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Ideational agenda-setting leadership: President von der Leyen and the EU response to the invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ideational perspective on agenda-setting leadership, which it applies to the role played by President von der Leyen in the EU's response to the crisis that followed the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022. On a conceptual and methodological level, by searching for evidence of strategic framing, this study traces the process of President von der Leyen's ideational agenda-setting leadership and how it influenced the overall development of the EU's response during the initial ten weeks of the crisis. The empirical findings contribute to the academic debate on the Commission President's leadership in a crisis context by revealing how her principled ideas enabled her to diagnose the situation precisely and devise clear priorities and tools to address it. The empirical analysis also suggests that President von der Leyen, in line with her geopolitical Commission, played a very active foreign policy role.

KEYWORDS Commission President; Ursula von der Leyen; ideational agenda-setting leadership; strategic framing; Ukraine

This article addresses two main research puzzles. First, even though one of the Commission President's primary political functions is shaping the EU's political agenda (Müller 2020: 129), the academic literature is divided on the Commission's agenda-setting role in a crisis context. Indeed, according to a widely held view, the Lisbon Treaty changes and inter-governmental crisis management have challenged the Commission's dominance in agenda-setting to the advantage of the European Council (Deters and Falkner 2021: 291). However, according to a different view, the effectiveness of the European Council's handling of crises depends on the 'crucial role' of the Commission in 'anticipating, setting the scene for, and providing the follow-up to European Council involvement'

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(Smeets and Beach 2022: 1415). This view is shared by Kassim (2022a: 2-3), who argues that the role played by the Commission is contingent on two factors: first, the policy area hit by the crisis because of the different resources available; second, leadership by the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council, who have ‘different backgrounds, experiences, and views on how the institution they lead should act’. Therefore, this article examines and sheds light on the agenda-setting role played by President von der Leyen in the case of the EU’s response to the crisis that followed the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022.¹ In particular, by adopting an ideational perspective and searching for evidence of strategic framing, this study traces the process of President von der Leyen’s ideational agenda-setting leadership and how it influenced the overall development of the EU’s response in the timeframe from 16 February to 6 May 2022. Second, the EU’s response to this crisis deeply concerns its foreign policy,² CFSP included in which the Commission ‘enjoys its most limited agenda role’ (Riddervold and Trondal 2020: 945). Furthermore, von der Leyen’s ‘geopolitical Commission’ (von der Leyen 2019b, 2019c) aims to strengthen the role of the Commission as a foreign policy actor (see also Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 93). Hence, this article investigates President von der Leyen’s ideational agenda-setting leadership in a crisis that closely concerns the foreign policy domain in which the member states ‘see themselves in the driving seat of shaping the policy process through informal leadership practices’ (Aggestam 2021: 50).

The crisis that followed the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine has been selected to investigate President von der Leyen’s ideational agenda-setting leadership because it is the second crisis she has had to deal with during her mandate, and, usually, crises create a new window of opportunities for the President of the Commission to exercise political leadership. Furthermore, this is mainly an external crisis, albeit one with severe internal-EU repercussions, that strongly challenges the President’s geopolitical Commission with the ambition to take ‘the global lead on the major challenges of our times’ (von der Leyen 2019a: preamble). Finally, the role played by President von der Leyen during this crisis has not yet been extensively documented.

The timeframe from 16 February³ to 6 May⁴ 2022 – covering the eight days that preceded the Russian full-scale military invasion on 24 February and the ten weeks that followed it – represents the beginning of the crisis. During that period, the President had to face a new reality, develop and present her ideas on how to address it, and try to anticipate and set the scene for the European Council’s involvement. The empirical analysis set out below relies on qualitative content analysis of EU official documents, and particularly of 30 of President von der Leyen’s public

speeches, statements, and remarks issued in the timeframe examined. Further background material with which to better understand President von der Leyen's role in this crisis is drawn from three exploratory, in-depth, and strictly confidential conversations held with a member of the President's cabinet, a representative of the Commission in a member state, and a member of the European Parliament (MEP) (see Table A.1 in the online appendix for more details). The interviewees were selected because of their expertise on the crisis and the different institutional/bureaucratic distances from which they evaluated the President's role.

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents the analytical framework, which is based on the literature on Commission's political leadership, its role in the EU foreign policy domain, and strategic framing. The second section briefly reconstructs Ursula von der Leyen's ascendance to EU leadership. The third section traces the President's ideational agenda-setting leadership in the EU's response to the crisis that followed the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. This article contributes to the academic debate on the Commission President's leadership in a crisis context by showing how President von der Leyen's principled ideas enabled her to diagnose the situation precisely and devise clear priorities and tools to address it. The article also suggests that President von der Leyen, in line with her geopolitical Commission, played a very active foreign policy role.

Commission President's ideational agenda-setting leadership: theory and analytical framework

The academic literature has introduced a functional classification of Commission Presidents' leadership in the different phases of the policy-making process (see Müller 2016, 2020: 27–28). In this article, we focus only on agenda-setting leadership, which entails the 'threefold task of diagnosing the situation authoritatively, devising a course of action designed to resolve or alleviate the problem, and mobilising the political community's support for the ... prescribed policy response' (Tucker 1995: 31; see also Müller 2020: 27). Then, we specifically concentrate on the role of the Commission President's ideas in this phase of the policy process. Therefore, the concept of ideational agenda-setting leadership is understood, in this article, as a process whereby an individual actor, with institutional, ideational, and personal resources, proactively uses strategic framing 'to rally consensus' (Pollack 1997: 121) for his/her proposals. Indeed, empirical studies on the leadership of the President of the Commission (Endo 1999; Kassim *et al.* 2013: Ch. 6; Müller 2016, 2020; Müller and Tömmel 2022; Tömmel 2013, 2020) have underlined the importance of considering these resources not only as pre-requisites for

the exercise of leadership but also as explanatory of the variance in the type of leadership performed.

