

”History is watching us”

The use of history in Ursula von der Leyen’s speeches 2019-2024

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Laatija:
Katariina Niskanen

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In this thesis, I analyze how the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, used history in her official speeches during her first term in office 2019-2024. Von der Leyen delivered 434 speeches from November, 2019 to June, 2024. My research aim is to identify the historical references and arguments used in the speeches, place them in historical context and critically assess the purpose and objective of the arguments.

As the categorization for the analysis of historical arguments, I use the four dimensions presented by Pertti Grönholm and Heino Nyyssönen in their article “Historian käyttö ennen ja nyt – faktana ja fiktiona”. These categories are the existential, moral, political and ideological uses of history. The existential and political categories have the most substance to them from von der Leyen’s speeches. The existential use of history focuses on the questions of European identity and integration while the political use of history legitimizes the exercise of power.

Von der Leyen uses history in her speeches mainly to strengthen the legitimacy of the EU and to justify the need for the policy decisions made by her Commission and, on the other hand, to strengthen the unity and cohesion of Europe and to demand solidarity from the Member States. The references to history in von der Leyen’s speeches focus most prominently to the main events of the 20th century: the World War II, the Holocaust and the early stages of European integration. Most events prior to World War I are not mentioned, and the awkward topics of colonialism and imperialism are conspicuous in their absence. Additionally, topics important from a German perspective are highlighted at the expense of other European historical experiences, most clearly in the emphasis on the unique nature of the Holocaust.

Key words: use of history, Ursula von der Leyen, European Union, European Commission

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Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkin historian käyttöä Euroopan komission puheenjohtaja Ursula von der Leyenin puheissa hänen ensimmäisellä puheenjohtajakaudellaan vuosina 2019-2024. Marraskuun 2019 ja kesäkuun 2024 välisenä aikana von der Leyen piti 434 virallista puhetta. Tutkimukseni tavoitteena on tunnistaa puheissa käytetyt historialliset viittaukset ja argumentit, sijoittaa ne historialliseen kontekstiinsa sekä arvioida kriittisesti niiden tarkoitusta ja tavoitetta.

Analyysin luokitteluna hyödynnän Pertti Grönholmin ja Heino Nyysösen artikkelissa ”Historian käyttö ennen ja nyt – faktana ja fiktiona” esiteltyjä neljää historian käytön ulottuvuutta. Nämä ulottuvuudet tai kategoriat ovat historian eksistentiaalinen, moraalinen, poliittinen ja ideologinen käyttö. Ursula von der Leyenin puheissa yleisimmät historian käytön tavat sijoittuvat eksistentiaaliseen tai poliittiseen ulottuvuuteen. Eksistentiaalinen historian käyttö keskittyy Euroopan integraatioon ja identiteettiin liittyviin kysymyksiin, kun taas poliittinen historian käyttö legitimoisi vallan käyttöä.

Von der Leyen käyttää historiaa puheissa pääasiassa vahvistaakseen EU:n legitimitettä ja perustellaakseen komission poliittisten päätösten tarpeellisuutta, sekä toisaalta vahvistaakseen Euroopan yhtenäisyyttä ja vaatiakseen jäsenvaltioilta lisää solidaarisuutta. Historialliset viittaukset puheissa keskittyvät pitkälti 1900-luvun suuriin tapahtumiin: toiseen maailmansotaan, holokaustiin ja Euroopan integraation ensivaiheisiin. Suurin osa ensimmäistä maailmansotaa edeltäneistä tapahtumista ei tule puheissa mainituksi, ja erityisesti Euroopassa edelleen kiusalliset imperialismiin ja kolonialismiin liittyvät kysymykset loistavat poissaolollaan. Lisäksi saksalaisesta näkökulmasta tärkeät aiheet korostuvat muiden eurooppalaisten historiallisten kokemusten kustannuksella, mikä näkyy selkeimmin holokaustin ainutlaatuisuuden korostamisessa.

Avainsanat: historian käyttö, Ursula von der Leyen, Euroopan unioni, Euroopan komissio

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1 Introduction

On July 16th, 2019, the European Parliament elected Ursula von der Leyen – a German politician, at the time serving as the Minister of Defense – as the first-ever female President of the European Commission, succeeding Jean-Claude Juncker in the role. The vote in the Parliament was extremely tight: von der Leyen was elected with 383 favorable votes while the threshold needed to be elected was 374. Prior to the Parliament's vote, von der Leyen was nominated for the highest seat of the European Commission by the European Council, despite the fact that she wasn't the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidaten*) of any political group.¹

Thus, von der Leyen rose to power in the European Commission from the sidelines. Some analysts argue, in fact, that she was only able to take office because the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure effectively failed, and she was perhaps the only candidate that could be accepted by the majority of MEPs.² Nevertheless, von der Leyen was able to consolidate her power quickly and make the position her own. Von der Leyen's election as the President of the European Commission marked a symbolic and strategic shift in the European Union's institutional profile, a much wider transformation than solely the often-emphasized gender dimension. Contrary to the initial expectations, she has turned out to be a strong leader and has redefined leadership within the Union towards a more politicized and personalized model.³ Indeed, after five years, von der Leyen was re-elected as Commission President in the summer of 2024 with a strong margin: 401 MEPs favored her for the post.

1.1 Research questions and previous research

In this thesis, I analyze the use of history in Ursula von der Leyen's official speeches during her first term as the President of the European Commission in 2019-2024. My research aim is to identify the historical references and arguments used in the speeches, place them in historical context and critically assess the objective or purpose of the arguments. Von der Leyen's first five-year term was tumultuous and riddled by a series of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, the European Union (EU) had its internal struggles with Brexit and the democratic decline in some member states. Pentti Grönholm and Heino Nyssönen state that the most dramatic aspects of the use of

¹ Bernard 2024, 1.

² Johansson et al. 2022, 2.

³ Stavolo 2026, 2093-2094.

history are often seen in conflict situations, especially when it comes to war and peace. Historical arguments can either be used to foment the conflict or to build trust.⁴ Therefore, I think especially the timeframe of the past five years is relevant to research regarding the use of history. Analyzing von der Leyen's speeches is important because her words matter to the development of the EU and to the internal decisions made in the member states. Also, how she talks about history in her speeches, mostly reflects the EU's official stands on the past issues.

Von der Leyen delivered 434 speeches in her first term, the first one on November 8th, 2019 and her last one before being re-elected on June 29th, 2024. The references to history in the speeches are diverse: from the Second World War, Holocaust and the establishment of the European Communities to the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Brexit referendum in 2016. She talks frequently about her own past as well, for example her childhood in Brussels and her time as a federal minister in Germany. In my thesis, I regard as *history* all the events and phenomena that happened before the first examined speech took place, that is, all the past events before 8.11.2019. In her speeches von der Leyen uses the words European Union and Europe often as synonyms. Therefore, also in my analysis, these words shall be interchangeable unless otherwise mentioned.

When using von der Leyen's speeches as the primary source, I analyze not only references to Europe's collective, commonly known history but also to von der Leyen's own past experiences and memories as well. Therefore, it is important to address the concept of memory. "Memory is understood as the individual or collective interpretation and elaboration of historical events that can change over time. It is thus different from history", Aline Sierp states. Our memories are selective, malleable and subjective and they cannot be treated as a source providing historical facts.⁵ These insights are important to take into consideration when analyzing the parts of speeches where von der Leyen talks about her personal past. More broadly, also, the focus in this thesis is on von der Leyen's *interpretations* of the past, not in her recollection of how things actually were.

The use of history in political speeches and debates has been researched in great quantities, by historians and other researchers alike. For example, German historian Karl-Georg Faber and Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan have each contributed to the research on the uses and

⁴ Grönholm and Nyssönen 2019, 7.

⁵ Sierp 2026, 4; MacMillan 2009, 45-46.

abuses of history in politics, focusing on why political actors choose to use history in a variety of situations and what can be achieved by it.⁶ Similarly, in Finland, Pilvi Torsti and Juhana Aunesluoma as well as Heino Nyysönen and Jussi Metsälä (and many others) have studied the role of history in international politics, society and scientific research.⁷ All have come to the conclusion that using history as an argument in political debate is very common, although the political and historical context is not always clear. The past abounds with lessons to be learned and advice offered that can be used for almost anything in the present. Also, as many scholars agree, use of history is always a reflection of the world we live in now as the present determines which parts of the past are considered meaningful.

The most important piece of research for my thesis regarding the use of history is the article “Historian käyttö ennen ja nyt – faktana ja fiktiona” (2019) by Pertti Grönholm and Heino Nyysönen. In their article, the authors focus on what the “use of history” actually means, who are the actors using history and what are the common purposes in using historical knowledge or narratives. They also present a categorization for different uses of history that I utilize as the basis for my analysis of the historical references in von der Leyen’s speeches. I discuss the categories more in depth in sub-chapter 1.4. as well as later in the thesis.

As the mentioned examples of research literature illustrate, often the research on use of history focuses on arguments in political debate on a general level or, alternatively, on national actors using history, like the President of Russia or the leader of China. There is less research on the use of history by international and regional organizations, such as the European Union. Research on the use of history comes close to research on collective memory and memory politics which, too, has a lack of research on the EU level. There is, however, some fruitful research that deals with use of history and memories also at the institutional level in the EU. For example, *Handbook on the politics of memory* (2023), edited by Maria Mälksoo discusses the political utilization of memories and interpretations of the past very comprehensively. Among many other perspectives, the book addresses also the memory politics of the EU. Additionally, Aline Sierp has studied the EU’s use of past interpretations in multiple articles, most recent of which dealt with the use of memory and

⁶ *The Use of History in Political Debate* (1978), Faber; *The Uses and Abuses of History* (2009), MacMillan.

⁷ *Historian käyttö yhteiskunnassa ja tutkimuksessa* (2009), Torsti and Aunesluoma; *Historian uusi rooli kansainvälisessä politiikassa, onko sellaista?* (2015), Nyysönen and Metsälä.

emotions by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in their discussions on Russia's war on Ukraine.⁸

The European Commission, and in the recent years also Ursula von der Leyen as the Commission President, have both been a common topic for research. The work of von der Leyen's first Commission has been reviewed, for instance, by Elise Bernard as well as Markus Johansson, Valentin Kreilinger and Anna Wetter Ryde. They have given insight on how von der Leyen's Commission was able to navigate through crises and stick to the priorities and goals set at the beginning of the five-year term.⁹ Henriette Müller has studied the role of the President of the European Commission and the wide set of political demands and expectations that the President faces. Müller's research is important in understanding the institutional context Ursula von der Leyen and her predecessors have worked in and what, overall, is possible for the President to achieve in their role.¹⁰ Also, von der Leyen's speeches have been studied quite a lot, usually focusing on her rhetoric or political communication. For example, Agostino Stavolo has analyzed von der Leyen's institutional and social media communication through a cross-platform discourse analysis while Anna Kyriazi has analyzed the crisis communication of Ursula von der Leyen and her predecessors.¹¹ Von der Leyen's life and career prior to her post as the Commission President has been explored by Joyce Marie Mushaben, among others. Mushaben's work helps in creating a longer-term picture of von der Leyen's political priorities as well as her rise to power as a Federal Minister in Germany.¹²

There seems to be a gap in research for a comprehensive analysis of the use of history in Ursula von der Leyen's speeches covering her full first term as the Commission President between the years 2019 and 2024. This thesis also contributes more generally to the research on the use of history on the European level.

⁸ *The past as a resource – memory and emotions in Russia's war on Ukraine* (2026), Sierp.

