

The “Leftover” Portfolio: Gender Equality at the Onset of von der Leyen’s Second Term

ALBA MARÍA KUGELMEIER LÓPEZ

Introduction

Gender equality (GE) policies depend on active advocacy (Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021), hence, their prominence on the political agenda is paramount. Against this backdrop, the agenda of the re-elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, raises important questions. The agenda for her second term creates concerns about the future of GE with regard to the European Union’s (EU) agenda, mainly as it appears to show little to no innovation in her policy priorities (von der Leyen 2024a). The president may prioritise GE as a central issue for the Commission or, like some of her predecessors, adopt a more gender-blind approach (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020).

It is evident that although the Commission President holds limited formal power, she influences the political direction of the EU. Consequently, one of her primary political functions is to serve as a policy entrepreneur (Müller 2020), making the ambitions and blind spots surrounding her agenda all the more interesting in terms of assessing the Commission’s policy outcome during her second term. The central assumption of this article is that the decision of von der Leyen to prioritise, or not, GE for the Commission will have a future impact.

This article addresses the ambiguities surrounding the role of GE by touching upon the bigger question: What can we expect from GE in von der Leyen’s second Commission (VDL II Commission)? Building on the importance of the president as an agenda-setter, the central research question is: How is GE featured in the agenda of the VDL II Commission? I employ a theory-guided descriptive analysis, which focuses on a set of key VDL II Commission documents. To identify what kind of GE policy the VDL II Commission agenda proposes, the article draws on three main goals an agenda-setter typically pursues to move an issue from the deliberation phase to the decision-making stage in any political system (Müller 2020): firstly to define the issue and refer to it on the agenda; secondly to consider the way in which it is presented; and thirdly to outline specific solutions, in this case, which instruments will be employed in promoting GE.

The article is structured as follows: first, it reviews research on von der Leyen’s leadership for GE during her first and second presidency; second, in the theoretical framework I outline GE policies and their application in the agenda; third, the methods section presents a typology of GE concepts used to analyse the agenda using document analysis. I then present a quantitative assessment of GE’s prominence on the Commission’s agenda, a qualitative evaluation of the promoted GE model and the corresponding instruments used. Finally, the discussion and con-

clusion summarize the findings and explore reasons for a shift in von der Leyen's GE agenda.

Von der Leyen's Leadership

Von der Leyen has been recognised as a capable and strategic leader, effectively exercising her leadership powers with varying impact across key policy areas (Mushaben 2025). Accordingly, she has demonstrated strong ambitions in areas such as European values, the European Green Deal, the Single Market, Digitalisation, and Europe's Geostrategic Role. She has guided the EU through critical crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, all while pursuing ambitious goals (Müller/Tömmel 2022). To push for these policy objectives, her priorities have shaped the Commission's agenda and structured the College of Commissioners to ensure their execution, achieving a successful policy performance despite occasional setbacks (Kassim 2022).

Given the complexity of GE policies as a horizontal issue open to diverse policy solutions, Commission Presidents have generally exerted significant influence on EU action, either by advancing or constraining GE policies (Ahrens/van der Vleuten 2020; Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021; Jacquot 2015). Von der Leyen demonstrated strong ambitions for GE from the start of her first term (Debusscher 2022). Her "Political Guidelines 2019–2024" (von der Leyen 2019) refer to gender nine times and emphasise that equality extends beyond gender, paving the way for the "Union of Equality" (UoE). This was mentioned under one of her flagship initiatives "An economy that works for people" (ibid., 8) and published within her first 100 days in office. The UoE emphasises equality as a central element of the agenda for the 2019–2024 legislature (European Commission 2020; for an outline of the UoE see Hubert/Jacquot 2025). The strategy uses a contemporary feminist concept, intersectionality, recognising its role in addressing multiple forms of discrimination. Its use sparked academic debate by introducing language that reflects more inclusive and complex views of inequality (Abels/Mushaben 2020). Yet it has been criticised for lacking analytical depth and for employing the concept in a superficial manner, with gender remaining the dominant frame of reference (d'Agostino 2024). In institutional terms, von der Leyen established the most gender-balanced College of Commissioners to date (Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021). She appointed Helena Dalli as the first Commissioner for Equality (Abels/Klöckner 2025) and created a dedicated Task Force on Equality within the Secretariat-General to coordinate initiatives across all directorates (European Commission 2019).