In terms of institutional resources, because of the traditional Commission's almost exclusive right of legislative initiation, the President can play a crucial role in problem recognition, issues selection, and agenda-setting (Müller and Tömmel 2022: 317). Furthermore, in recent decades, the role of the President within the Commission has been strengthened by two different dynamics. First, the incremental treaty changes from Maastricht to Lisbon have led to a centralisation of power within the Commission. Second, the presidentialisation of policy control has, since 2004, led to the adoption of a more strategic approach to policy (see Kassim *et al.* 2017). However, in the foreign policy domain, the role of the Commission is more complex. In particular, whilst in the EU's external action and the external dimension of internal policies, the Commission 'plays a critical role', thanks to its exclusive right of initiative, in the CFSP, including the CSDP, the Commission 'stands largely on the sidelines' (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 91; see also Riddervold and Trondal 2020: 945). This sideline role of the Commission in CFSP is due to its lack of exclusive initiative power.⁵ Furthermore, the Lisbon Treaty's institutional re-organisation⁶ created new overlaps and rivalries in CFSP. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that the Commission has developed informal agenda-setting practices in this area by linking CFSP issues with external action areas⁷ or the EU budget (on which the Commission has competences) and by establishing 'informal patterns of coalition-building' with the HR/VP and the EEAS (Riddervold and Trondal 2020: 957, see also Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 97). Indeed, President von der Leyen's idea of creating the first geopolitical Commission, in order to 'keep engaging with the world as a responsible power' and shape 'a better global order'⁸ (von der Leyen 2019b: 2), seems to originate also from the necessity to address the rivalry between the Commission and the EEAS and the functional link between the Commission's economic powers and international security issues (see also Haroche 2022: 2). In the same way, the creation by the von der Leyen Commission of a new collegial preparatory body, the Group for External Coordination (EXCO), to 'better align the internal and external aspects of the Commission's work and enhance the working relationship between the Commission and the EEAS' (European Commission 2019: 14) is an indicator of the President's intention to strengthen the Commission's institutional resources so that it can act as a foreign policy actor.

Ideational resources, including principled ideas, technical expertise, and policy capacity, enable the President of the Commission to exert 'intellectual leadership' by relying on ideas 'to shape the way in which

participants in institutional bargaining understand the issue at stake and to orient their thinking about options available' (Young 1991: 288). Furthermore, the Commission President can count, in addition to the personal advisors in the cabinet, on the policy capacity and the specific technical knowledge developed by its specialised Directorate Generals, as well as on the actors with the expertise that it lacks (Kassim *et al.* 2013: 74–75). Finally, 'personal characteristics' or 'personal capacity' are other factors shaping the President's leadership potential (Endo 1999: 23). For example, Kassim (2022b: 188–189) argues that 'the authority of the President does rely on the personal capital or political experience of the individual incumbent'. Other studies (Müller 2016: 69, 2020; Tömmel 2020: 1145) have also suggested that an evaluation should be made of the strength of the President's commitment to promoting European integration, his/her capacity to develop corresponding objectives, and his/her ability to broker compromises and persuade member states' governments and the Parliament to proceed along the envisioned route.

The literature on political leadership has also underlined the need to examine the context of action in all its dimensions and levels since it can favour or constrain the exercise of political leadership. First, it has been stressed that consideration should be made of 'objective' situations, such as economic conditions, and 'subjective' ones, including the attitude of the governments of the member states and the broader public towards the EU (Tömmel 2013). Second, the crisis/routine distinction has been introduced, because a crisis may bring about 'an unusually wide window of opportunities that might allow the office-holder to take bold actions inconceivable in a routine period' or instead 'impose extraordinary constraints' on the office-holder (Endo 1999: 21). Third, the distinction between external and internal situations has been added. This refers to specific contingencies at different levels of analysis that might shape leadership performance (Endo 1999: 21; Müller 2020). In particular, according to Princen (2007: 23), the wider 'political context' is key for understanding the Commission's agenda-setting role since the Commission is 'influenced directly by a range of actors within and outside of the EU'.

By adopting an ideational perspective and searching for evidence of the activity of strategic framing, this article traces the process of President von der Leyen's ideational agenda-setting leadership during the first ten weeks of the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine and how it influenced the overall development of the EU's response. The perspective is ideational because it assumes that 'ideas matter in the explanation of policy change' (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2022: 841). Hence, it is necessary to identify what ideas are and address their origin – that is, their micro-foundations – since ideas are relevant only when an individual actor deploys them (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2022: 842–843, 848). On the

origin of ideas, it is necessary to distinguish between the ultimate source of an idea and its first deployment on the EU political agenda. Indeed, while the former is more challenging to discover since it ‘builds on ideas that went before and searching for the source will then only lead to an infinite regress back in time’ (Princen 2007: 23), the latter can be more easily identified.

