Von der Leyen set to reveal EU’s new top line-up

AFP- After weeks of fierce political horse-trading, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen is expected on Tuesday to unveil her new top team to help steward the EU through the next five years of global uncertainty.

As part of the bloc’s careful balancing act, the German head of the EU executive must choose the line-up for her second term from nominees put forward by the other 26 member states.

That has meant treading a political tightrope between the demands of competing national leaders – and putting some noses out of joint.

The highest-profile casualty so far has been France’s first choice candidate Thierry Breton, who quit suddenly as internal market commissioner on Monday accusing von der Leyen of pushing Paris to ditch him.

But von der Leyen also looks to have fallen short in her push to get a gender-balanced administration, as countries largely snubbed her request for both a man and woman candidate.

The choice of who gets which job is seen as a clear indication of where Brussels wants to steer the European Union.

Faced with Russia’s war in Ukraine, the potential return of Donald Trump as US president and competition from China – the formation of the new commission comes at a crucial moment.

“Choices are the hinges of destiny. And in a world full of adversity, Europe’s destiny hinges on what we do next,” said von der Leyen in July, as she secured a new mandate.

– Who gets what? –

Von der Leyen has placed bolstering Europe's economic competitiveness at the heart of her new agenda as the continent struggles to keep pace with Beijing and Washington.

Heavyweight France has been angling to lead that push and President Emmanuel Macron should see his new pick, outgoing foreign minister Stephane Sejourne, land a key role.

A desire to maintain the EU's support for Ukraine and face off against the threat from Russia will also shape the new team.

Former Estonian prime minister Kaja Kallas, a hawkish critic of the Kremlin, has already been tapped as the bloc's next foreign policy chief.

Von der Leyen has also promised to designate a commissioner for defence charged expressly with bolstering Europe's faltering efforts to rearm.

That job could go to another of the EU countries bordering Russia – signalling a potential shift of gravity eastwards inside the bloc.

In a nod to gains made by the far right at European elections in June, von der Leyen is expected to make Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's pick a commission vice president.

But naming Rome's Europe minister Raffaele Fitto, a member of Meloni's post-fascist Brothers of Italy party, to such a senior post has sparked outrage from centrist and left-wing groups.

After losses by Green parties at the June ballot, defending the environment has skidded down the list of priorities in Brussels.

Von der Leyen has pledged to "stay the course" on the EU's flagship "Green Deal" drive – while promising to "reconcile climate protection with a prosperous economy."

Advocacy groups are rooting for Spain’s candidate Teresa Ribera, a socialist climate campaigner, to get the portfolio.

All the would-be commissioners will need to win over broad political support as they have to still get approval from the European Parliament.

Hearings are set to start in Brussels in the coming weeks and lawmakers could flex their muscles by rejecting some candidates.

Chief among those suspected for the chopping block are Hungary’s Oliver Varhelyi, nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s man in Brussels over the past five years. The stated target is to have a new commission in place by November 1 – but diplomats warn that looks like an ambitious goal.

Adding to the potential delays is a stand-off in Slovenia over the country’s choice after von der Leyen seemingly pressured the prime minister into swapping a woman for a man.

AFP