⁹ *A review of the von der Leyen I Commission (2019-2024)* (2024), Bernard; *Taking Stock of the EU Institutions in the 2019-2024 Term* (2022), Johansson, Kreilinger and Wetter Ryde.

¹⁰ *Political Leadership and the European Commission Presidency* (2020), Müller.

¹¹ *Speaking as a woman: the political communication of Ursula von der Leyen* (2026), Stavolo; *Framing the EU polity: how Commission presidents address crises and shape the Union* (2026), Kyriazi.

¹² *Against All Odds: Angela Merkel, Ursula von der Leyen, Annngret Kramp-Karrenbauer and the German Paradox of Female CDU Leadership* (2022), Mushaben.

1.2 The European Commission and the Commission President

European Commission is one of the European Union's official decision-making institutions based in Brussels. The Commission is the executive branch of the EU, and its mission is to represent the EU's general interest "with complete independence from EU Member States' national governments", according to the European Commission's website. The Commission has monopoly on legislative initiative and executive powers in important policy areas, such as external trade and competition. The Commission also oversees Member States' compliance, that is, the respect for the Treaties and the Union law. The Commission chairs the committees responsible for the implementation of EU law.¹³ Thus, the Commission has plenty of tasks, however, its overall legislative activity has declined since the late 20th century, according to Markus Johansson, Valentin Kreilinger and Anna Wetter Ryde.¹⁴

The European Commission is led by a President whose role resembles broadly a national head of government. Henriette Müller argues, however, that the Commission President faces a more complex environment, is subject to stricter constraints and has less access to available resources than a national leader. Therefore, the office can prove to be a difficult post: on one hand, there are strong political demands facing the president while on the other hand the president has only weak institutional powers to execute these demands. Individual presidencies are difficult to compare though, due to the constantly changing situational and institutional context. Nevertheless, Müller states that there have been major differences between the performance of Commission presidents in the past 60 years and that the post does provide potential for strong political leadership if the president is capable and willing to act on it.¹⁵

The Commission consists of 27 Commissioners – one from each Member State – and it is formed every five years after the European Parliament elections. One of the first votes for the new Parliament is approving the European Council's choice for the President of the Commission. After that is settled, Member States choose their candidates as Commissioners which the Commission's political leadership then appoints and, again, the Parliament votes for their approval in confidence votes. Only after full approval for the whole College of

¹³ "History of the European Commission – EC Library Guide." European Commission's website. <<https://ec-europa-eu.libguides.com/ec-history/introduction>> [read 6.10.2025]

¹⁴ Johansson et al. 2022, 6.

¹⁵ Müller 2020, 1.

Commissioners, the European Commission can begin its work.¹⁶ For the first von der Leyen Commission, for example, this process took approximately five months after the election. Von der Leyen's first Commission was the first gender-balanced College in the history of the EU: she led a team of 14 men and 13 women.

As previously stated, Ursula von der Leyen was proposed as the Commission President in July 2019 as a surprise candidate. Prior to her EU job, von der Leyen worked as the Minister for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth (2005-2009), Minister of Labour and Social Affairs (2009-2013) and Minister of Defence (2013-2019) in Germany.¹⁷ In the European Union, von der Leyen represents the Group of the European People's Party (EPP). EPP is a center-right political group that has dominated the European Parliament with the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) for years. EPP and S&D have together formed an absolute majority of the Parliament's seats, commonly known as the 'grand coalition'. This majority has been challenged only in recent years by other political groups.¹⁸

The European Parliament only gave a grumbling 'yes' to von der Leyen's nomination in the summer of 2019. To give their approval, many of the political groups were able to influence – at least to an extent – the priorities of the new Commission. Johansson, Kreilinger and Wetter Ryde state that the groups in the political mainstream pressured von der Leyen when she presented herself after being proposed as the President of the Commission by the European Council. As a result, the approved Commission Priorities for 2019-2024 were accommodating to multiple fronts. Johansson, Kreilinger and Wetter Ryde argue that, for example, the European Green Deal – one of the most important initiatives of the first von der Leyen Commission – and her promise to “forge a ‘special relationship’ between the Commission and Parliament” were policies that were influenced by the political groups.¹⁹

1.3 Ursula von der Leyen's speeches as research material

Public speeches are a widely used primary source for historians as well as for researchers in other fields. Generally, researchers of speech or “speech scientists” as Jaakko Lehtonen and Pertti Hurme call them, are interested in how people communicate: what do people do when

¹⁶ "Fact Sheets on the European Union: The European Commission". European Parliament's website. <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/25/the-european-commission>> [read 30.3.2026]

¹⁷ Mushaben 2022, 21, 24-25.

¹⁸ Ahrens et al. 2022, 2.

¹⁹ Johansson et al. 2022, 9.

they talk and listen. The research is focused on the interactional situation where language and speech are used. Lehtonen and Hurme state that “utterances (or ‘sentences’) are not abstractions occurring in isolation. On the contrary, they always have a sender, a receiver and an intention, and they are always produced in a given situation”.²⁰ In other words, speeches are always situation-specific, and their context is one of the most important things to take into account when using speeches as a primary source.

According to Paul Readman, public speeches of statesmen and politicians can be used in contemporary history research, for example, to examine the ideological outlook of the speaker, the character of contemporary political discourse and popular political culture, the speaker’s public presentation and argumentation style as well as the form and content of the speech itself.²¹ It is important to remember, however, that speeches of high-level politicians are carefully drafted – hours can be used to plan them – and they often reveal only what the speaker wants them to reveal. The starting point for “speech scientists” is actually not the language of the speech but instead the individual speaker: their attitudes, motivations, needs and the communicative means which they apply to reach their goals. The form and content of the speech is heavily influenced by the speaker’s attitudes, intentions and knowledge in a given time and social setting.²² Thus, before analyzing the language of the speech itself, it is essential to consider who is giving the speech, where, when and to whom.

Like all primary sources, speeches present historians and other researchers with interpretive or methodological problems. It is quite straightforward to analyze the construction and content of a speech but much more difficult to assess or prove their contemporary impact on politics and society. Political statements are also made up of terms of many origins, and they can bear many possible indications and convey more than one meaning. However, Readman states that scholars should not neglect the “relationship between what politicians said and what they did, between rhetoric and legislation, platform oratory and policy-making.”²³ In my thesis, instead of trying to prove the impact of von der Leyen’s words to Europe’s development or the effectiveness of her arguments, I focus on assessing the objective of the arguments and why she chose to refer to certain historical events.

²⁰ Lehtonen and Hurme 1979, 3.

²¹ Readman 2020, 241-242.

²² Lehtonen and Hurme 1979, 4.

²³ Readman 2020, 243-244, 246.

As my primary data, I use Ursula von der Leyen's official speeches as the President of the European Commission during her first term in office. She was elected as the President on July 16th, 2019. Von der Leyen's first Commission started its work as a full College officially on December 1st, however, von der Leyen held her first speeches as the President-elect already earlier. Her first speech was delivered on November 8th, 2019. She held her last speech before being re-elected on June 29th, 2024. Overall, during her first term in office, von der Leyen held 434 official speeches.

Von der Leyen leads the European Commission which is the principal executive body of the European Union. As the President, she faces strong political demands and is often assumed to mediate consensus and help foster positive views of the EU institutions and European integration in the European public sphere.²⁴ Von der Leyen's speeches are an effective way in promoting the positive impact of the European Union and the Commission, and a majority of the speeches focus – at least in part – to the past and future work of the Commission. The success story of European integration and the EU's role as a defender of peace since World War II (1939-1945) are also continuous themes in her speeches.

When analyzing von der Leyen's speeches, it is particularly important to take into consideration the character of them. The Commission President's public speeches are carefully drafted, high-level addresses in a clearly defined social context. They do not reveal anything from behind the scenes or give the President a chance to speak freely. Instead, they represent the official stands of the President and the Commission and portray the image they want to publicly build about the EU, European history and European integration among other things.

Even though von der Leyen represents the European Commission, she is not solely an agent of the EU institutions but also brings in her own political views and past experiences. She is a woman and a mother, a German who has also spent years of her life in Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States. She is a politician from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany and the European People's Party (EPP) in the EU, and has worked as a federal minister in Germany for 14 years. When analyzing the use of history in her speeches, these factors should be taken into consideration.

²⁴ Müller 2020, 2.

All the speeches by the President of the European Commission, as well as other Commissioners, can be found on the European Commission's Press Corner, a website that publishes press material from the Commission Spokepersons' Service. According to the website, The Spokepersons's Service (SPP) is the official voice of the European Commission vis-à-vis the media and the main point of contact for media organisations. The Service organizes events for the media, such as briefings and press conferences. In addition to Commissioners' speeches, the Press Corner publishes a wide range of other documents from the European Commission: daily news, fact sheets, press releases and statements from different policy areas. Von der Leyen's speeches are published in Press Corner in text but also in video format.²⁵ In my analysis, I have only read the content of the speeches in text format.

The material in Press Corner can be filtered through the date of publication, document type, policy area and the Commissioner responsible for the matter. Material can also be searched with the help of keywords. I searched for von der Leyen's speeches between July 16th, 2019, and July 18th, 2024 (her re-election date). As the document type I chose "speech" and as the Commissioner, naturally, Ursula von der Leyen. This search returned the 434 speeches which I am utilizing in this thesis.

The original language of virtually all the material in Press Corner is English, French or German. Unquestionably the largest portion of material is in English, however, most of the time there are translations available in French and German. Some pieces such as the State of the Union addresses and important press releases, are translated into all the 24 official languages of the European Union. The documents that aren't officially translated are always available as machine translations; however, the European Commission cannot guarantee the accuracy of them and is not responsible for the errors. Therefore, analyzing the speeches in their original language, English, allows for the most accurate understanding of for example the rhetoric and vocabulary. Most of von der Leyen's speeches are fully in English, however, there are 22 speeches that are entirely in German and 4 that are entirely in French. On top of these there are some speeches that are mostly in English but include some sections in German and French. Especially in the beginning of her term, von der Leyen preferred to use more

²⁵ "Commission's Spokeperson's Service". European Commission's website. <https://commission.europa.eu/about/contact/press-services/press-contacts/commissions-spokepersons-service_en> [read 18.9.2025]; "Press Corner". European Commission's website. <<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>> [read 3.3.2025]

often all the three languages. For these speeches and sections, I've had to rely on machine translations and the translator in Mot Sanakirjat -website.

It is not evident, however, that the language differences would in any meaningful way affect the message or even the vocabulary choices in von der Leyen's speeches. When talking about the Commission's initiatives or votes coming up in the European Parliament, she might use the exact same sentences in multiple speeches delivered in different forums, also in German and French. Of course, the themes might differ – to an extent – by language. Many of her speeches in German are delivered at events or forums in her home country Germany, therefore she often at least touches upon her own past in the country. However, even then, she is holding the speeches as the President of the European Commission and therefore, the specific language used in the speeches is virtually no different to other speeches delivered in English or French.

The first speech von der Leyen delivered as President-elect of the Commission was held on November 8th, 2019, in Pariser Platz, Berlin as part of the Allianz Forum -event. The speech commemorated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Von der Leyen talked about the event as “the culmination of a European movement for freedom” but also addressed it from a specifically German perspective. Furthermore, she touched upon future issues that her new Commission would have to deal with, such as climate change, Brexit and Europe's relations with Russia and China.²⁶ Before being re-elected as the President of the Commission in July 2024, Von der Leyen delivered her last speech on June 29th, with Egyptian president EI-Sisi at the EU-Egypt Investment Conference. In this speech she emphasized the magnitude of a new Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership agreement between the EU and Egypt and stated that “Egypt and Europe are closer than ever before”.²⁷

Between these two, significantly different speeches there are hundreds of others. The speeches are heterogeneous in length, topic and style. The data includes for example four annual State of the European Union -addresses (2020-2023), other speeches held in the European Parliament Plenary around a variety of topics, video messages in conferences and laudation speeches at award ceremonies. On the European Commission's website, the length

²⁶ Von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, “Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin”.