This article uses strategic framing to trace how an individual actor deploys ideas on the EU’s political agenda. This concept refers to deploying specific ideas to reshape a particular policy domain (Rhinar 2018: 309; see also Princen 2007: 34, 2009: 43). Hence, the focus is on: 1) how the President’s ideas are framed and reframed following new developments in the political context; and 2) how the President’s ideas are deployed on the EU’s political agenda. The activity of strategic framing is unpacked into three parts – ideas, instruments, and context (see the data set in the online appendix) – to conduct the qualitative content analysis.

President von der Leyen’s ideas on the EU’s response to the crisis provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine are classified according to their generality level (Schmidt 2008: 305–6). The first level of generality encompasses specific policy solutions and is operationalised in terms of the President’s proposals for specific policy tools. Second-level ideas concern more general programmes or paradigms that underpin specific policy solutions and are operationalised in terms of the President’s policy priorities and objectives. Third-level ideas, which regard philosophies or worldviews that undergird the policies with values and principles, are operationalised in terms of the main dimensions/pillars of the most general vision and normatively grounded principles. Instruments are operationalised in specific initiatives (i.e. speeches, statements, press statements, remarks) used by the President to convey her ideas and drive the policy process. Finally, the context concerns when ideas are placed, where they are placed (the institutional setting), or what (the situational setting) has led to their deployment on the EU political agenda. These three components of strategic framing are analysed on the basis of a specific data set for the 30 statements/speeches/remarks by President von der Leyen in the timeframe considered.

Ursula von der Leyen’s ascendance to EU leadership

Ursula von der Leyen had a ‘turbulent ascendance to the Commission presidency’ (Müller and Tömmel 2022: 311; see also Kassim 2022b: 169) mainly because she was not a *Spitzenkandidat*⁹ and therefore could not count on the same procedural democratic legitimacy that her predecessor – Jean-Claude Juncker – had enjoyed. French President Emmanuel Macron proposed her name for the Commission’s top office to overcome the impasse caused by the lack of a majority in the European Parliament

(EP) for one of its *Spitzenkandidaten* and amid the power struggle on this appointment between the European Council and the EP. Ursula von der Leyen had been a moderate member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) since 1990. Supported by Angela Merkel at the beginning of her political career, she had served in all four of Chancellor Merkel's cabinets (2005–19) and shared some federalist ideas for the EU with President Macron.

At the time of her nomination by the European Council on 2 July 2019, she was serving as Germany's defence minister (since 2013).¹⁰ There was no dissent among the heads of state and government (HOSG) on her nomination¹¹ since the victory in the European elections of the EPP (European People's Party) group was acknowledged, and she had significant experience in executive offices. It was more challenging to obtain the support of the EP, with the EPP and S&D (Socialists and Democrats) groups perceiving her nomination as an imposition by President Macron vis-à-vis a much more democratically legitimised nomination of a *Spitzenkandidat*. However, it seems she was a 'positive surprise', especially for the S&D MEPs (Interview 2). Indeed, she developed an agenda that encompassed six priorities, including a very ambitious 'European Green Deal', a digital transition, and the promise of Europe-wide minimum wages. On 16 July 2019, thanks to the support of pro-European party groups (EEP, S&D and Renew Europe, although some MEPs belonging to these groups did not vote for her), and the right-wing ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists), the EP elected Ursula von der Leyen as the first woman as Commission President, albeit with the smallest margin to date.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis opened a new window of opportunity for leadership at the EU level. According to Kassim (2022a: 3), the von der Leyen Commission played a leading role during this crisis, setting out the issues that the EU should address and the measures it should take, with the European Council endorsing the proposals already made by the Commission. This leading role can be explained by the fact that the crisis involved areas where the Commission has important functions, and President von der Leyen 'asserted Commission leadership and responsibility from the start' (Kassim 2022a: 3 and 17). Remarkably, the Commission, using its competences on the single market and 'through innovative modalities' (Interview 1), managed to play a crucial role in bargaining on behalf of the member states with medical firms producing vaccines against COVID-19. The Commission also addressed the economic consequences of the pandemic by proposing that the Recovery Fund of 750 billion euros should be borrowed, for the first time, from the financial markets and be integrated into the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). According to Smeets and Beach (2022: 1429), 'the von der Leyen Commission was able to anticipate what the Heads needed

in terms of a big financial gesture and to convince them that this was something that could be feasibly delivered within the framework of the next MFF'. Furthermore, 'by prioritising the Green Deal and digital transition in EU spending [in the framework of the Recovery Fund], she also acted strategically on behalf of her own agenda' (Müller and Tömmel 2022: 324). In particular, according to Bongardt and Torres (2022: 179 and 182), the Commission used the pandemic crisis to frame the European Green Deal 'as an exit strategy and to equip itself with funds to accelerate the [green] transition'.

Tracing the President's ideational agenda-setting leadership

This section traces President von der Leyen's ideational agenda-setting leadership in the EU's response to the crisis that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Four main phases are identified according to the developments in the war and the EU's response. The first phase (16–23 February 2022) covers the eight days that preceded the Russian full-scale military invasion, during which President von der Leyen anticipated her vision of the situation. The second phase (24 February – 9 March 2022) comprises the beginning of the Russian full-scale military invasion and the first European Council extraordinary meeting. The third phase (10–23 March 2022) involves the informal European Council at Versailles, dominated by the war in Ukraine, and its follow-up. The fourth phase (24 March – 6 May 2022) starts with the March European Council and covers the reaction to the crimes in Bucha and the highly symbolic visit of President von der Leyen to Kyiv.

