German minister of defence to head European Commission

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After weeks of wrangling, European leaders agreed on Tuesday to nominate a new European Union leadership.

The new head of the EU Commission will be the current German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen. The European Central Bank (ECB) will be headed by the current director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde of France. The President of the European Council will be Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel and the new EU High Representative, the bloc's chief diplomat, will be Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell.

The President of the Commission still needs to be ratified by the European Parliament, where there is considerable resistance to von der Leyen. As the 751 European parliamentarians from 28 member states vote by secret ballot, the proposal could still fail in the parliament.

Yesterday, however, the European Parliament elected Italian David Sassoli as its new president and thus filled the fifth top job of the EU with a Social Democrat, as proposed by the heads of government. Von der Leyen and Lagarde come from the conservative camp, Michel is a Liberal and Borrell is a Social Democrat.

The proposal of the heads of state and government is a clear political signal. It stands for the expansion of the EU into a military superpower under German-French domination.

The dispute over the new leadership of the EU has shown how deep the contradictions, rifts and conflicts currently are in the EU. They run between North and South, East and West, between different economic and foreign policy interests and parties. They are so sharp that compromise and unanimous solutions seem increasingly impossible.

On June 20-21, the regular EU summit in Romania failed to agree on a successor to Jean-Claude Juncker as head of the European Commission. Chancellor Angela Merkel had insisted on the German Manfred Weber, who was the lead candidate of the conservative European People's Party (EPP) for the European elections, while French President Emmanuel Macron strictly rejected Weber.

When it became apparent that Weber could not command a majority among either the heads of state and government or the European Parliament, Council President Donald Tusk drafted a new proposal, in consultation with Merkel and Macron on the side-lines of the G20 summit in Osaka. The new lead candidate for President of the Commission was to be the Dutch Social Democrat, Frans Timmermans, and the EPP should be given the posts of President of the Parliament and the EU High Representative. The Council presidency would go to a liberal.

But this proposal failed at a special EU summit on June 30 due to the fierce resistance of the East Europeans. They will not forgive Timmermans, who as EU Commissioner made a legal ruling against Poland and Hungary. Despite 19 hours of negotiations, which lasted until the morning hours of Monday, no solution seemed in sight. The summit was postponed to Tuesday.

The surprise suggestion that Ursula von der Leyen should be appointed Commission President was then described by many commentators as a "miracle." All the heads of government could unite on von der Leyen because, more than anyone else, she stands for the arming of the European Union to become a military power that can oppose both the USA and China.

The 60-year-old doctor and mother of seven is one of the most ambitious and ruthless politicians in Germany. Her father, Ernst Albrecht, was state premier of Lower

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Saxony for 14 years. Von der Leyen herself has been a member of the Merkel government since 2005, first as family minister, then as labour minister and since December 2013 as minister of defence.

Since she took over the defence portfolio, German military spending has risen from 30 to 45 million euros. She enjoys good links with NATO and was a leading figure in pushing the alliance's military march to the border with Russia. That is why she also enjoys the support of the Eastern European governments. At the same time, she is pushing forward the project of a European army, which is also supported by Macron, and is involved in the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) mission in the Central African Republic and Mali, where Germany works closely with French troops.

According to several reports, von der Leyen was proposed for the Commission chairmanship by Macron and not Merkel. For the French president, it was particularly important to secure the ECB leadership for France. The German candidate to head the ECB, Jens Weidmann, president of the Deutsche Bundesbank, is a strict supporter of a restrictive monetary policy. Macron wanted to prevent this at all costs.

As head of the IMF, Christine Lagarde is also responsible for austerity programs. As a member of the so-called troika, the IMF has worked on all the austerity dictates that have ruined the Greek people. Lagarde had also proposed a debt reduction for the heavily indebted country, which was strictly rejected in Berlin.

Prior to joining the IMF in 2011, Lagarde spent four years as French Finance Minister in the conservative government of François Fillon. She was later condemned for authorizing 403 million euros in compensation to the dubious businessman Bernard Tapie.

The proposal of the heads of state and government would considerably strengthen the predominance of Germany and France in the EU. If von der Leyen is confirmed by the European Parliament, she would be the first German Commission chair since Walter Hallstein 52 years ago.

Charles Michel, who is to become Council President, is also considered a confidant of Emmanuel Macron. Like Macron's party La République en Marche, he too belongs to the liberal grouping in the European parliament. As Belgian Prime Minister, Michel had been in coalition with the nationalist New Flemish Alliance. He is therefore credited with working more closely with far-right parties such as the Italian Lega, which significantly increased their weight in the European elections.

The future EU High Representative Josep Borrell looks back on a long career in the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). From 2004 to 2007, he was President of the European Parliament. A year ago, the newly installed Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez had appointed him Spanish Foreign Minister. Borrell is a strict opponent of Catalonia's independence, the region of his birth.

The slate proposed by the European heads of state and government means a clear shift to the right, towards militarism and stronger German-French supremacy in Europe. It will not resolve the conflicts within the EU but will further aggravate them. This applies not only to the Eastern European member states, which are no longer represented at all in the EU's leading offices, but also to the relationship between the Western European powers.

For example, the conservative media in Germany expressed outraged at the nomination of Lagarde. *Die Welt* commented, "With the nomination of Lagarde, EU governments have missed their last chance of returning to the Stability Union." Like today's ECB chief Mario Draghi, she stands "for a course that benefits debtor rather than creditor nations."

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