²⁷ Von der Leyen, 29.6.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen with Egyptian President El-Sisi at the EU-Egypt Investment Conference”.

of the speeches is presented in their reading time. The speeches vary anywhere from 1-minute reading time (a few chapters) to 41-minute reading time (multiple pages). The average reading time for one speech is a few minutes. The only speeches crossing the 30-minute reading time threshold are the State of the European Union addresses.

The years with the most speeches are 2021 (113 speeches) and 2023 (110 speeches). In 2022 von der Leyen held 83 speeches while in 2020 the amount was only 66. Naturally, the years with the least speeches are her election year of 2019 and her re-election year of 2024: in November-December 2019 she held 15 speeches and in the first six months of 2024 before her re-election 47 speeches.

The COVID-19 pandemic is evident in the number of von der Leyen's speeches. In early 2020, the pandemic struck around the world and Europe effectively closed down in March. Many conferences and other events, where the Commission President was scheduled to speak, had to be cancelled, although some were also able to quickly transfer to distant events via video. Regardless, the difference is stark: von der Leyen held 8 speeches in March, April and May of 2020 altogether while in January alone, she held 14 speeches. However, when video conferences held via communications platforms became more widespread, the amount of von der Leyen's speeches only grew. As mentioned above, 2021 was the top year in von der Leyen's first term with 113 speeches, almost double the amount of 2020 (66). Video format gave von der Leyen the possibility to give more speeches than before, sometimes even multiple speeches at multiple different events on the same day.

After reading through the speeches initially, I could disregard nearly a quarter of them as they included no references to history. Most of these 106 disregarded speeches were very brief press statements or speeches at events around specific topics, such as green hydrogen, cancer or the future of agriculture. Thus, for the overall analysis of the use of history, I am utilizing 328 Ursula von der Leyen's speeches which all have more or less references to history.

1.4 Methodological approach: analyzing the use of history

The *use of history* is a multidimensional concept and can refer to different things in different contexts. For instance, information about the past may be used to justify an argument. This information could be knowledge acquired through first-hand experience, general knowledge that is widely shared in a community or specific knowledge produced by recent research. The use of history can also have rhetorical value, especially in day-to-day conversations, or

political value in high-level speeches. According to Grönholm and Nyysönen, the use of history as a phenomenon cannot be separated from an understanding of the world that emphasizes historical or temporal change.²⁸ Inevitably, historical consciousness is a part of the present and historical interpretations carry significant implications for people's lives, especially in the realm of politics and public presentations. Debates over contemporary history are, unavoidably, also debates over the present.²⁹

In their article, Grönholm and Nyysönen talk about a current "period of presentism", meaning an era where the past has become an extended part of the present, especially in politics and culture. They quote French historian François Hartog who has written about the topic and stated that after the Second World War and especially during the 1970-1980s, a habit of viewing the past as part of the present evolved. According to Hartog, this new way of thinking was characterized, for example, by "an obsessive need to forget nothing". Presentism brings history as an integral part of our everyday life and, instead of seeing the past as a different world which we can learn from, the past is now often imagined as something that corresponds to the ideals and dreams of modern people. Grönholm and Nyysönen argue that through the use of history, the aim is often to understand the present by comparing it to the events of the past. Thus, the unique nature of past events is questioned. Karl-Georg Faber, a German historian, highlights the same point in his article and states that the borderline between past and present has become fluid³⁰

Our perception of the past is constructed and re-constructed all the time. Historians but also politicians, like von der Leyen, take active part in this process. It is important to note that the present determines which parts of the past are considered meaningful. The relationship between past events to other events is not predetermined. Using history as an argument is still quite common in politics according to Heino Nyysönen and Jussi Metsälä, although the political and historical context are not always clear in the argumentation. History – or perceptions of history – is regardless a practical tool that policy makers can use to their advantage in public debate. The use of history in politics is almost self-evident, however, not always successful.³¹

²⁸ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 8-10.

²⁹ Fulbrook 2004, 38, 41.

³⁰ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 7, 11; Faber 1978, 44.

³¹ Nyysönen and Metsälä 2015, 282, 284-285.

Using history does not, of course, only mean using historical facts or commonly accepted views in argument. The past events can also be distorted to fit the agenda of the speaker or writer. Margaret MacMillan argues that there are so many lessons to be learned from history and so much advice offered that it is easy to pick and choose only exactly what you want from it. The past can be used for almost anything in the present. Therefore, using history and also researching the use of history has to be done with care. The use of history can be researched to explore, for instance, how history is used to influence people and government or manipulate political campaigns and religious movements. As noted earlier, in some circumstances, the research on use of history comes close to the research on collective memory. Remembering the past collectively can also be one way to use history in political (or other) settings and strengthen the identity of the reminiscing group.³²

I analyze the historical references in Ursula von der Leyen's speeches by dividing them into four categories, as presented by Pertti Grönholm and Heino Nyysönen in their article "Historian käyttö ennen ja nyt – faktana ja fiktiona". These four categories, or dimensions, as Grönholm and Nyysönen call them, are the existential, moral, political and ideological uses of history. This typology is intended as a tool for identifying the different functions and purposes of the use of history. The categorization presented in Grönholm and Nyysönen's article is based on the work of Klas-Göran Karlsson, Meike Wulf, Ulf Zander and Grönholm himself.³³ There are, naturally, many other ways to categorize the use of history in public presentations as well. However, I consider Grönholm and Nyysönen's categories to be particularly comprehensive and well-articulated which is why I chose to use them for my thesis.

Grönholm and Nyysönen emphasize that although forgetting is not a category in itself, it is integrated in all of the four dimensions. The past events, experiences and actors that are highlighted by historians and public figures influence what is remembered and what is ultimately forgotten. Furthermore, what we remember can be consciously influenced by emphasizing certain narratives and interpretations. Grönholm and Nyysönen also note that all the categories or dimensions presented in their article can be considered political but not merely political.³⁴ This is also obvious in von der Leyen's speeches and in my categorization.

³² Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 10; MacMillan 2009, xiii.

³³ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 17–18.

³⁴ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 18.

Essentially, everything the Commission President talks about in official speeches has political reasons behind it.

The existential, moral, political and ideological dimensions also form the disposition of my thesis. In each category I look into the central themes that arise in von der Leyen's speeches within that specific category, relating both to Europe's collective history as well as her personal past. Naturally, the dimensions somewhat overlap, which is why I have made certain choices to adjust the categories to fit the context of my research as well as to distinguish them from each other better. The categories are presented in more detail in the beginning of each chapter.

The reason I have decided to include von der Leyen's personal past in a thesis analyzing *use of history* is simply the fact that it cannot be ignored. Von der Leyen talks about her personal memories often in her speeches and they are used also to justify policy decisions made by her Commission or the need for initiatives she is promoting. As Pilvi Torsti and Juhana Aunesluoma point out in their editorial "Historian käyttö yhteiskunnassa ja tutkimuksessa", the research on the use of history includes collective as well as private perceptions of the past.³⁵

When analyzing the use of history, it is important to consider the context dependency, as is the case also when examining speeches. Understanding the context is crucial to understanding historical references and arguments. Who is using history and why? What underlying assumptions or presuppositions may affect their view? Analyzing the use of history is meaningful not only to understand the past but more importantly to understand the present. For example, when analyzing the use of history in von der Leyen's speeches, it is essential to consider what position she is talking from. Von der Leyen's Germanness is often evident in the speeches and naturally affects how she views and talks about history. Von der Leyen does, of course, at least to an extent, recognize the effect of her Germanness to her view of the past. For example, in her speech on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January 2022, she calls herself "a German with Europe in her heart" and talks about the deep scars in Germany's history and the indelible responsibility she feels. The responsibility to keep the

³⁵ Torsti and Aunesluoma 2009, 279.

memory of the Holocaust and other terrible past events alive is collective for all of Europe, but as a German, von der Leyen feels this responsibility as especially heavy.³⁶

Contemporary history in Germany is a highly sensitive issue. More specifically, Germany's characteristic, infamous problem of 'overcoming the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) still today affects how Germans view their history. The issue has been especially tangible since World War II and the crimes of the Nazi regime but Seppo Hentilä argues that the problem dates all the way back to the 19th century. Germans have had more issues than other Europeans in dealing with the guilt and responsibility of the crimes of their predecessors. In Germany, the view of the recent past, mainly the 20th century, has been almost exclusively negative. According to Hentilä, this trauma of the past has instilled into Germans a fear of history repeating itself. Any historical interpretation by any actor comes with political overtones but, as Mary Fulbrook emphasizes, "contemporary history in Germany is particularly littered with the debris".³⁷ Therefore, taking into account Ursula von der Leyen's German nationality and Germany's struggles with their history is essential in my analysis.

Next, I delve into the existential use of history in von der Leyen's speeches through the themes of European identity and community-building.

³⁶ Von der Leyen, 27.1.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the solemn ceremony on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day".

³⁷ Hentilä 1994, 12-13, 203; Fulbrook 2004, 31-32.

2 The existential use of history: identity and community

The existential dimension of the use of history is usually strongly linked to the identity construction and self-awareness of a community. It appeals powerfully to both individual and shared emotions and aims to answer the questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Existential use of history aims to socialize and integrate the members of the community. Narratives about the past (legends, symbols, myths) can be drawn for the community's use in both the good times as well as the bad times. Existential use of history can also guide communal ways of remembering. Some concrete examples of the existential use of history are memorials, commemorative events and anniversaries as well as the activities of memory institutions such as archives, libraries and museums (although these institutions, naturally, have other functions as well). According to Grönholm and Nyysönen, the existential dimension can also be seen in the concepts and phrases used by the community to build narratives of the past, such as *reconstruction*, *Western integration* and *the Continuation War*.³⁸

In the context of the European Union and Ursula von der Leyen, I focus the existential dimension especially on questions about European identity, the sense of community within Europeans as well as European integration. The founding fathers and their legacy is an important part of the birth story of the European Community and often referenced in von der Leyen's speeches, along with the narrative of the European Union as a "necessary" peace project after the horrors of World War II. Thus, the existential dimension of the use of history touches upon schemes of survival, loss, reconstruction and integration. In Grönholm and Nyysönen's article, the existential dimension is also linked to identification and differentiation both within as well as between communities. However, I leave the question of differentiation and "the other" mostly to the ideological dimension (chapter 5) in my work.

Existential can also be personal. Therefore, in the context of the existential use of history, I examine also von der Leyen's personal past. Who is she? Where has she come from? Where is she going? This dimension includes for example memories of her childhood and upbringing, the development of the values that have steered her political career and the lessons she learned as a young woman – essentially the paths that led her to where she is now.

³⁸ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 18–19.

The following three sub-chapters reflect the existential use of history in von der Leyen's speeches. First, I talk about the historical references regarding European identity as well as European integration as an inevitable process that now needs to be completed. Second, I discuss the European founding fathers and mothers who are often referenced in von der Leyen's speeches. These European founders are the men and women who were the main architects and implementers of European integration after World War II. In the third sub-chapter I examine references in von der Leyen's speeches to her personal history, mainly her childhood, upbringing and major life events that have strongly affected the course of her life.