In 2024, von der Leyen ran for re-election and secured a second term for 2024–2029. While her first election in 2019 was portrayed as a "fundamental transformation" (Abels/Mushaben 2020, 121) for GE, the beginning of her second Commission was described as a "deep disappointment" (Gender Five Plus 2024). Significant concerns about the inadequate representation of women and marginalisation of GE, par-

ticularly compared to her first term, were raised (Gender Five Plus 2024). Despite promising a new Commissioner for Equality, GE now ranks third in the portfolio of Commissioner Hadja Lahbib, behind Preparedness and Crisis Management. In her speech to the newly elected and now more right-leaning European Parliament, von der Leyen focused solely on women's rights, neglecting broader gender issues and emphasising the priority of the Commission in terms of competitiveness and the geostrategic responsibility (von der Leyen 2024b).

Although the Commission holds wide-ranging powers, including the quasi-monopoly on the proposal of legislation and, the political leadership role of its president has long remained constrained by institutional limitations (Müller 2020). Nevertheless, scholars have increasingly pointed to a trend toward EU “presidentialisation” since the Barroso presidency (Abels/Klöckner 2025; Kassim et al. 2017). This shift is reflected in the Commission's growing role as a policy entrepreneur and agenda-setter. Demonstrating political leadership as a strong leader (Müller 2020) is possible if the Commission President effectively navigates political opportunities and institutional structures. A strong leader must generate and expand resources, as the role involves more than exercising authority, demanding proactive engagement and strategic decision-making (Müller 2020; Tömmel 2013). One key opportunity for presidents to showcase leadership is via strategically setting the European agenda (Kassim et al. 2017). Agenda-setting refers to deliberate political actions in which specific political issues are chosen to receive focused attention, enforcing a pre-defined goal and pushing the issue further in the policymaking phase.

As a strong leader, von der Leyen's agenda will be indicative of the policies promoted during her current mandate. Gender perspectives in EU politics are volatile, their prominence shifting depending on the influence of actors, particularly the Commission President, acting within institutional power dynamics, shaping the importance of GE in policymaking. Given the 2024 EU elections resulted in a more centre-right Parliament, it is crucial to assess the president's agenda to understand her intended direction.

Conceptualising Gender Equality

To pinpoint *if* and *how* GE is framed, we need concepts to classify policy frames and, correspondingly, to evaluate the potential of frames for future policies. I use five different definitions to operationalise theory-based categories. Drawing on the work of Ahrens and Kantola (2025), Hartlapp, Müller and Tömmel (2021), Jacquot (2015) and Verloo (2005) GE can be conceptualised in five different ways:

- **Equal Treatment:** GE means equal access, and before the law, men and women are formally equal. The aim of GE is to correct existing inequalities through legislation and to hold individual citizens responsible for using their formal equal rights, with the male norm as the standard.

- **Equal Opportunities:** All men and women are provided with the same opportunities, which result in equality of outcome to counterbalance unequal starting positions. GE aims to reduce women's disadvantages, particularly in relation to the labour market. It focuses on ensuring equal access for women to public and private life through compensatory policies such as positive action or positive discrimination.
- **Equal Impact:** Men and women achieve the same societal status. The focus is on creating equality in policy design and formulation, taking into consideration societal structures in relation to all policies. GE aims to transform societal structures that reinforce gender inequalities, expanding the promotion of equality to areas beyond employment.
- **Anti-Discrimination:** GE means the absence of discrimination (between men and women). Gender differences are framed in a way that creates marginalised or minority groups. They are treated unequally to mainstream groups and as such are in need of protection from discrimination.
- **Intersectionality:** GE aims to eliminate systems of inequality and address the interconnected social categories in which people live. Intersectionality refers to various forms of discrimination, acknowledging that, for example, women are a diverse group. They may experience multiple, overlapping layers of discrimination based on factors such as race, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation or migration status.