Before the Russian full-scale military invasion (16–23 February 2022): anticipating a timely and comprehensive vision of the situation

In this pre-invasion phase, with 150,000 troops at the Russian side of the border between Russia and Ukraine, President von der Leyen gave her first speech on EU-Russia relations at the EP plenary the day after the Duma, on 15 February 2022, called on Russia's President Vladimir Putin to recognise Donetsk and Luhansk, in the Donbas region of Ukraine, as independent republics. In this speech, President von der Leyen expressed her vision of European security and Russia's military threat against Ukraine, the main priorities of the EU's response, and the specific policy tools to be used. A few days later, all these elements were further elaborated upon in her speech at the Munich Security Conference and in her statement with the Norwegian Prime Minister. It was a timely and comprehensive diagnosis of the situation that, by establishing a clear, principled lens

through which to interpret it, and presenting a straightforward course of action to address it, to both the EP and the most important international forum on security (the Munich Security Conference) favoured an extraordinarily rapid and efficient first response.

President von der Leyen's vision of the crisis has been strongly steered by her principled ideas (third-level ideas) on the geopolitical role of the EU, 'created to put an end to European wars' (von der Leyen 2022a, 2022b), and based on respect for international law, and in particular for the United Nations (UN) Charter, according to which countries shall refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Based on these tenets, she introduced three main pillars of her most general vision (third-level ideas) that would be confirmed after the invasion: 1) Russian leadership (to be distinguished from the Russian people) is responsible for the escalation of the crisis (von der Leyen 2022a); 2) the Kremlin is threatening Ukraine because it is today a 'stronger, freer and more sovereign country than in 2014' (von der Leyen 2022a); 3) the crisis is not only about Ukraine, 'it is also a time of crisis where autocracies are challenging democracies' (von der Leyen 2022d). On the basis of these three premises, she also conceptualised five main priorities (second-level ideas) for the EU's response to the crisis: 1) stand firm with Ukraine (von der Leyen 2022a); 2) provide a strong and united response within the EU and with its transatlantic partners (von der Leyen 2022a, 2022b); 3) be ready in case Russia weaponises the energy issue (von der Leyen 2022a); 4) 'get rid' of the dependence on Russian gas (von der Leyen 2022a, 2022b, 2022d); and 5) support democracy in Ukraine (von der Leyen 2022b). To achieve these objectives, she mentioned specific policy tools (first-level ideas), such as a comprehensive package of sanctions (von der Leyen 2022a, 2022b), the diversification of energy suppliers and sources, and the development of emergency measures in case of complete disruptions (von der Leyen 2022a, 2022d).

This timely and comprehensive diagnosis of the situation steered the EU reaction to the Russian Federation's recognition, on 21 February, of the two pro-Russian 'republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk and the decision to send its troops there. Indeed, on the same day as the recognition, President von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel condemned it 'in the strongest possible terms' since it was a 'blatant violation of international law', reiterated the 'unwavering support to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity', and affirmed that the Union would react with sanctions (von der Leyen and Michel 2022). At an unprecedented speed, on 22 February, von der Leyen declared that the 'EU Member States have given their political agreement for a new package of sanctions against Russia' (von der Leyen 2022c). Moreover, on 23

February, the Council adopted the first package of sanctions against Russia, including targeted sanctions against the 351 members of the Duma. This extremely rapid EU response was only possible because from the end of December President von der Leyen and her cabinet had prepared for the worst scenario, including the planning of sanctions and aligning them with those of the United States (US) (Interview 3; see also The Economist 2022a; von der Leyen 2022a, 2022b).

After Putin declares a ‘special military operation’ (24 February–9 March 2022): providing the follow-up to the extraordinary European Council meeting

During this phase, which started with the announcement of the ‘special military operation’ and the extraordinary European Council meeting on the same day, President von der Leyen further developed her conceptualisation of the situation, the main priorities and objectives of the EU’s response, and the specific policy tools to be used. It was during this phase, and notably in the framework of the Group of Seven (G7),¹² that President von der Leyen endeavoured to create a consensus on sanctioning the Central Bank of Russia, which was considered the most aggressive financial sanction with potentially devastating effects on the Russian economy (see Quaglia and Verdun 2023).

On 24 February, the EU immediately reacted to President Putin’s early morning address on state television in which he announced ‘a special military operation’ against Ukraine. Already at 7:00, President Michel and President von der Leyen issued a press statement in which they condemned ‘in the strongest possible terms Russia’s unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine’ and affirmed that the ‘EU stands firmly by Ukraine and its people’ (Michel and von der Leyen 2022a). This statement was followed at midday by a joint statement along the same lines by the members of the European Council. President Michel urgently convened for the afternoon an extraordinary meeting of the European Council, in which President von der Leyen outlined a further sanctions package. In the Conclusions, published at 21:10, the HOSG: 1) condemned ‘in the strongest possible terms’ the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine; 2) agreed on further restrictive measures prepared by the Commission and to be adopted by the Council ‘without delay’;¹³ 3) reiterated its ‘unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine’; 4) acknowledged the ‘European aspirations and the European choice of Ukraine as stated in the Association Agreement’ (European Council 2022a).