2.1 "Unite the entire European family" – European identity and integration

The European Union is a community of millions of people from different countries, nationalities, languages and societies. The similarities between people in this large group are therefore mostly abstract and vague. Regardless, it is important for the European Union to display a common identity and to be able to speak with one voice. Therefore, also Ursula von der Leyen as the Commission President actively constructs a common European identity in her speeches with the help of historical references. She talks about the Europeans' common values, shared history and democracy as uniting factors that brought European countries together after World War II and still motivate the current candidate countries on their journey into the EU. In this sub-chapter, I explore von der Leyen's historical references regarding European identity, community and integration. With these references, von der Leyen provides answers to the existential questions of "who are we" and "where are we going".

The core of the common European identity is summarized in the European Union's motto, "United in diversity", which was first adopted in 2000. According to the European Union's website, the motto signifies how Europeans have come together to work on peace and prosperity while also being enriched by the many cultures, languages and traditions on the continent.³⁹ Von der Leyen mentions the EU's motto in her speeches several times in connection with Europe's history. She calls the motto Europe's promise and mission. In her speech at the 2021 Anti-Racism Summit, she recalls on the late 1990s when European students chose the motto for the EU: "It was just perfect. In just three words, they summed up our Union's *raison d'être*, and our greatest aspiration. Our starting point and our destination". Von der Leyen says that Europe's history is, in fact, a history of diversity and that the people

³⁹ "EU motto". The European Union's website. <https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/eu-motto_en> [read 16.2.2026]

who fought for liberation during World War II and afterwards for European integration were united in diversity. They had different backgrounds, political views and religions but they all fought for the same cause: a peaceful future for Europe.⁴⁰ Von der Leyen portrays this example from the past as an inspiration for the EU's work still today. In essence, the idea of the European Union has not changed from the early days: it is still based on people from different backgrounds working together towards common goals.

What drives Europeans from different countries and societies to work together though? Von der Leyen's answer is the common European values: "Democracy. The rule of law. Rights and liberties for all". She talks about the common values of the EU in her speech on the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty. She says that the Treaty – signed in 2007, entered into force in 2009 – went to the core of European identity and gave Europe a soul. Von der Leyen emphasizes that Europe was always meant to be more than a single market and with the Lisbon Treaty, the EU rediscovered its vocation to truly be a Union. The Lisbon Treaty, according to von der Leyen, gave Europe something it was missing: a democratic identity.⁴¹ The Treaty enhanced the EU's democratic legitimacy and strengthened the role of the democratically elected European Parliament, for example by giving it the power to elect the Commission President. Here von der Leyen is showing her support for the current power dynamics in the Union and also arguably aiming to highlight that the Treaty has everything the EU needs to handle the crises of our time, such as climate change and democratic decline in some Member States.

As illustrated above through the lens of von der Leyen's speeches, European identity can seem quite ambiguous and indefinite. This is also presumably the intention. Why is this vague identity so important to the EU? Markus J. Prutsch argues that it is necessary for the EU to foster a European sense of belonging among citizens if the Union wants to endure as a political entity. The required corresponding legitimacy and public support can be gained by building a common feeling of belonging. Collective identities are not natural or fixed but instead constructed, dynamic and learned. Therefore, building a European identity requires effort from the top. Prutsch also highlights that history and remembrance have a key role in

⁴⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 11.7.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the commemoration ceremony on the occasion of the 77th anniversary of the massacre in Campo di Fossoli"; Ursula von der Leyen, 19.3.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Anti-Racism Summit".

⁴¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 18.12.2019, "Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights".

the construction of European identity. One of the most powerful tools in building a collective identity is not only fostering a shared view of the past but a common ‘sense’ of our history.⁴² This is essentially the process which Ursula von der Leyen also takes part in through the historical references in her speeches.

“Let us continue to believe that we are more than a continent. We are a community of destiny”, von der Leyen remarks as her closing words at the opening plenary session of the European Political Community in 2023.⁴³ Von der Leyen talks in her speeches often about *destiny*. The meaning of this seems to be two-fold. On one hand, destiny refers to Europe’s past: to the often-painful lessons and common values that brought Europeans together. On the other hand, destiny is directed towards the future. The common destiny of Europe is to *complete* the European Union by bringing the current candidate countries into the EU. Therefore, destiny is deeply connected to the questions of European integration as well as European identity. Von der Leyen says that the countries who have joined the EU have done so because they yearned to be “masters of their own destiny”. The Union cannot be complete until all the people of Europe are masters of their destiny: “The story of our Community began with just six Member States. Our long-term objective was always one day to unite the entire European family. For a long time, it seemed an illusory goal. But it is clearly in Europe's strategic and security interest to complete our Union.”⁴⁴

The goal of completing the Union and uniting the European family is strengthened by examples of successful past enlargements in von der Leyen’s speeches. During her first term in office, especially important were the commemorations of the 20th anniversary of the “EU-10”: the ten mainly Central and Eastern European countries who joined the European Union in 2004. In 2024, von der Leyen personally visited and held a speech in Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Lithuania out of the 10 countries. In these speeches von der Leyen emphasizes the countries’ importance as a part of the European Union and their major achievements over the past 20 years. However, von der Leyen also highlights all the good that the EU has done for these Member States. She emphasizes mainly how much the economies of the countries have grown and how much their trade has increased since joining the EU. These

⁴² Prutsch 2017, 6, 10, 27.

⁴³ Ursula von der Leyen, 5.10.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening plenary session of the European Political Community”.

⁴⁴ Ursula von der Leyen 9.5.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the parliamentary session on the 20th anniversary of Lithuania's accession to the European Union”; Ursula von der Leyen, 23.10.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the 20th Aachener Krönungsmahl 2023”.

commemorations are also important in emphasizing the unity and cohesion between Member States as well as guiding a communal way of remembering the 2004 enlargement as a common success.

In her speech in Cyprus, von der Leyen says that through the 2004 enlargement the European Union became “a truly continental one”: “And this has made us ask ourselves: What is it, that makes us all European? What is it that makes us one family, actually spanning from the Atlantic and the Arctic, to these warm Mediterranean shores? It is of course our shared roots, dating back to the great civilisations of our past. But most importantly, it is the values that we all share.”⁴⁵ Here it is clear that the question of integration is connected with the question of a common European identity. According to von der Leyen, common values and a shared past are what make Europeans a family. Therefore, it is vital for the countries to be able to rejoin together in the EU. Similarly, in her speech in Prague, von der Leyen says that the Czech Republic retook its place in the European family by joining the EU.⁴⁶

The 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement was also celebrated at the European Parliament formal sitting in April 2024. In her speech there, von der Leyen emphasizes similar things as in her speeches in Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Lithuania: the 10 new Member States were completely transformed by the opportunities of the membership but also the EU was changed for the better because of the new Member States. “It was not just the birth of a larger Union; it was the birth of a new era. It was a night of promise, because Europe is a promise: the promise that all Europeans can be masters of their own destiny. The promise of freedom and stability, peace and prosperity”, von der Leyen remarks.⁴⁷ The main purpose here, as in many of the other commemorative speeches, is to highlight the unity of the European Union but also the importance of the EU to the Member States. The EU promises stability and prosperity to its members, as von der Leyen notes. The demand to preserve the unity in the Union and to even increase solidarity between Member States is also underlined in the speech.

In von der Leyen’s speeches, an especially important part of the identity construction is the awareness of Europe’s past, present and future as parts of the same linear process. Von der

⁴⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.5.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Cyprus' accession to the European Union”.

⁴⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 30.4.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Czechia's accession to the European Union”.

⁴⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 24.4.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament formal sitting on the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU Enlargement”.

Leyen portrays European integration after World War II as a necessary peace project, something that was imperative, almost compulsive. The same necessary process continues now and into the future with new Member States that will become part of the “European family”. The vision of a common future is emphasized in von der Leyen’s speech in Cyprus: “Our idea that every one of us must enjoy the same rights and opportunities – independent of whom you love, young or old, of all colours, all cultures, all faiths or none. This is what makes us European. This is what makes us united, not only our history, but our shared direction of travel”. Also, in her speech in Lithuania, she says that Europe is a family that travels towards freedom together.⁴⁸

The success of the past enlargements is also connected to Europe’s future in a more concrete way. An especially stark connection is drawn between the success of the 2004 enlargement and the future of Ukraine. Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. In the midst of the war, the EU decided to open membership negotiations with Ukraine. “Ukraine has made its European choice, and you know what this means. And we have made our Ukrainian choice. Just like we made our choice all those years ago when we welcomed so many countries back home to our Union”, von der Leyen notes in her speech in the Parliament’s formal sitting commemorating the 2004 enlargement. She continues by saying that in order for Europe to “win the future”, like it did 20 years earlier, Ukraine must win the war.⁴⁹ Despite initial fears and doubts, the 2004 enlargement has turned out to be a success story. Some similar doubts have been voiced recently in the case of new Member States joining, especially if the accession process would happen uncommonly quickly. It has also been more than 10 years since the latest Member State joined the Union and, instead, the EU has lost one prominent member in recent years. Therefore, it is important for von der Leyen to emphasize a successful example of the past to encourage Europeans to complete the Union. Supporting Ukraine in the war and staying ambitious on enlargement are presented almost as synonyms in von der Leyen’s speeches.

Although von der Leyen is speaking of Ukraine and Europe, “winning the future” is also clearly directed towards Russia. The 2004 enlargement was significant for many reasons. One

⁴⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.5.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Cyprus’ accession to the European Union”; Ursula von der Leyen, 9.5.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the parliamentary session on the 20th anniversary of Lithuania’s accession to the European Union”.

⁴⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 24.4.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament formal sitting on the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU Enlargement”.

unprecedented aspect of it was broadening the scope of the EU to Eastern Europe and welcoming in many countries that had previously been a part of the Soviet Union, located on the east side of the Iron Curtain. Similarly with Ukraine today, the EU is attempting to pull the country towards the West and further away from the influence of Russia. The past example of the successful 2004 enlargement is therefore also important in offering a precedent of Eastern European countries, formerly under Russian influence, becoming full Members of the European Union and equal partners with Western European countries.

Von der Leyen's references to European identity and integration are often connected to appeals for increased or maintained unity and solidarity within the EU. Timo Miettinen states, however, that constructing a European identity is not only about creating unity but principally about tolerating disagreements and managing cohesion. He also highlights that as a cultural idea Europe is certainly a construction, but it is not merely a figment of imagination. "A European way of thinking" forms an actual supranational framework which has been important for Europe for centuries. Already since the Middle Ages, "Europe" meant something more than a geographical area: it became a political entity or an identity.⁵⁰ The European Union has taken upon itself to remind Europeans of their sense of belonging and their common values. An essential factor of identity construction is also Europe's common history, especially the success story of the European Union as a guarantor of peace. This success story begins with the founding fathers and mothers of the EU who are the focus of the next sub-chapter.

2.2 "The spirit of our founders" – the legacy of the European founding fathers and mothers

The founders of the European integration project are an important part of the often-recited origin story of the European Union. As previously noted, these people considered as the *founding fathers and mothers* are generally the men and women who contributed significantly to European integration and the building of the European Community after World War II. Some well-known founding fathers are Jean Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak and Robert Schuman. According to Heikki Mikkeli, there are many European statesmen that have been titled as the "father of European integration" since the war.⁵¹ Traditionally, the founders of the European Community were regarded only as significant statesmen but in later years more attention has

⁵⁰ Miettinen 2021, 18–19, 32.

⁵¹ Mikkeli 1998, 121, 126.

also been paid to the important role of women, like Simone Weil and Louise Wess. Therefore, von der Leyen, among many others, calls the founders as the “founding fathers and mothers”.