The Commission has referred to all five categories in the past (European Commission 2020; Hartlapp/Müller/Tömmel 2021; Jacquot 2015). Certain policy instruments are more closely aligned with specific concepts, both in practice and, partly, conceptually. For instance, defining GE as equal treatment is closely linked to legislation, notably eliminating laws that create unequal treatment. While equal opportunities echo part of this, they are, in practice, often promoted by compensatory interventions for women such as EU action programmes. Equal impact, in contrast, is directed at policy outcomes. To alleviate the different living conditions, the policies do not necessarily intervene in people's lives, rather, the policy focus shifts horizontally, influencing how legislative and interventive public actions are formulated. Similarly, framing GE as anti-discrimination aims for horizontal mainstreaming in policy programmes and legislation. Gender inequalities are primarily tackled by updating previous commitments and addressing implementation gaps. Finally, intersectionality demands policies that go beyond binary approaches. It promotes mainstreaming across policy design and includes action programmes, technical support (for example, awareness-raising, monitoring), and funding through initiatives like Horizon Europe's 2023-2025 Work Programme.

Methodology: Document Selection and Operationalisation

The study employs a qualitative content analysis of 42 key documents published between 18 July 2024 and 11 February 2025. The selection of the following four types of documents is based on the fact that von der Leyen holds political responsibility for their content. Additionally, these documents define the political agenda of the Commission to the other EU institutions and the public. Data were retrieved from the Commission website, all publicly available online in the Commission repository.

- The “Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029” (von der Leyen 2024a) were published on 18 July 2024, while von der Leyen was still the presidential candidate. She presented her guidelines to the European Parliament, which had to vote on the candidate.
- Political Portfolio definition for incoming Commissioners: the mission letters (see list online European Commission 2024) for the 26 candidates to become Commissioners (before confirmation by the European Parliament) are issued by the Commission President. They assign the tasks and a division of responsibilities, as well as priorities (published on 17 September 2024)
- Commission organisation and portfolio cooperation: Von der Leyen defined 14 Commissioners’ Project Groups (see list online European Commission 2025a). They indicate how the Commission President wants Commissioners to intersect their portfolios and collaborate on specific priorities (documents were released on 7 January 2025)
- Annual Commission Agenda: The Work Programme 2025 was published on 11 February 2025 (European Commission 2025b). It offers a more detailed legislative and policy agenda, thus substantiating the broader guidelines.

For the analysis, I define indicators for key terminology and contextual indicators derived from the outlined theoretical concepts. To this end, I have coded the documents based on a predefined list of keywords and phrases operationalising the core understanding of GE. Only issues relating to gender concerns in one way or another were coded; generic objectives, such as social cohesion, were not included. Actual policies can refer to multiple GE definitions. For such instances, I have coded the agenda reference twice. These overlaps will be discussed in the comparative discussion as they bear specific insights about the overall understanding of GE in the VDL II Commission and its agenda.

Analysis

The empirical section is structured as follows: (1) In a quantitative analysis across all documents, I identify where GE is defined, addressed as an agenda issue, or not traceable; (2) based on the theoretically explicated five definitions and codes derived

(operationalisation), the number of different types of GE is measured; and (3) to qualitatively measure the relevance of the agenda items, the specific policy instruments proposed are identified for each mention of GE.

Table 1 demonstrates the conceptualisations found in von der Leyen’s agenda, the sources where they were found, and the instruments they entail.

Table 1: Concepts, Quantities, and Instruments Used in Ursula von der Leyen’s Agenda for her Second Term

GE Concepts	Quantity	Policy Instruments
Equal Treatment	Mission letter: Preparedness and Crisis Management/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roadmap for Women’s Rights
	Political Guidelines 2024-2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roadmap for Women’s Rights• New Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025
	Commission Work Programme 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roadmap for Women’s Rights
Equal Opportunities	Mission letter: Mediterranean	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demography Toolbox
	Mission letter: International Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referring to Gender Action Plan III (2020)
	Commission Work Programme 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roadmap for Women’s Rights
	Mission letter: Preparedness and Crisis Management/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025
	Political Guidelines 2024-2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 * No concrete initiative• STEM Education Strategic Plan• New Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025
Gender Equality	Mission letter: International Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referring to Gender Action Plan III (2020)
	Mission letter: Preparedness and Crisis Management/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025• Implementation of the Istanbul Convention• Technical assistance: Monitoring and Reporting
	Political Guidelines 2024-2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025• Strengthen daily work to strive for gender equality (No concrete initiative)