The Conclusions were followed by a twenty-minute video statement by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whom President Michel

invited to address the European Council. During the lengthy debate among the members of the European Council that followed Zelenskyy's emotional speech, the participants proposed new ideas on additional policy tools with which to deal with Russia and to support Ukraine further (Ludlow 2022a: 6–7). In particular, it seems that it was Italian President and former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who pushed the idea of sanctioning the Russian Central Bank, arguing that 'otherwise Russia's stockpile of reserves could be used to cushion the blow of other sanctions'¹⁴ (Pop *et al.* 2022). The other new ideas that emerged during this debate concerned, first, the opening of member states' frontiers to refugees and, second, the potential relevance of the European Peace Facility (EPF)¹⁵ to finance armaments purchases for Ukraine – a proposal which seems to have been further developed in a telephone conversation on 26 February between Michel and Zelenskyy (Ludlow 2022a: 7 and footnote 4).

In the days that followed the video statement by Zelenskyy and the debate in the European Council, President von der Leyen introduced two new principled ideas (third-level ideas), probably suggested by the emotional speech by the Ukrainian President. The first was that Ukrainians are an inspiration for the EU since they are 'fighting for universal values [the principles of independence and freedom] and are willing to die for them' (von der Leyen 2022i, 2022j). The second was that freedom/democracy 'is priceless' whatever the cost of sanctions for the European economy (von der Leyen 2022i, 2022l). Then, she added two important pillars to her general vision (third-level ideas): the war as the beginning of a new era characterised by the attempt to redraw the maps of Europe by force (von der Leyen 2022f); and the idea that 'nobody ... can doubt that a people that stands up so bravely for our European values belongs in our European family' (von der Leyen 2022i). By introducing these new third-level ideas, she provided the normative justification for the entry of new issues (in terms of both priorities and tools) into the EU political agenda, or for ones already present to be given more and renewed emphasis.

Indeed, President von der Leyen did not only confirm the previously affirmed priorities (second-level ideas) of standing with Ukraine and its people (von der Leyen 2022e), providing a united response within the EU and with its partners (von der Leyen 2022f, 2022k), and getting rid of energy dependence on Russia (von der Leyen 2022l); she also enriched her comprehensive programme with new objectives targeting the EU, 'the other Russia', and Ukraine: in particular, (i) the necessity to 'shield the most vulnerable consumers and businesses' from rising energy prices (von der Leyen 2022m); (ii) the need to differentiate between holding the Kremlin accountable (von der Leyen 2022f) and offering support to 'the other Russia' (von der Leyen 2022i); and (iii) notably the necessity

to address the issue of future Ukrainian membership because ‘[t]oday, the European Union and Ukraine are already closer than ever before’ (von der Leyen 2022i). Finally, she emphasised the EU’s duty to stand up for Europe’s security, invest in it, and assume ‘our fair share of the responsibility’ (von der Leyen 2022i, 2022e).

Regarding policy tools (first-level ideas), President von der Leyen’s new proposals focussed mainly on additional financial sanctions ‘designed to take a heavy toll on the Kremlin’s interests and their ability to finance war’ (von der Leyen 2022e). Indeed, on 26 February, President von der Leyen’s cabinet, through the chief of staff Bjoern Seibert, coordinated the effort to reach a consensus among the G7 leaders on the idea of freezing a large part of Moscow’s foreign currency reserves (Pop *et al.* 2022). President von der Leyen also called Draghi, asking him ‘to thrash the details out directly with Yellen [the US secretary of the Treasury and former chair of the US Federal Reserve]’ (Pop *et al.* 2022). Later that night, the G7 leaders announced their commitment to preventing ‘the Russian Central Bank from deploying its international reserves in ways that undermine the impact of our sanctions’ and other measures, including the removal of ‘selected Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system’ (G7 2022). For the EU, all these new measures became part of the third package (see von der Leyen 2022g, 2022h) approved between 28 February and 9 March.

President von der Leyen also presented proposals for tools (first-level ideas) to support Ukraine and its people. She suggested, for the first time the activation of the temporary protection mechanism to provide Ukrainian refugees with ‘a secure status and access to schools, medical care and work’ (von der Leyen 2022h, 2022i, 2022j, 2022k). The Council adopted this proposal on 4 March. Furthermore, von der Leyen stated that the EU budget should be used to deal with the humanitarian consequences of the war (von der Leyen 2022i), to establish civil protection hubs in Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, and to set up humanitarian corridors (von der Leyen 2022k). Finally, the President’s proposals focussed on how to get rid of energy dependence on Russia. She brought onto the EU political agenda the necessity of energy supply diversification (von der Leyen 2022l, 2022m) and energy efficiency (von der Leyen 2022l, 2022m). Moreover, she used the crisis to give more and renewed emphasis to her agenda’s priority of massive investment in renewables (von der Leyen 2022i, 2022l, 2022m).

The informal European Council at Versailles and its follow-up (10–23 March 2022): new policy tools

This phase comprises the informal European Council at Versailles on 10–11 March and its follow-up. The war in Ukraine dominated the proceedings

of the meeting, and particularly the working dinner, during which President von der Leyen gave her contribution (Ludlow 2022c: 3) and probably shaped some contents of the final Declaration. In the days following the meeting, President von der Leyen proposed several new policy tools targeting Russia, Ukraine, EU energy consumers, EU farmers, and also world regions.