In this sub-chapter, I analyze the references in von der Leyen’s official speeches to the European founders and how their legacy, still today, affects the work of the Commission. The aim is to illustrate how von der Leyen through these references provides an answer to the existential question of “where did we come from”. In von der Leyen’s speeches, the founders and their legacy are an important and a constant theme. The founders are celebrated, commemorated, quoted and respected. Von der Leyen says, for example, that the European Union works every day to get closer to the ideals of the founding fathers and mothers and to uphold their values.⁵² This is presented as an essential responsibility and honor of every European. Von der Leyen discusses the founders of Europe most often as a collective. The individual founding fathers receiving attention in the speeches are Winston Churchill, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer.

“Our founding fathers and mothers were bold. They sought to overcome the imperfections of things as they were and saw the beauty of what things could become”, von der Leyen states in her speech at Toulouse Capitole University in June 2023. She says also that our founders knew that only unity could make Europe strong in a changing world. They dreamt of a Europe that was stronger than the sum of its parts, built of solidarity and responsibility. They wanted to restore peace, economic prosperity and security in Europe that was based on common values and principles of democracy and equality.⁵³ The fact that the founders were able to defy all odds and build something great from the ground up acts as an example of what the European Union still strives – or at least what von der Leyen wants it to strive – to be able to achieve in the midst of today’s crises.

Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1940-1945, is regarded as one of the early founding fathers of Europe, although the United Kingdom didn’t become a member in the European Community until 1973. “Before the ashes of the Second World War had even settled, it was Winston Churchill who made the best case for a united Europe”, von

⁵² Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev”.

⁵³ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.6.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at Toulouse Capitole University”; Ursula von der Leyen, 7.12.2019, “Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press statement with Moussa Faki, Chairperson of the African Union Commission”; Ursula von der Leyen, 28.11.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University”.

der Leyen declares in her speech at the London School of Economics in the beginning of 2020. She is referring to Churchill's speech held in Zurich in September 1946 and emphasizes that it is "the most eloquent and powerful case for the European Union you could ever wish to read".⁵⁴ Mikkeli states that Churchill's speech was indeed an important milestone in the early stages of European integration. In the speech, Churchill named the United States of Europe as his goal for the European unification process.⁵⁵ Von der Leyen's speech was held only a few weeks before the UK officially left the European Union after a long and at times painful Brexit process. Therefore, von der Leyen arguably wanted to highlight Churchill's role as one of Europe's founding fathers to ease the tension and to emphasize the longstanding and durable relationship between the EU and the UK. Von der Leyen mentions Churchill overall in two speeches.

Jean Monnet is undoubtedly one of the most well-known founders of the European community. He was an influential Frenchman who supported European unity and was involved in the integration plans from the beginning. In the 1940s, he and Belgian politician Paul-Henri Spaak were the main driving forces behind European integration.⁵⁶ Monnet has many famous quotes that also von der Leyen utilizes in her speeches. She mentions him in altogether six speeches. "In recent days many of you have quoted Jean Monnet on Europe being forged in crises. This still stands true today", von der Leyen states at the European Parliament Plenary on the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020. Later in the same year she uses the same quote in a speech at the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University in relation to the pandemic and the national recovery plans.⁵⁷ Von der Leyen uses this quote to demonstrate that Europe will survive the crisis – in this case, the pandemic – and even come out stronger on the other side. As a leader, von der Leyen aims to keep up optimism and positive cooperation between the Member States. She highlights that also in the past, crises have pushed Europe through profound change and in the midst of the worst moments, Europe has been able to find its inner

⁵⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.1.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the London School of Economics on 'Old friends, new beginnings: building another future for the EU-UK partnership'".

⁵⁵ Mikkeli 1998, 125.

⁵⁶ Mikkeli 1998, 126.

⁵⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 26.3.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak"; Ursula von der Leyen, 28.11.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University".

strength. As Grönholm and Nyssönen point out in their article, history is used in this case to build trust in the EU's ability to survive crises.

The most quoted founding father in von der Leyen's speeches is Robert Schuman. He was the Prime Minister of France in 1947-1948 and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1948-1952. Schuman is best remembered for the Schuman Declaration of May 9th, 1950, when he proposed publicly for the pooling of France and Germany's resources and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). At the time of its publication, the Schuman Declaration was, according to Mikkeli, the most significant document setting out the objectives of post-war European integration. The plan was very ambitious and stated as its goal the creation of a federalist United States of Europe. Despite the name of the proposal, Jean Monnet was the main architect of the plan.⁵⁸

Von der Leyen talks about Robert Schuman or the Schuman declaration in seven speeches during her first term in office, usually at length. In her speech held for the 90th anniversary of the *Grandes Conférences Catholiques* in January 2021 – in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – she says that it is important for policy to set a clear course, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. It is also essential to have leaders who have a clear vision for the future and who can find appropriate means to achieve that vision. Von der Leyen continues that here we can learn from the founders of Europe and especially Robert Schuman who found a concrete and a pragmatic way to unite Europe and “change the destiny of Europe forever”: coal and steel. “I think that every new generation of European leaders faces a similar task. Define a vision of the future of Europe”, von der Leyen concludes.⁵⁹

Here von der Leyen uses Schuman's pragmatic view as a desirable example on how to make decisions as a European leader, taking concrete and realistic steps towards a bigger end goal. She says that this is what her Commission has been trying to do since the beginning of the term, throughout the pandemic. Thus, von der Leyen illustrates how her Commission is following the example of the respected founders and walking in their footsteps towards a better Europe. For Schuman and his generation of leaders, the ambitious end goal was a united Europe. For von der Leyen and the EU now, the ambitious end goal is to build a green, digital and fair Europe with a sustainable economy. She summarizes Schuman's ideals at the

⁵⁸ Mikkeli 1998, 128.

⁵⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.1.2021, “Discours de la Présidente von der Leyen à l'occasion du 90ème anniversaire des *Grandes Conférences Catholiques*”.

Conference on the Future of Europe in 2021: “Because it is as true today as it has been in the days of Robert Schuman, one of our founding fathers: When it comes to the future of Europe, no effort is too much and no dream too bold”.⁶⁰

Konrad Adenauer was a good friend of Robert Schuman’s and the first Chancellor of West Germany in 1949-1963.⁶¹ He is regarded as an important character in integrating Germany back to the heart of Europe after World War II and in building a peaceful cooperation especially with France. Von der Leyen talks about Adenauer in six speeches between the years 2019-2024. It is noteworthy that four of these six speeches are held in Germany and two of them also in German. Adenauer is not only considered a founding father of European integration but also of the Federal Republic of Germany, and he is well respected in his home country. It is arguably deliberate for von der Leyen to choose to quote a fellow countryman when holding official speeches in Germany. In her speeches, however, von der Leyen speaks of Adenauer mostly as an architect of European unity.

There is one speech, however, where von der Leyen does speak of Adenauer from a specifically German perspective. At the Allianz Forum in Berlin commemorating the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, she talks about the reconstruction of Germany after the ruins of World War II and how Germans pinned their hopes on Europe. “As early as 1946, Konrad Adenauer said that saving Germany was the same as saving Europe. I therefore think it is wrong to say, as we often here nowadays, that remembering the darkest chapter of our past no longer helps to justify why EU Member States must work more closely together”, von der Leyen states.⁶² Here, she is reminding listeners that what brought Europeans together after World War II was the urge to avoid similar crimes from ever happening again, in Germany or anywhere else. Peaceful future was possible if the European countries – Germany included – worked together instead of against each other. This was the starting point for the European Union. Von der Leyen emphasizes that this is still a valid argument for why cooperation within European countries is essential.

“Konrad Adenauer said 70 years ago: ‘European unity was a dream of a few people. It became a hope for many. Today it is a necessity for all of us’. His words are not just topical.

⁶⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 10.3.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the signature of the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe“.

⁶¹ Mikkeli 1998, 126.

⁶² Ursula von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, “Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin“.

They reflect our common duty to continue working on this great Europe”, von der Leyen quotes in her speech at the 2024 New Year Reception of the State Chamber of Industry and Commerce for the Elbe-Weser region. She uses the quote as an answer to the criticism of “pessimists and populists [...] especially when they call for the end of our unique community”.⁶³ With this quote she is emphasizing the constant necessity of solidarity within the Union, especially in times of crisis. The threats Europe was facing in 2024 were numerous: climate change, the risks and opportunities of the digital age, displacement and migration as well as Putin’s war at Europe’s borders, as von der Leyen herself lists them.

There are also a few other quotes from Adenauer that von der Leyen utilizes. In her speech at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic von der Leyen doesn’t only quote Jean Monnet as mentioned earlier but also Adenauer: “But there is a quote from another founding father which I think also sums up where we are. Konrad Adenauer once said that ‘History is the sum total of things that could have been avoided.’ In order to avoid making mistakes, von der Leyen calls on Europeans to instead “do the right thing together”.⁶⁴ Here again von der Leyen requests for more solidarity and compassion so that Europe can pull out of the crisis stronger and not leave anyone behind.

Ultimately, what is the legacy of the founding fathers and mothers? What should we learn from them, according to von der Leyen? Often in her speeches, the references to the founding fathers are connected to the demand for more solidarity within the EU Member States, especially during times of crisis. She calls for Europe to have more of a “spirit of our founders”. What she means is the founders’ ability to be bold, to strive to achieve the seemingly impossible, to never give up on the dream that a better world is achievable. “If it seems impossible – then it can be done. Se sembra impossibile, allora si può fare. This was the spirit of Europe’s founders and this is the spirit of Europe’s next generation”, von der Leyen concludes in her 2021 State of the Union Address.⁶⁵ Not only were the founding fathers and mothers bold but also intensely optimistic amid turmoil. Perhaps this is ultimately

⁶³ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.1.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the New Year reception of the State Chamber of Industry and Commerce for the Elbe-Weser region”.

⁶⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 26.3.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak”.

⁶⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.9.2021, “2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”: Ursula von der Leyen, 13.6.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the event 'Progettiamo il Rilancio', hosted by Giuseppe Conte, Prime Minister of Italy”.

what von der Leyen aims to instill into the minds of Europeans: the sight of a better future. Without hope and optimism, sustainable change becomes impossible.

2.3 "The history of the European project for me is also family history"

Even in her official speeches as the President of the European Commission, von der Leyen talks frequently about her family: her parents, grandparents, her husband and children. She talks about, for example, her childhood in Brussels, her studies in England and Germany as well as her time in Stanford as a trailing spouse in the 1990s. In this sub-section, I analyze what kind of historical references von der Leyen makes to her own personal history as well as their significance. Most of the references are likely attempts to build an emotional bond with her audience and to show that she stands on an equal footing with them. They also aim to offer some type of answers to the existential questions of who she is, where she comes from and where she is going now.

At the start of the mandate of the new College of Commissioners in December 2019, von der Leyen held a speech at the House of European History in Brussels. She says that the House is a reminder of the road that led Europe to where it is now: a continent in peace, a single market with unprecedented economic opportunities. She continues by reminding Europeans that our continent is a treasure we have inherited and one that needs to be preserved. "For me, this is almost personal. You know that my father was there at the very beginning of this European adventure – I might even be in some of the pictures that we see here today. The history of the European project for me is also family history", von der Leyen adds.⁶⁶

Von der Leyen was, indeed, born in Brussels and spent her youth there as her father, Ernst Albrecht, worked as a civil servant at the European Commission.⁶⁷ Von der Leyen talks about her father and his experiences on multiple occasions, as well as things she learned from him. Her father grew up in Germany and was 15 years old when World War II ended. He, like von der Leyen after him, fell in love with the European idea and wanted to work for the good of the continent. "He was overwhelmed by the power of reconciliation and the rule of law. In 1957, he witnessed the foundation of the European Economic Community, the beginning of the European Union, with only six members at that time. He dedicated his whole life to

⁶⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2019, "Statement by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the ceremony at the House of European History to mark the 10th anniversary of the Treaty of Lisbon and the start of the mandate of the new College of Commissioners".