GE Concepts	Quantity	Policy Instruments
Anti-Discrimination	Mission letter: People, Skills and Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No concrete initiative. Reference to the Union of Equality• New EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the new European Affordable Housing Plan
	Mission letter: Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action plan against cyberbullying
	Mission letter: Internal Affairs and Migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implementation and update of EU Strategy on combating anti-semitism and fostering Jewish life and update of the Anti-Racism Strategy
	Mission letter: Preparedness and Crisis Management/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Renewed LGBTIQ Equality Strategy for post-2025• Renewed Anti-Racism Strategy• Equality Mainstreaming• Implementation of EU Strategic Framework for Roma equality• Implementation of Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability• Action plan against cyberbullying
	Commission Work Programme 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updated strategy on LGBTIQ equality and new anti-racism strategy
	Political Guidelines 2024-2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updated strategy on LGBTIQ equality and new anti-racism strategy
Intersectionality	Mission letter: Preparedness and Crisis Management/Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safeguarding the rights of persons belonging to minorities (No concrete initiative)
	Political Guidelines 2024-2029	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appointing a commissioner (No concrete initiative)
	Commission Work Programme 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updated strategy on LGBTIQ equality and g a new anti-racism strategy

Source: Compiled by the author based on von der Leyen 2024; European Commission, 2024, 2025a/b.

Note: Some instruments appear in two conceptualisations with the same document type. This is because several conceptualisations appear with the description of one instrument.

Quantity of GE: Identification and Tracking Across Documents

In total, only eight out of 42 documents address GE in some form and it is rarely explicitly mentioned, i.e., only five times. Notably, intersectionality or gender mainstreaming, key terms in the first von der Leyen GE approach, are missing.

In the *Political Guidelines 2024-2029*, most references to GE explicitly and implicitly are found in the chapter “Supporting people, strengthening our societies and our social model” (von der Leyen 2024a, 18) under the subsection “A Union of Equality” (ibid., 20) followed by individual mentions under “Tackling the skills and labour gaps” (ibid., 12). Published and upcoming programmes for GE are mentioned. The presidential-candidate promises to appoint a Commissioner of Equality again. As outlined above, the promise was unfulfilled; Equality falls behind Preparedness and Crisis Management in Commissioner Hadja Lahbib’s portfolio.

While the introductory sections of all 26 mission letters to the Commissioners made general mention of gender balance for the Commissioner cabinets, only six went on to refer to GE in some form. The one to Lahbib explicitly mentions GE twice, with most GE-related content under “A Union of Equality” (von der Leyen 2024c, 7). Other portfolios which address GE include: Mediterranean (von der Leyen 2024d); People, Skills and Preparedness (von der Leyen 2024e); Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy (von der Leyen 2024f); Internal Affairs and Migration (von der Leyen 2024g); and International Partnerships (von der Leyen 2024h). Two of these – People, Skills and Preparedness (von der Leyen 2024e), and Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy (von der Leyen 2024f) – are held by Commissioners in higher-ranked positions within the College of Commissioners, namely as executive vice-presidents. Interestingly, none of the other Commissioners’ portfolios reference collaboration with Commissioner Lahbib on issues included in their portfolios. As a rule, Commissioner Lahbib works under the guidance of the executive vice-president for People, Skills and Preparedness (von der Leyen 2024c). A Task Force on Equality supports her work, which is, however, no longer located in the Secretariate-General (see interview with Agnès Hubert in this issue).

None of the documents on the *Commissioners’ Project Groups* makes any reference to GE or mainstreaming. Instead, they focus on topics such as the green transition, digitalisation, economic security, defence, and social transitions.

The *Commission Work Programme 2025* addresses GE explicitly on one occasion; in addition, mainstreaming equality appears once. It includes two paragraphs under the section “Protecting our democracy, upholding our values” (European Commission 2025b, 9) addressing GE issues in general. The connection between upholding democracy and GE is visible under the same headline in its annexes, where three key policy initiatives for 2025 are outlined: the “Roadmap for Women’s Rights” (non-legislative, Q1/2025; see analysis by Lange et al. in this issue), “New Equality Strategies for LGBTIQ” (non-legislative, Q4/2025), and Anti-Racism (non-legislative, Q4/2025).

