly macho figure in charge at the Kremlin, it is increasingly Ms. von der Leyen's bold pronouncements that are setting the 'party line' across Europe. Wanting to eliminate Europe's energy dependence on Russia goes hand-in-hand with her stated position that, strangely enough, isn't too different from what Mr. Putin wants: not peace but victory. As she tweeted after proposing the ban on Russian crude, "We want Ukraine to win this war."

In Focus

Against a background of Russia 'weaponising' Europe's dependence on its energy supplies, the EU now seeks to 'weaponise' Russian dependence on oil revenues

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