⁶⁷ Stavolo 2026, 2097.

serving the European idea”, von der Leyen states at the award ceremony for the ‘World Peace and Liberty Award’ to the European Commission.⁶⁸ Through her father’s devotion to the European Union, von der Leyen also explains her own commitment.

Von der Leyen might be keen in emphasizing her early ties to the European Commission and Brussels as well as her father’s legacy, especially in the beginning of her term, considering that the vote in the European Parliament that allowed her the post of Commission President was extremely tight. She underlines, for example, that through her father’s profession she was able to visit the European Commission already as a child and was impressed by the multicultural atmosphere.⁶⁹ Von der Leyen talks about her father in multiple speeches during the years 2019-2021 but only mentions him once after that, in the above-mentioned award ceremony in 2023. She might therefore be highlighting early in her term that she is where she belongs and that her family was involved in the European project already from the early stages.

When von der Leyen talks about her father, highlighting his achievements as a civil servant in the European Commission is an important theme. In the context of the European Union, the founding fathers and other people who have contributed significantly to the European project are well respected. At the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University in Italy, von der Leyen talks about the Treaties of Rome that were signed in 1957 and her father’s role: “Back then, my father had the honour to be part of the German delegation that negotiated the Treaties. He was only 27. And on that day of March he was there, at Rome’s Campidoglio, as the leaders of the six founding members made history”, von der Leyen describes.⁷⁰ Thus, von der Leyen lifts her father into the company of the founding fathers.

Not only does von der Leyen speak admirably of her father but also of her mother, however, only in a single speech. “I would like to tell you about a woman who influenced me in many ways: My mother. She was a tough and smart woman. Unlike most women in her days, she had a chance to study. She was the first woman in our family to get a PhD”, von der Leyen begins her speech at the Pulse Women Economic Network in September 2023. The reason for

⁶⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 21.7.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony for the ‘World Peace & Liberty Award’ to the European Commission”.

⁶⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 20.11.2019, “Speech by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen at the 2019 EPP Congress in Zagreb”.

⁷⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 28.11.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University”.

the personal story is to illustrate to the audience how much women's rights have progressed since von der Leyen's mother was young. When von der Leyen's mother had children, pursuing a career wasn't an option anymore and she became a stay-at-home mother. Things are much better now but von der Leyen reminds the crowd that the work is not finished, especially when it comes to women in leadership positions: "Many of the questions on how to reconcile private life and a career that leads you to the top persist. And many of the most promising sectors for the economy of tomorrow are very much dominated by men".⁷¹

Women's rights are a topic that has been close to von der Leyen's heart throughout her political career. She references often her own difficult experiences as a woman throughout her life and, in the speech at the Pulse Women Economic Network, also her mother's experiences. I will delve deeper into von der Leyen's experiences and insistence on women's rights issues in chapter 5 on ideological use of history.

Von der Leyen also references her family's transatlantic ties that have affected her life. Her great-grandmother was born in the United States but moved to Germany after marrying von der Leyen's great-grandfather and spent the rest of her life there. Von der Leyen's father was one of the first German students who was awarded the Fulbright scholarship to study in the United States after World War II. Von der Leyen says that she herself fell in love with the United States during the years she spent in California as a trailing spouse while her husband was a postdoc and later a faculty member at the division of cardiovascular medicine in Stanford. From those years, von der Leyen and her husband are parents of two American citizens. "The story of the transatlantic ties is made of millions of stories like mine. But most importantly, it's made of shared values and interests between the two shores of the Ocean", von der Leyen concludes her personal story at the Atlantic Council's Distinguished Leadership Awards.⁷² At this event, she talks about personal matters to signify the close ties between Europe and the United States and the importance of the Atlantic Council in standing up for the common values.

Her speech at the Atlantic Council's award ceremony is closely connected to her identity and self-understanding which Grönholm and Nyssönen consider to be important aspects of the

⁷¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 5.9.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Pulse Women Economic Network, via video message".

⁷² Ursula von der Leyen, 11.11.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Atlantic Council's Distinguished Leadership Awards".

existential use of history. The Atlantic Council awarded von der Leyen a “European and transatlantic citizen” award and von der Leyen says that she truly views herself as a citizen of both sides of the Atlantic. Through the above-mentioned references to her past, von der Leyen has described both sides of her identity: on one hand, Brussels-born European, profoundly connected to the European Union since she was a child and on the other hand a transatlantic citizen with extensive family ties to the United States.

During her first term in office, von der Leyen mentions in five speeches a major life event that her family went through when she was a child. Von der Leyen’s little sister Eva-Benita died of a rare cancer, reticulo-sarcoma, at 11 years old. Von der Leyen was 13 at the time. Her sister’s death was preceded by two years of pain, an endless odyssey from specialist to specialist and utter helplessness: “The days were filled with fear and the nights with tears. Back then, in 1971, there was nothing the doctors could do to save her”.⁷³ This was a time of darkness and doubts for von der Leyen and her family.

Von der Leyen tells her sister’s story usually at events around cancer and health, for example at the Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan Conference, at the European Society for Pediatric Oncology and at the 5th anniversary of the Princess Máxima Center for pediatric oncology. She highlights that cancer cases are on the rise in Europe and that “every one of us has a similar story – or knows someone who has”. Her story functions as a reminder for Europeans that cancer can touch anyone’s life and that they don’t have to be alone with the struggle. Von der Leyen wants Europe to take the lead in the fight against cancer. She highlights that her sister is the reason why she cares so much about fighting cancer. “My little sister’s death has changed my life. I guess it is also because of her death that I decided to study medicine and become a medical doctor”, she says at the Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan conference in February 2020.⁷⁴

When von der Leyen was a teenager, she and her family moved from Belgium to Hanover, Germany. Von der Leyen says that she followed the political world as a teen because her father sat in the Lower Saxony Parliament. For her, the politicians at the time seemed to be mostly serious, strict and stoic men. What impressed her was the election of Valéry Giscard

⁷³ Ursula von der Leyen, 3.2.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen to the European Society for Paediatric Oncology”.

⁷⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 4.2.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan conference”; Ursula von der Leyen, 27.11.2019, “Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme”.

d'Estaing, a young and dynamic politician, as the President of France in 1974. She says she has never forgotten his inauguration day and how she remembers him as “the great artist of modern communication”, a person who developed an intimate political communication style that has inspired von der Leyen ever since. According to her, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had a gift of being close to people even when they were far away.⁷⁵ Von der Leyen talks about President Giscard d'Estaing at a ceremony held in his honor. She uses historical references often when holding speeches at these kinds of ceremonies or other commemorative events. As Grönholm and Nyssönen emphasize, these kinds of events are prime examples of existential history use. In this case, the commemoration of a political figure is cleverly connected to memories of von der Leyen’s own past as well.

On some occasions von der Leyen also connects her own personal memories to crisis situations or major transformative events in Europe. The first example is the Northern Ireland Conflict, or the Troubles, that lasted from the late 1960s until 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed by the British and Irish governments as well as political parties in Northern Ireland. The Troubles was a violent sectarian conflict largely between the pro-UK Protestants and pro-secession Catholics. The other example in von der Leyen’s speeches is the Brexit process. The multi-year process of Brexit began officially in 2016 when the United Kingdom voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. The process was finalized in 2020 when Britain formally exited the EU.⁷⁶

In the late 1970s when von der Leyen was in her twenties, she studied in London. She says that she fell in love with the vibrant, vital and colorful city. She connects her memories in England to the conflict of Northern Ireland: “So during my time in London, when I heard about Northern Ireland in the news, it was a story of conflict, bombs and violence in the streets”. Von der Leyen also reflects on how different Northern Ireland looks now for her children who are in their twenties, the same age von der Leyen was when she studied in London. She says that for young Europeans today, Northern Ireland is a “cool place”. Instead of conflicts and violence, her children have learnt a story of reconciliation and hope, of economic and social progress. According to von der Leyen, all of this is thanks to the Good

⁷⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 2.12.2021, “Discours de la Présidente von der Leyen à la cérémonie d'hommage européen au Président Valéry Giscard d'Estaing”.

⁷⁶ Landow and McBride 2024.

Friday (Belfast) Agreement that was signed in 1998 when “the leaders of Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK made the impossible come true”.⁷⁷

Von der Leyen also connects her studies at the London School of Economics to the Brexit process which was finalized at the beginning of her first term as the Commission President. She says that during her time in London she grew a strong fascination and admiration for the United Kingdom that remains as strong today as it was back then: “In the period just before and after the referendum, I thought a lot about my time here in London. I say this not just because of my love for this country. But also because of what the United Kingdom brought to Europe and the European Union”. She adds that the relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom has not been perfect but, in her opinion, “the good far outweighs the difficult”.⁷⁸ As the President of the European Commissions she wants to pay tribute to all the British people who contributed so much to their nearly half a century long EU membership.

Von der Leyen’s words dedicated to her family history and her younger years provide a more profound view into who she is outside her role as the Commission President. Of course, it is important to remember that von der Leyen still represents the EU and the speeches only reveal exactly what von der Leyen wishes for them to reveal. Still, it is noteworthy that she speaks of her personal past so often and draws motives for her commitment as the President of the European Commission from personal history. Often her personal stories are intended to emphasize the strong ties between different actors, like Europe and United States or Europe and the UK. She is also sharing some of her own struggles, for example her sister’s cancer and death, to emphasize that she understands the worries of European citizens and wants to assure that the European Union can support them.

In the following chapter, I explore the moral dimension of the use of history in von der Leyen’s speeches, where history is used both as a warning and as an opportunity to learn.

⁷⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 19.4.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the conference ‘Agreement 25’ organised by Queen's University Belfast”; Ursula von der Leyen, 29.3.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement”.

⁷⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.1.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the London School of Economics on ‘Old friends, new beginnings: building another future for the EU-UK partnership’”.

3 The moral use of history: responsibility and justice

In the moral dimension of the use of history, the events of the past are viewed as justifying or obligating far-reaching ethical and social solutions. Thus, history provides answers to questions such as: What is right? What is wrong? What can we learn from the past? What kind of mistakes should be avoided? By comparing history and present, we can be reminded of the lessons of our past and warned against repeating the same mistakes. The moral dimension is also linked to the question of which parts of our history we view as honorable and which parts as shameful. The moral use of history appeals to the community's sense of justice and aims to help the community seek morally correct solutions.⁷⁹

Through the lenses of the moral dimension, there are essentially two distinct themes in von der Leyen's speeches. On one hand, she warns about repeating the mistakes of our past and forgetting the lessons of our history. It is everyone's responsibility to preserve what Europe's founders have built and never let the forces wishing to destroy it get too powerful. The Holocaust, that is, the genocide of European Jews in 1941-1945 by Nazi Germany along with its collaborators, is a prime example of something Europe should avoid happening again and a theme that often takes center stage in von der Leyen's speeches. It is also deeply connected to the birth story of the European Union and the freedom of Europeans. Von der Leyen reminds Europeans of our obligation to never forget and that the world cannot afford to make the same mistakes we made 80 years ago. This side of the moral dimension consists of the negative, dark aspects of Europe's history.