Measurement of GE Types: Operationalisation of Five Theoretical Definitions

The main conceptualisations of GE identified in the documents are equal opportunities and anti-discrimination, while equal treatment and intersectionality are used least. As intersectionality is not explicitly named throughout the agenda, it is primarily captured in phrases such as “equality for all and equality in all of its senses” (von der Leyen 2024c, 7). While equal impact is mentioned more often than intersectionality, it is often mentioned in connection with the principles of equal opportunities. Although the *Political Guidelines* (von der Leyen 2024a) show a variety of GE concepts, they primarily focus on equal opportunities. They frequently address women’s participation in the labour market, the empowerment of women, and family-related issues:

We will look at increasing participation in the labour market, especially by women and young people, reducing regional disparities so people can stay in their home regions, and supporting young parents for a healthy work life balance. (von der Leyen 2024a, 19)

Equal treatment is mentioned twice in the *Political Guidelines* (von der Leyen 2024a): once as part of a plan to strengthen women’s rights across the board, and again in relation to a “Roadmap for Women’s Rights”, which was presented on the International Women’s Day 2025. Equal impact is linked to the fight against gender-based violence. Anti-discrimination efforts in this document focus on combating racism and advocating for LGBTIQ rights. The aim of the *Political Guidelines* was to present von der Leyen as a strong political leader and an ambitious candidate for the presidential office. Using her agenda-setting powers, von der Leyen’s second-term priorities, competitiveness and geostrategic responsibility (von der Leyen 2024a) make no mention of GE and key initiatives, such as the UoE.

The *mission letters* to the Commissioners for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy (von der Leyen 2024f), for People, Skills and Preparedness (von der Leyen 2024e), and for Internal Affairs and Migration (von der Leyen 2024g) primarily conceptualise GE as an element of an anti-discrimination agenda. Including the two mission letters from executive vice-presidents, the mission letters do not reference equality for women or use terms like “gender” or the concepts of equal impact or intersectionality. For example:

We must reunite our society through education, supporting young people and building on the things we have in common. This is why our continued work on building a Union of equality and break down the barriers and the discrimination that too many people encounter on a daily basis. I would like you to guide the work on this to create a fairer society and social model and ensure that Europe can draw on all of its talent and potential. (von der Leyen 2024e, 5)

The *Mission Letter* to Lahbib (von der Leyen 2024c) incorporates all the conceptualisations of GE, primarily focusing on anti-discrimination and equal impact. This

mission letter goes beyond a narrow focus on women, addressing broader equality issues and promoting GE in various areas. The *Mission Letter* for International Partnerships (von der Leyen 2024h) and the Mediterranean (von der Leyen 2024d) mainly emphasise equal opportunities. However, the International Partnerships letter also hints at equal impact by mentioning gender:

As women and girls play a key role in development, you should ensure that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls continue to be a top priority in our international cooperation and development policies, in line with the Gender Action Plan III. (von der Leyen 2024h, 6)

The *Commission Work Programme 2025* includes all the concepts of GE, yet in relatively short segments, explicitly naming terms such as “gender”, “women”, “intersecting discrimination forms”, and “women’s rights”. The references to GE are dispersed across two paragraphs in the document, highlighting the Commission’s focus on the issue, yet they tend to be brief and general. Compared to other agenda issues, GE is addressed more comprehensively within a maximum of three instruments, unifying all the GE concepts.

Qualitative Assessment of Policy Instruments: Relevance of GE Agenda Items

The *Political Guidelines* (von der Leyen 2024a) outline several instruments for promoting GE. To strengthen women’s rights, the Commission announces a Roadmap that will help to prepare a new GE Strategy. The Gender Equality Strategy for the post-2025 period aims to strengthen women’s rights across the EU, combat gender-based violence, and empower women in the labour market and politics. Equal opportunities is reflected in initiatives such as a STEM Education Strategy Plan, while simultaneously, anti-discrimination and LGBTIQ equality are addressed through two new strategies. Intersectionality is only mentioned indirectly by referring to the Commissioner for Equality. Other parts of the document discuss GE but do not propose concrete instruments.