The first issue addressed by the Versailles Declaration that seems to have been influenced by the President's ideas regarded the HOSG's vision of Russia's war of aggression. They defined it as 'a tectonic shift in European history', and they affirmed the necessity for the EU to 'live up to its responsibilities in this new reality, protecting our citizens, values, democracies, and our European model' (Versailles Declaration 2022: para. 6 and 7). President von der Leyen had previously defined the aggression as 'the beginning of the new era' (von der Leyen 2022f), with the consequent necessity for the EU 'to carry our fair share of the responsibility' (von der Leyen 2022i). The second issue concerned the need to address future Ukrainian membership, considering that, on 28 February, President Zelenskyy had submitted Ukraine's membership application. Following the ideas anticipated by President von der Leyen (2022b, 2022i, 2022j), with their Versailles Declaration, the HOSG went further than anything they had previously said about Ukrainian membership before the crisis (Ludlow 2022b). Indeed, they commended the people of Ukraine for their courage in defending 'our shared values of freedom and democracy' and stated that 'Ukraine belongs to our European family' (Versailles Declaration 2022: para. 2 and 4). The latter was the same expression as used by President von der Leyen on 1 March (von der Leyen 2022i). However, von der Leyen, together with Poland, the Baltic States, and the other Central and Eastern European member states, failed to lay the basis for giving Ukraine a fast-track status. Indeed, the other member states, led by Germany, Italy, France and the Netherlands, opposed this solution and favoured proceeding in an orderly and slower way (Ludlow 2022b: 5, 2022c: 4). Finally, the HOSG agreed 'to phase out our dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal imports as soon as possible, in particular by a) accelerating the reduction of our overall reliance on fossil fuels ... b) diversifying our supplies ... c) further developing a hydrogen market ... d) speeding up the development of renewables ... e) completing and improving the interconnection of European gas and electricity networks ... f) reinforcing EU contingency planning for security of supply ... g) improving energy efficiency' (Versailles Declaration 2022: para. 16). President von der Leyen had mentioned for the first time the objective of getting rid of the dependence on Russian gas on 17 February (von der Leyen 2022a; see also von der Leyen 2022l). *Phasing out* was less determined than *getting rid of*, but considering the interests of the member states, it went in the direction previously established by the

President. Furthermore, all the policy tools to reach this objective mentioned in the Versailles Declaration had been previously introduced by the President (see von der Leyen 2022a, 2022i, 2022l, 2022m), and in the Commission ‘REPower EU’ communication presented on 8 March.

In the days that followed the Versailles Declaration, several proposals for new policy tools (first-level ideas) enriched the President’s vision of the EU’s response. On 12 March, she presented the fourth package of sanctions (adopted by the Council on 15 March), which removed Russia’s status of most-favoured-nation, made sure that the Russian state could not use crypto assets to circumvent the sanctions, banned the exporting to Russia of any EU luxury goods, prohibited the importing from Russia of key goods in the iron and steel sector, and proposed a ban on new European investments across Russia’s energy sector (von der Leyen 2022o, 2022n). The President also introduced new tools to deal with the rising energy prices: in the short-term, guidance on price regulation in exceptional circumstances and the possibility of a new Temporary Crisis Framework for state aid to support struggling businesses (von der Leyen 2022n), and in the long term, a common gas procurement and stricter rules for storage (von der Leyen 2022p). Then, President von der Leyen presented new tools to support Ukraine, such as emergency macro-financial assistance (von der Leyen 2022o) and the mobilisation of resources from the EU budget to support member states hosting refugees (von der Leyen 2022p). Finally, as requested by the HOSG in Versailles, she started working on how to address the issues of rising food prices and global food security (Versailles Declaration 2022: para. 21). In doing so, she devised special measures to help European farmers and provide direct food aid to regions around the world (von der Leyen 2022p, 2022q).

The March European Council and its follow-up (24 March–6 May 2022): the energy partnership with the US and the visit to Kyiv

This extended phase covers the six weeks following the March European Council. During this phase, President von der Leyen played a very active foreign policy role. Indeed, she was at centre stage during the visit of US President Joe Biden when they jointly announced the partnership to reduce Europe’s dependency on Russian gas. She also sent a strong message to China. Furthermore, she promptly reacted to the crimes committed against civilians in Bucha with the proposal of the fifth package of sanctions. Finally, she visited Kyiv, where she reiterated her intention to accelerate the procedure for Ukraine’s membership.

The European Council of 24–25 March 2022 took place in a new phase of the conflict: whereas at Versailles there had been a widespread

belief that Russia was going to win in the end, two weeks later a Russian victory appeared to be less certain (Ludlow 2022d: 2). This change was reflected in President von der Leyen's statement, which advanced the (third-level) idea that the war 'will be a strategic failure for Putin' (von der Leyen 2022r). The first meeting day focussed on the war in Ukraine and included an 80-minute session with President Biden, whose participation was very important not only to show the world that '[t]he transatlantic partnership stands stronger and more united than ever' (von der Leyen 2022r) but also to continue 'coordinated transatlantic efforts to support the Ukrainian people, impose severe costs on Russia ... and strengthen the resilience of our democracies' (von der Leyen and Biden 2022). Indicative of President von der Leyen's leadership is the fact that the most important achievement of this visit was unveiled outside the European Council format by Biden and von der Leyen on the morning of 25 March (von der Leyen 2022r, 2022s; see also Ludlow 2022e: 3). Indeed, it was President Biden and President von der Leyen who launched the agreement on a partnership to reduce Europe's dependency on Russian gas, according to which the US will provide Europe with an additional at least 15 billion cubic metres of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in 2022, replacing the amount of Russian LNG for 2022, and in the following years at least 50 billion cubic metres per year, replacing one-third of all Russian gas supply to Europe (von der Leyen 2022r, 2022s, 2022w). This event shows that President Biden considers President von der Leyen to be his EU interlocutor (Interview 3).