On the other hand, there are the opportunities and lessons to be learned from our past, things we *should* repeat. Europe has survived crisis after crisis through solidarity, trust and unity and, once again, Europe – and the world – can pull through. “It is up to us! Everyone in this room is called upon!” von der Leyen proclaims at the 2020 Munich Security Conference and urges the world to restore the spirit of the generation that founded the United Nations.⁸⁰ This side of the moral dimension stems from positive actions of the past and aims to learn from them and show respect to the actors of the past. Both the positive as well as the negative history can also be used to justify current policy decisions.

⁷⁹ Grönholm and Nyssönen 2019, 20.

⁸⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.2.2020, “Laudatio by President von der Leyen on the awarding of the 2020 Ewald von Kleist Prize to the United Nations at the Munich Security Conference”.

The moral dimension of the use of history includes in my work also von der Leyen's personal account. This revolves essentially around two themes: first, the World War II, the Holocaust and Germany's reconstruction and second, the Cold War period of divided Germany and the jubilee of the fall of the Iron Curtain. As a German, von der Leyen speaks of these events naturally from a specifically German perspective and expresses feelings of guilt, responsibility and gratitude.

I analyze von der Leyen's moral use of history in the following three sub-chapters. First, I explore how the past is used as a *warning* in von der Leyen's speeches. This includes mainly references to the Holocaust as well as demands to "never forget" this dark chapter in Europe's history and to stay vigilant so the past does not return. Second, I analyze how von der Leyen presents history as an *opportunity*. Von der Leyen draws positive examples from the past and urges Europeans to learn from these inspirational cases. In comparison to events of Europe's history that should not be reiterated, the focus of the second sub-chapter is on the events that Europeans should strive to repeat. Third, I examine von der Leyen's use of personal historical memories in the moral dimension. She talks about her personal feelings about the Holocaust, the reconstruction of Germany and the Cold War period all the way to the fall of the Iron Curtain.

3.1 "The obligation to never forget" – history as a warning

"We must look our past in the eyes if we want to shape a better future and present. And today I can tell you: Europe's eyes are wide open. We remember. Because we owe it to our parents, your parents and grandparents. And we owe it to our children", von der Leyen remarks at the commemoration ceremony on the 77th anniversary of the massacre in Fossoli concentration camp.⁸¹ Von der Leyen is talking about facing the reality of the horrors of World War II, primarily the Holocaust. These types of references are quite common in her speeches, especially during anniversaries and commemoration ceremonies of the victims of Holocaust. As indicated above, the moral use of history in von der Leyen's speeches revolves mostly around the Holocaust and von der Leyen mentions it overall in 20 speeches. This dark chapter of Europe's past provides answers to the moral questions of "what is wrong" and "what kind

⁸¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 11.7.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the commemoration ceremony on the occasion of the 77th anniversary of the massacre in Campo di Fossoli".

of mistakes should be avoided”. In this sub-chapter, I analyze the historical references in von der Leyen’s speeches to the Holocaust and the demand to *never forget*.

In 1905, George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher, wrote an insightful sentence in his book *Life of Reason* that is still extensively quoted today: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. Since the horrors of World War II, the message of Santayana has often been connected to the Holocaust which is widely considered to be one of the worst crimes in human history. Historian E. H. Carr has at least partly echoed Santayana’s thoughts by arguing that historically aware actors are familiar with precedents and therefore usually know how to act accordingly, that is, how to avoid repeating past mistakes. However, Heino Nyssönen and Jussi Metsälä challenge Santayana and Carr’s views by stating that even a good understanding of the past does not, in itself, guarantee the successful application of that knowledge. It also does not eliminate the possibility of making new mistakes.⁸²

In her speeches, von der Leyen draws a Santayana-like causal relationship between remembering the Holocaust and not repeating the past mistakes. “We want to understand what happened and why, so it never happens again”, she remarks in her speech on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January 2022. She adds that preserving the memory of the Holocaust is an essential step in avoiding that history repeats itself.⁸³ The discourse around Holocaust in von der Leyen’s speeches is the perfect example of the kind of moral use of history that Grönholm and Nyssönen discuss in their article. She warns Europeans against repeating past mistakes and appeals clearly to the community’s sense of justice by proclaiming how much Europe owes to the victims and to the people who fought against Nazism. She connects Holocaust to the fragile nature of human societies and human dignity. She also emphasizes that if someone is trying to deny the Holocaust, they are calling into question Europe itself. That is why Europeans have the duty to remember the Holocaust and to pass the knowledge down from generation to generation. “Because it is the young who in the future will have to keep our solemn promise: Never Forget!” she concludes.⁸⁴

⁸² Nyssönen and Metsälä 2015, 292, 294.

⁸³ Ursula von der Leyen, 27.1.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the solemn ceremony on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day”.

⁸⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.2.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day”; Ursula von der Leyen, 29.1.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz”.

Timo Miettinen states that since World War II, Europe has been defined by a particular awareness of history. The foundation for the political community has been sought in “the logic of remembering”, specifically in an effort to avoid the mistakes of the past. History has, in effect, become a mirror against which Europe has examined its own essence.⁸⁵ In a similar spirit, von der Leyen remarks in her speeches that the freedom of Europe is built on the memory of the Holocaust: “Because the very reason why our Union was founded lies in two simple words: never again, ‘nie wieder’”.⁸⁶ This is why the atrocities of the Holocaust can never be forgotten. Letting the memories fade would be similar to dishonoring the respected founding fathers and mothers of the European project.

This kind of discourse around Holocaust on the EU level has not always been common. Aline Sierp argues that it was not until the 1980s that the questions of guilt and responsibility for the events of World War II were confronted on the European level. The fall of the Iron Curtain only intensified the process. “This included in particular an aspect that had been silenced until then in most countries – the Holocaust. The memory of the genocide of the Jews had played no role for early European integration, and was certainly not considered to be a point of reference”, she states. Through the 1990s and the 2000s the Holocaust became increasingly the core of a unifying European memory. Historian and professor Andrew H. Beattie has critically argued that these attempts “to transform the Holocaust into the EU’s foundational myth [...] rewrite and distort the historical record”. Neither in the EU’s founding treaties nor public speeches prior to the 1980s was reference made to the role that the Holocaust might have played in defining the original political goals and values of the EU.⁸⁷ Von der Leyen talking about the memory of Holocaust as the origin of the European project is therefore interesting as the Holocaust wasn’t actually discussed on the European level during the early years of integration. Naturally, von der Leyen’s German nationality plays a role in how she approaches questions of responsibility around Holocaust. Also in Germany, however, the first few decades after World War II were characterized by difficulties of publicly addressing the atrocities of the past. According to Seppo Hentilä, it wasn’t until the 1980s that broad and open discussions about coming to terms with the history of the Third Reich were properly

⁸⁵ Miettinen 2021, 11.

⁸⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 27.1.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the solemn ceremony on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day”.

⁸⁷ Sierp 2023, 83-84.

possible in West Germany.⁸⁸ I examine the German perspective to Holocaust more closely in sub-chapter 3.3.

In her speeches, von der Leyen highlights frequently that knowledge about the past helps in building a better future for Europe. It does, however, require active participation from all Europeans. “Understanding is impossible, but knowledge is necessary”, von der Leyen quotes Liliana Segre, a Holocaust survivor, in her speech on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. She also emphasizes that as painful and frightening as the memory of the horrors of Holocaust is, it does not paralyze us but instead it warns us and sharpens our moral compass. Von der Leyen says that reason she is so passionate about fighting hate crimes and antisemitism in all its forms is because Holocaust did not start in Auschwitz, it started much earlier in people’s minds. She continues by highlighting that not only is it essential to remember but also to stay vigilant and “stop the beginnings”.⁸⁹

During von der Leyen’s first term, the Commission initiated the first-ever EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life in Europe. One goal of this strategy was also to enhance Holocaust education around Europe.⁹⁰ The strategy was built upon years of prior work in the EU, but it was also heavily driven by von der Leyen’s commitment to tackling rising antisemitism in Europe. She is the first German President of the Commission since Walter Hallstein (1958-1967) and perhaps therefore has a special interest in the topic. Also, the antisemitic terrorist attack in Halle, Germany in October 2019 as well as other similar incidents around Europe in recent years added urgency to the preparations of the Strategy.

Von der Leyen talks about the Strategy in her speeches a few times since its adoption in 2021. She wishes that through the Strategy, all European students have a chance to learn about the “historical truth” of Holocaust, no matter where they come from or what their background and family history is. She emphasizes that Europe must do everything it can to keep the stories of the Holocaust survivors alive especially now that the last survivors are passing away. As a justification for the Strategy, von der Leyen states also that antisemitism is an existential

⁸⁸ Hentilä 1994, 202, 252-253.

⁸⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 29.1.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz”.

⁹⁰ “EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish Life (2021-2030)”. European Commission’s website. <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/combating-antisemitism/eu-strategy-combating-antisemitism-and-fostering-jewish-life-2021-2030_en> [read 28.2.2026]

threat to Europe: “Antisemitism is a threat to our democracies, our values and our open societies. It is a threat to humanity. It is a threat to all of us, no matter what we believe in”.⁹¹

Remembering the Holocaust is portrayed as Europeans’ moral obligation and historical responsibility. As antisemitic attacks have been on the rise in Europe, there is also a sense of urgency to the issue in von der Leyen’s speeches. “‘Never again’ means now!” she declares at the New Year Reception of the State Chamber of Industry and Commerce for the Elbe-Weser Region. She says also that if the Holocaust survivors “overcame their need to forget and they spoke about the unspeakable”, then we are obliged to do the same.⁹² Von der Leyen portrays remembering and raising awareness of the Holocaust as important factors in fighting threats to European democracy and the values at the heart of European integration.

Is remembering our history – especially the mistakes and the atrocities – always a blessing though? Perhaps not, suggests Timo Miettinen. He proposes that one of Europe’s problems is that it has not learned to forget. At the heart of all European nations lies crime – conquest, violence, use of force. Miettinen argues that forgetting this fundamental crime would be a prerequisite for unity in Europe. He also wonders how the appeals to the horrors of history help shape future policy in Europe. Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller has similarly talked about the problem of Europe’s historical memory. She has remarked that Europe has become a “prisoner of the past” in the sense that Europe has a difficult time escaping historical traumas, specifically the effects of Nazism. The issue is solidified by Europe lacking grand narratives of a better future.⁹³

Von der Leyen and the EU institutions have more or less an opposing view on the memory of the dark chapters of Europe’s past as Miettinen and Heller. As noted earlier, von der Leyen views remembrance as an important step in building a better future. By ‘never forgetting’ Europe continues the work of the founders based on their ideals and values. In her speech at the 2023 Atlantic Council Awards, von der Leyen states that in troubled times the world needs “leadership that is not afraid to learn from the past to shape a different future”.⁹⁴ In her

⁹¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.5.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the 16th World Jewish Congress Plenary Assembly”.

⁹² Ursula von der Leyen, 9.1.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the New Year reception of the State Chamber of Industry and Commerce for the Elbe-Weser region“; Ursula von der Leyen, 1.2.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day”.

⁹³ Miettinen 2021, 12-13, 376.