The *Mission Letter* to Commissioner Lahbib (von der Leyen 2024c) includes most of the instruments for GE with eleven concrete initiatives: an action plan on cyberbullying; data collection; the Istanbul Convention; the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability; the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality; a new Anti-Racism Strategy; the renewed LGBTIQ Equality Strategy; the new GE Strategy; a Road Map for Women’s Rights; and mainstreaming equality considerations. The mission letter for the Mediterranean (von der Leyen 2024d) connects women’s employment with implementing a Demography toolbox; the mission letters for International Partnerships (von der Leyen 2024h) refers to GE and the empowerment of women and girls, which should follow the Gender Action Plan III, which was introduced in 2020. The mission letter for Internal Affairs and Migration (von der Leyen 2024g) refers to the EU

strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life and to an update for the Anti-Racism Strategy due to anti-Muslim hatred. Finally, the mission letter for Tech Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy (von der Leyen 2024f) refers to an action plan against cyberbullying, and the mission letter for People, Skills, and Preparedness (von der Leyen 2024e) refers to the UoE in an unspecific way with no instruments, but it includes different instruments under the European Pillar of Social Rights, such as the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. In addition to calls in the mission letters for the renewal of policy programmes, such as the Commission’s White and Green Papers, the implementation of instruments is explicitly highlighted. Specifically, the mission letter to Commissioner Lahbib emphasises the need to implement the Istanbul Convention, the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Simultaneously, the Commissioner for Internal Affairs is entrusted with overseeing the implementation of the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (von der Leyen 2024c).

The *Commission Work Programme 2025* references three instruments discussed in the Political Guidelines, namely the Roadmap, a strategy on LGBTIQ, and a strategy on anti-racism, which is therefore reaffirmed to take place. In contrast, other agenda items, such as “3.3. Supporting people, strengthening our societies, and our social model” (European Commission 2025b, 7) are accompanied by more detailed initiatives, including: a new action plan for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights; a new Pact for Social Dialogue; Youth Dialogues; a Union of Skills; and the upcoming Consumer Agenda for 2025-2030, along with a new action plan on consumers in the single market. The section on GE, “3.5. Protecting our democracy, upholding our values” (ibid., 9), while emphasising support for civil society, outlines the Roadmap, commits to mainstreaming equality, and introduces two new policy strategies on LGBTIQ rights and anti-racism. However, it omits the new GE Strategy hinted at in the Political Guidelines.

Discussion of Findings

What is the overall picture that emerges from this analysis? What direction do the five agenda formats indicate for the next years of EU GE policy?

First, GE appears infrequently across the documents. While it features most prominently in the mission letter to Commissioner Lahbib, neither GE, gender mainstreaming, nor any related concepts are mentioned in the Commissioners’ Project Groups. This is particularly striking, because cross-cutting issues, such as gender mainstreaming, should be prominently featured in the Commissioners’ Project Groups. This is crucial because different Commissioners could then collaborate on agenda issues, but their omission results in a missed opportunity to manifest GE horizontally. In this respect, the Commissioners’ Project Groups appear to be gender-blind.

Second, with regard to the understanding of GE across the different documents, it is remarkable that innovative notions, such as intersectionality, only feature in vague descriptions and are never mentioned explicitly. Overlaps between different concepts are evident, as one key indicator for a concept is often linked in the next sentence to another, such as gender being connected to women in the labour market or descriptions of intersectionality linked with anti-discrimination. This suggests a lack of clarity and reduces gender to a binary understanding while presenting intersectionality as merely addressing a variety of discriminations, thereby minimising the complexity of intersectional issues.

Third, the conceptual linkages between concepts and corresponding instruments are evident in the current agendas. For instance, equal opportunities are connected with action plans to support and empower women in the labour market. Simultaneously, anti-discrimination measures are linked to previous commitments and address implementation gaps. Equal treatment through law is expected to be reflected in the Roadmap. However, equal impact suffers from the absence of gender mainstreaming as a strategy, and the concept of intersectionality is only once connected to an instrument for anti-discrimination in the Work Programme 2025.