The second day of the European Council was dominated by energy policy (Ludlow 2022e). It can be observed that the HOSG mandated the Commission and the Council to develop additional policy tools – in particular, the common procurement of gas and stricter rules for gas storage – anticipated by President von der Leyen two days before in the framework of her speech at the EP plenary (von der Leyen 2022p). In the case of the common procurement of gas, President von der Leyen had advocated 'a strong European approach' in order to use 'our collective bargaining power' considering that the 75% of the global pipeline gas market is the European one (von der Leyen 2022p, 2022s). Even though adopting a weaker European approach, the European Council's conclusions established that the Commission and the member states would 'work together on voluntary common purchase of gas, LNG and hydrogen, making optimal use of the collective political and market weight of the European Union and its Member States to dampen prices in negotiations' (European Council 2022b: 7). Similarly, in the case of gas storage, the European Council 'tasked the Council to examine the proposals by the Commission on EU gas storage policy duly taking into account and

addressing the interests of the Member States with significant storage capacity in order to ensure a fair balance’ (European Council 2022b: 6).

In the two weeks following the European Council, significant developments gave further visibility to the President’s foreign policy role. On 1 April, the EU-China summit allowed President von der Leyen to enrich her vision of the war as ‘a defining moment for our relationship with the rest of the world’ (third-level idea) (von der Leyen 2022t). Her vision also focussed on the role that China should play (third-level idea). Notably, she affirmed that, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China ‘has a special responsibility to uphold international peace and security’ (von der Leyen 2022t, 2022w). Furthermore, in terms of second-level ideas, she stated that China should not interfere with EU sanctions and that it should consider the reputational costs – in terms of EU-China trade – of its positioning in the war (von der Leyen 2022t).

On 4 April, President von der Leyen had a phone call with President Zelenskyy on the crimes against civilians uncovered in Bucha (von der Leyen 2022u). The day after, she presented the fifth package of sanctions (first-level ideas), including an import ban on coal from Russia, a complete transaction ban on four key Russian banks, and a ban on Russian vessels and Russian-operated vessels from accessing EU ports (von der Leyen 2022v, 2022w). The Council adopted this package on 8 April. On the same day, President von der Leyen visited Kyiv. This visit had a tremendous symbolic value since President von der Leyen started it in Bucha and gave President Zelenskyy the questionnaire that the Commission required to issue its opinion on Ukraine’s application for membership. She did not limit herself to recalling the (third-level) idea that ‘Ukrainian people are holding up the torch of freedom for all of us’ (von der Leyen 2022x, 2022y). She again advocated her (second-level) idea on Ukraine’s membership by affirming that ‘we will accelerate this process as much as we can, while ensuring that all conditions are respected’ (von der Leyen 2022x).

In the subsequent weeks, President von der Leyen focussed on the presentation, on 4 May, of the sixth package of sanctions (first-level ideas), including the phasing out of the Russian supply of crude oil within six months and refined products by the end of the year (von der Leyen 2022aa, 2022ad), and the announcement of the objective (second-level idea) of Ukraine’s reconstruction (von der Leyen 2022z). This new objective was linked to Ukraine’s accession (and, therefore, to the Commission’s leading role in this policy area). Furthermore, she tried to further advocate this idea by explicitly demanding the EP’s support. Indeed, she proposed that the Parliament should start ‘working on an ambitious recovery package for our Ukrainian friends. This package should bring massive investment to meet the needs and the necessary reforms ... And eventually, it will

pave the way for Ukraine's future inside the European Union' (von der Leyen 2022aa, see also 2022ab, 2022ac).

Conclusion

The empirical analysis conducted in this article contributes to the academic debate on the Commission's role in a crisis context by showing how President von der Leyen's ideational agenda-setting leadership shaped the EU's response to the crisis that followed the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, her principled ideas enabled her to precisely diagnose the situation and devise clear priorities and tools to address it. Moreover, she acted in different EU and international contexts to rally support for her designed course of action.

From an ideational perspective, the empirical investigation has shown that President von der Leyen's diagnosis of the situation was inspired by four main principled ideas, which seem to have originated from her understanding of the European integration process and the EU's role in foreign policy. The first two principled ideas concern the EU's internal and external identity: in particular, its creation to end the European war, and respect for international law as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy. These principles represent the broader normative framework for the other two principled ideas related to the war in Ukraine: the image that the Ukrainian people are holding up the torch of freedom for all of us and the idea that freedom/democracy is priceless. Within this strongly principled framework, President von der Leyen developed the five main pillars of her overall view of the situation: 1) the war as the beginning of a new era characterised by the attempt to redraw the map of Europe by force; 2) Russian President Putin's responsibility for bringing back the war on Europe; 3) Ukraine has been invaded by Russia because it is stronger, freer and more sovereign country than in 2014; 4) the crisis is not only about Ukraine but also concerns cases where autocracies are challenging democracies; 5) the belonging of Ukraine to the European family.

President von der Leyen has established this general vision and developed new objectives and tools comprehensively, targeting different recipients in both external and domestic policy areas. This comprehensive approach has been favoured by her in-depth knowledge of all the different dimensions of the crisis, further presidentialisation of policy control, and probably her constant and dedicated work. On the origins of the ideas that she has deployed on the EU political agenda, the empirical analysis has shown that she has not limited herself to promoting her ideas. Indeed, she also advanced specific ideas on policy tools which originated from the members of the European Council.

Through this activity of ideational agenda-setting leadership, President von der Leyen has shaped the EU's response to the crisis. In particular, by establishing a clear, principled lens through which to interpret the crisis and showing the EU's direction, she has provided the normative justification for new issues to enter the EU political agenda or for already present issues to be given more emphasis. For example, she has contributed to bringing new issues, such as eliminating energy dependence on Russia and addressing the issues of future Ukraine membership and its reconstruction onto the EU's political agenda. She has also used the window of opportunities opened by the crisis to emphasise existing political issues on the agenda, such as the necessity to invest in Europe's security and the need for massive investment in renewables.

The empirical analysis also suggests that President von der Leyen, in line with her geopolitical Commission, has played a very active foreign policy role. In particular, to be recalled is her relationship with President Biden, for whom she has become the EU's interlocutor, and also her highly active role in favouring the agreement of the G7 leaders on sanctioning the Russian Central Bank. She has also been highly active in agenda-setting with her proposals in several foreign policy areas. In the framework of the external action, she has strongly promoted the acceleration of Ukraine's enlargement procedure. She has prepared several packages of sanctions against Russia that have had to be approved by the Council in the framework of CFSP decisions. She has proposed activating the temporary protection mechanism for Ukrainian refugees in the migration policy framework. On the external dimension of energy policy, she has promoted several measures for energy supply diversification. She has also used the Commission's competences on the budget to suggest using it to address the war's humanitarian consequences. Furthermore, she has emphasised the necessity to invest in the EU's security.

Overall, this empirical investigation of the first ten weeks of the Ukraine crisis suggests that the President of the Commission has contributed to advancing the European integration process by favouring a united, prompt and comprehensive EU response to the crisis. However, more research should be undertaken to explore whether new developments in the EU, member states, and the war will affect the President's chances of continuing to shape European integration.

Notes

1. This development was a major escalation of a war that had been ongoing in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Indeed, in February 2014, Russia reacted to violent protests in Kyiv (to oust pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovich from power and to strengthen Ukraine's bilateral relations with the EU)

with a military intervention, leading to the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and war in the Donbas region in April 2014.

2. This article adopts a broad definition of EU foreign policy comprising the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which includes the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), external action (trade, development cooperation, economic and financial cooperation with third countries, humanitarian aid, sanctions and international agreements), and the external dimension of internal policies (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 11–12).
3. This starting date has been selected for the empirical analysis since, according to the Commission press release database, it represents the first day on which President von der Leyen publicly addressed the issue of ‘European security’ vis-à-vis ‘Russia’s military threat against Ukraine’ (von der Leyen 2022a).
4. This ending date has been selected because, according to the Commission press release database, President von der Leyen’s speech on 6 May (von der Leyen 2022ad) was the last one dealing with the Russian invasion, ten weeks from its beginning.
5. According to the Lisbon Treaty, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) ‘with the Commission support’ may refer any question relating to the CFSP to the Council.
6. Notably, the establishment of a separate diplomatic service – the European External Action Service (EEAS) – the creation of the function of HR/VP combining the former position of the High Representative for the CFSP and the Commissioner for External Relations, and the creation of the new position of President of the European Council with the specific task, among others, of ensuring the external representation of the EU on issues concerning CFSP.
7. Sanctions, for example, are an external action policy that can be closely linked to CFSP since a CFSP decision (by the Council with unanimity) is required to adopt sanctions (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 242).
8. In the words of President von der Leyen (2019b: 2), ‘Europe urgently needs’ a geopolitical Commission since ‘[t]he world needs our leadership more than ever’, and Europe should ‘be a force for peace and for positive change’.
9. On the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, see Christiansen (2016) and also Kassim (2022b: 172–176).
10. According to Müller and Tömmel (2022: 313–314), her performance as defence minister was ‘mixed compared to her previous portfolios [family and labour and social affairs]’ since there was a controversy concerning irregularities in spending on external consultancy contracts.
11. Even though Chancellor Merkel abstained from voting for a compatriot and fellow party member (Kassim 2022b: 175).
12. The informal political forum consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the US. The EU is generally acknowledged as a ‘quasi-member’ (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 341). In the absence of formal rules on the EU’s representation in this forum, the division of labour between the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission is determined case by case (Keukeleire and Delreux 2022: 341).
13. It was the second package, presented by von der Leyen at the European Council on 24 February and adopted the day after (see von der Leyen 2022f).
14. According to Pop *et al.* (2022), this idea had been mooted a few hours previously, within the framework of the G7 leaders’ emergency summit,

by Justin Trudeau, Canada's Prime Minister, following the suggestion of Canada's Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, who is of Ukrainian descent.

15. Instrument created in 2021 to support operational actions under the CFSP and CSDP with military or defence implications. The EPF is outside the EU budget and composed of contributions by member states based on gross national income.

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