Fourth, two points stand out when evaluating the actual actions. On the one hand, emphasis is placed on implementation. These actions may gain momentum as the GE issue is linked to areas where the Commission has actual legislative powers, namely, anti-discrimination and the Istanbul Convention. While this could be seen as merely following up on previous initiatives without new ambition, the focus on implementation has the potential to unleash real power. On the other hand, the GE programmes are interconnected and mainly refer to existing strategies or their renewals, lending legitimacy to new editions. A full reshaping of the agenda into broader programmes has not taken place.

Fifth, regarding the values and frameworks depicted, the Political Guidelines reflect the changing political majorities, particularly with regard to the more right-leaning European Parliament. This explains the strong emphasis on equal opportunities and women in the labour market policies and the absence of a clear promotion of intersectionality. Additionally, the shift away from anchoring key programmes to the core policy priorities of competitiveness and geostrategic responsibility differs from the guidelines in von der Leyen's first term. More conservative programme objectives are less apparent in the other agenda documents.

Sixth, the absence of gender mainstreaming in the clusters of commissioners is striking. There is the risk of sidelining GE by isolating it from the core agenda of the Commission. While GE remains part of the mandate of a dedicated Commissioner, its framing as one out of Labbib's multiple tasks and not as a horizontal priority across all portfolios marks a significant departure from the more integrative approach initially promoted. Simultaneously, the absence of references to GE in the Commissioners' Project Groups, and the lack of connection between all portfolios may suggest an intention to let an individual Commissioner handle GE independently. Given that

equality in the Commission Work Programme 2025 is explicitly mentioned under “Protecting our democracy, upholding our values” (European Commission 2025b, 9) and not connected to the chapter about the Pillar of Social Rights, it is plausible that von der Leyen is positioning Commissioner Lahbib as the central figure responsible for driving GE forward. Given the relevance of the Commission organisation in promoting agenda objectives (Kassim 2022; Müller 2020), the structure of the College of Commissioners is important to ensure effective implementation. By assigning GE a clear role and the responsibility of one Commissioner within the College, von der Leyen has strategically integrated it into the Commission’s operations while maintaining individual accountability across portfolios.

Conclusion

Von der Leyen began her second term by setting high expectations for continuing the proactive GE policy of her first term, particularly by promising to appoint a Commissioner for Equality again and to maintain gender balance within the College of Commissioners. However, no such commissioner has been established, which has led to significant disappointment among women’s rights groups and lobbyists. As the analysis has shown, the agenda primarily focuses on equal opportunities regarding GE but completely overlooks intersectionality, doing so even more than during her first term, when intersectionality was at least present as an empty signifier (d’Agostino 2024). The limited follow-up on promised strategies further signals a reduced prioritisation of GE. While the renewed focus on equality, defined by the implementation of anti-discrimination measures and the Istanbul Convention, could potentially unlock real power, the lack of innovative concepts, significant shifts in GE policies, and the emphasis on the renewal and implementation of existing GE policy programmes raise concerns. These developments cast doubt on whether the Roadmap for Women’s Rights will effectively promote GE and reintroduce intersectionality, especially given that it aims to feed into and prepare the ground for a new post-2025 GE Strategy.

The strategic shift could reflect the changed political landscape, with a more right-wing European Parliament and an overwhelmingly conservative Council of the EU both of which bring with them a heightened need for compromise and negotiation. In this altered context, as observed from von der Leyen’s leadership style, nothing happens without purpose. This suggests that von der Leyen’s strategic choice lies in the absence of references to GE in the Commissioners’ Project Groups and the independence of the Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management, and Equality. Political context and institutional arrangements are crucial in shaping the political agenda. In this case, von der Leyen’s choices may reflect a pragmatic response to institutional constraints, while the Commissioner may enjoy greater independence. Nevertheless, removing GE as a horizontal priority risks undermining it. If, as argued at the outset of this paper, meaningful change requires active advocacy

and leadership, then the downgrading or sidelining of GE raises critical concerns about the direction and priorities of the next five years.

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