⁹⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 20.9.2023, “Laudation by President von der Leyen for Japanese Prime Minister Kishida at the 2023 Atlantic Council Awards“.

view, remembering the crimes of Europe's past can bring people together instead of dividing them. Similar conclusion is made by the European Parliament's 'Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe' that was adopted right before von der Leyen officially began her term as the Commission President. The resolution underlines that remembering the victims of fascist and other totalitarian and authoritarian regimes as well as raising awareness of the shared European legacy of crimes "is of vital importance for the unity of Europe".⁹⁵

Miettinen, brings up a possible solution for the issue of European historical memory:

"Perhaps Europe's hope lies simultaneously in remembering and forgetting – in our ability to both learn from the mistakes of history and forgive them".⁹⁶ I think von der Leyen's speeches do in fact balance on one hand remembering the dark chapters of our history but on the other hand building optimism towards the future. For example, she highlights in her speech at the Ben-Gurion University of Negev in Israel that the best way to honour the victims' memory is to build a better future. In the end, the most important takeaway that von der Leyen arguably wants Europeans to remember when it comes to the Holocaust is quite simple: "If it has happened once, it can happen again".⁹⁷

As illustrated in this sub-chapter, remembering the Holocaust takes up a significant amount of space and attention in von der Leyen's speeches. This is an important observation on its own but, at the same time, it is essential to consider what is consequently left out. As a matter of fact, many other difficult themes besides the Holocaust are not really ever brought up in von der Leyen's speeches. Colonialism and imperialism are among the themes that are not mentioned once by the Commission President in 2019-2024. Aline Sierp argues that the themes often overlooked in the EU's discourse, i.e. the memory of colonialism and imperialism, say a lot about the kind of vision the EU wishes to foster among its citizens and the self-image it wants to convey. According to Sierp, neither the EU nor many of the Member States have been willing or ready to face these issues yet although the history of

⁹⁵ Sierp 2023, 89.

⁹⁶ Miettinen 2021, 35.

⁹⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev"; Ursula von der Leyen, 9.1.2023, "Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the book launch of 'La saggezza e l'audacia. Discorsi per l'Italia e per l'Europa' with selected speeches of the late President of the European Parliament David Sassoli".

colonialism is – similarly as the Holocaust – closely linked to the history of the European integration.⁹⁸

Also, Markus J. Prutsch addresses in his study the issue of EU's historical remembrance focusing only on the 20th century and avoiding certain topics. While the focus on the atrocities of World War II and the beginning of European integration is understandable, it is also problematic. Prutsch argues that the focus on the 1900s does injustice to the complexity and richness of European history, and obscures the relations that are essential to the understanding of contemporary Europe. "And if we think of common memories shared across the continent, would not those of Colonialism and Imperialism – in a wide sense of the terms – be no less European than the Holocaust?" Prutsch wonders.⁹⁹

3.2 "Everyone in this room is called upon!" – history as an opportunity

Much focus in von der Leyen's speeches is on the demand to never forget the dark chapters of Europe's history, namely World War II and the Holocaust, and in making sure that the terrible actions are never reiterated. However, some aspects of European history are also highlighted as positive and inspirational examples. These cases offer answers to the questions of "what is right" and "what can we learn from the past". In this section, I examine the historical references in von der Leyen's speeches to the past events that are seen as positive examples, as opportunities to learn. Additionally, von der Leyen describes the responsibility Europeans have towards the founding fathers and mothers, the duty to preserve the Union they built. The positive, inspiring examples of Europe's history focus often on the aftermath of World War II, Europe's integration process and the responsibility to follow in the founders' footsteps.

According to Karl-Georg Faber, using historical examples as inspiration for action in the present presupposes that "politics, to the extent that is concerned with pragmatic and ethical action, can derive concrete lessons from history". He also points out that it is much more common to use historical references as deterrent examples in political debate than to use them as models of emulation.¹⁰⁰ In von der Leyen's speeches, also, negative examples of the past seem to be more common than positive ones, however, not as radically as Faber highlights in his article. In von der Leyen's speeches, the main inspiration for positive models of action

⁹⁸ Sierp 2023, 90.

⁹⁹ Prutsch 2017, 6, 29.

¹⁰⁰ Faber 1978, 45-46.

stems from the European founding fathers and mothers. She encourages and urges Europeans constantly to follow the example of our founders. They started building the Union from scratch and their work ethic and optimism are something Europeans should draw lessons from.

Von der Leyen quotes Václav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic in 1993-2003, who talked about Europe *as a Task*.¹⁰¹ On one hand, Europe *is* a task for all Europeans: our task is to preserve and take care of the continent and each other. On the other hand, Europe *has* a task to rediscover its responsibility and conscience. The responsibility of Europe in von der Leyen's speeches is mainly towards the founding fathers and mothers and everything they have achieved. Europe was their choice and most importantly, as von der Leyen emphasizes, "Europe is our choice, which we must renew every day". A noble task for all Europeans is to preserve, to develop and to strengthen the Union our founders worked so hard for. "Our Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality... We will always defend this!" von der Leyen declares at the 2019 European People's Party Congress and adds that we Europeans have the duty to work on a system based on the values of our founders.¹⁰²

Europe's common values are also the basis for many of the other positive examples von der Leyen highlights from the past. One lesson comes from the aftermath of World War II and the impact of the idea of a united Europe. "Back then a reunified Germany without the European framework was unthinkable for many of our neighbours. The strength of our shared idea sustained us back then. We should not forget this as we look to the future", von der Leyen remarks in her speech at the Allianz Forum commemorating the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹⁰³ She stresses that the "strength of our shared idea", that is, the common belief in the future of a united continent, saved Germany and Europe.

In the same speech, von der Leyen continues by saying that today the strength of our shared idea sustains us once again, this time in the battle against climate change. She reminds the

¹⁰¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 6.7.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the presentation of the programme of activities of the Czech Presidency and the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 23-24 June 2022".

¹⁰² Ursula von der Leyen, 18.12.2019, "Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights"; Ursula von der Leyen, 20.11.2019, "Speech by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen at the 2019 EPP Congress in Zagreb".

¹⁰³ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, "Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin".

listeners that the people in the East who overthrew their regimes in 1989 did so because they wanted a better future for themselves as well as for their country. “Just as we now look back to 1989, the next generation will judge us in 30 years according to whether we had the courage to shape the future”, von der Leyen concludes. Here von der Leyen interestingly combines the past, the present and the future into a simple, straightforward process. She is also “borrowing” judgement from the future. Similarly, as we can now evaluate the actions of our predecessors and speculate on how they should have acted, our actions will be assessed by someone else in the future. By “doing the right thing” – that is, by combating climate change – we can leave a positive mark in the history books.

Von der Leyen reminds Europeans frequently that the future generations will judge the decisions that are made today. Additionally, she declares that history is following our actions. “Dear friends, history is watching us. Let us do the right thing together”, she announces in her speech at the European Parliament Plenary in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Von der Leyen uses similar moral pleas several times in her speeches, especially during crisis situations such as the pandemic or Russian aggression in Ukraine. Regarding the EU’s enlargement and especially Ukraine’s membership, she says in multiple speeches that history is calling on Europe and Europe must, once again, answer the call by “completing” the Union. This reflects the wishes of the EU’s founders who “believed that Europe was the answer to the call of history”. Around the same topic, von der Leyen talks about history being on the march in Europe.¹⁰⁴ It is not always clear what von der Leyen exactly means with these phrases, other than that the moment is significant and will be remembered. Europe will want to be on the right side of history when the future generations look back on these moments.

Von der Leyen emphasizes that the European Union's founding Treaties promise “solidarity between generations” and that vow should function as our moral compass. She states also that every generation has their own mission shaped by our common values and aspirations. For von der Leyen’s parents’ generation the mission was to rebuild Europe after the World Wars and to lay the foundation for the European Union. At the plenary session on European affairs in Taizé, von der Leyen declares that her generation inherited “an immense treasure” from the previous generations. She says that her generation’s mission is to restore peace and security in

¹⁰⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 26.3.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak”; Ursula von der Leyen, 13.9.2023, “2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”; Ursula von der Leyen, 22.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the preparation of the European Council meeting”.

Europe which was the original aspiration of the founders. “This is the beauty of democracy. It is a great ever-unfinished symphony. And it is up to every new generation, and to each one of us, to keep the music going”, von der Leyen remarks.¹⁰⁵ Similarly as with most of the other examples from moral use of history, von der Leyen highlights that every European has a role to play in making the promises of the Treaties and the aspirations of the founders turn into reality every day. This is a way to build unity between European countries and emphasize that the EU is the Europeans’ common project. Everyone’s input is needed.

Interestingly, von der Leyen uses the same tactics to build unity when talking about the United Nations (UN). She refers to the inspirational legacy of the founders of the UN similarly as to the founders of the EU, although much less frequently. In her speech at the Munich Security Conference of 2020, she refers to the charter of the United Nations signed in 1945 and says that it is for a good reason that the preamble of the charter starts: “WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED... to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights”. Von der Leyen emphasizes that it is up to us to make these words ring through also in today’s world and everyone is called to take part in this work. Our common task is to reaffirm the primacy of the Charter in order to honor the people who built the UN from the ashes of World War II.¹⁰⁶

A major theme in von der Leyen’s speeches, especially during difficult times, is to compare the past and the present to illustrate that Europe has survived through crises before. Von der Leyen presents inspirational examples on how Europe or certain Member States have handled difficult situations in the past and how the EU can learn from them. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, von der Leyen talks about the financial crisis 10 years earlier and how some countries handled it better than others. Some Member States supported their countries’ economy by strong public investments and therefore allowed people to keep their jobs. “And this allowed some to come out stronger from the crisis than they went in it. And we should draw lessons from this”, von der Leyen proclaims in the heart of a new crisis.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 27.8.2022, “Address by President von der Leyen at the plenary session on European affairs in Taizé”; Ursula von der Leyen, 21.7.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony for the ‘World Peace & Liberty Award’ to the European Commission”.

¹⁰⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.2.2020, “Laudatio by President von der Leyen on the awarding of the 2020 Ewald von Kleist Prize to the United Nations at the Munich Security Conference”; Ursula von der Leyen, 15.6.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening plenary of the Summit on Peace in Ukraine”.

¹⁰⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.7.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the presentation of the programme of activities of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU”.

Von der Leyen also draws lessons for the pandemic from the earthquake of Lisbon (1755) and how the city was able to face the disaster. She says that in the 1750s Europe was going through a period of profound and rapid change like it is today. “And the need for us to get back to our feet today and build a better way of doing things is just as important as it was in the 18th century. The point is we can learn from Lisbon how to build back better. How to remodel our societies to harness change and progress”, von der Leyen highlights. She also says that the parallels to today’s latest disaster, the pandemic, may not be perfect but “history does have a habit of rhyming”.¹⁰⁸ Von der Leyen’s first term in office was very crisis-prone so drawing lessons from the past crises was topical. Especially the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented situation, so it was valuable to be able to reassure Europeans with positive examples from the past.

Another lesson on how to endure crises comes from Augsburg, Germany. Von der Leyen says in her speech for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Fuggerei – Augsburg’s oldest social housing complex – that the city of Augsburg was founded by a Roman emperor but owes its current importance and strength only to itself. “They have withstood economic crises, world wars and other disasters. Europe can learn from Augsburg”, she proclaims. Special importance von der Leyen sets on Augsburg’s citizens’ ability to stay united in emergencies and focus on their strengths.¹⁰⁹ Here again, von der Leyen highlights the important role of the unity of citizens in enduring crises.

Most of the historical references regarding the positive side of the moral dimension are used to either build unity among Europeans or to draw lessons from the past on how to build a better future. The importance of the inspirational past examples comes to the fore especially in crisis situations. Von der Leyen emphasizes how in previous crises some Member States of the EU were able to handle difficult situations better than others. Europe can learn lessons from these individual success stories, such as Portugal’s reconstruction after the 1755 earthquake or Augsburg’s long tradition of stable and dynamic economy. However, the most significant lesson to learn from the past comes from the architects of the Good Friday

¹⁰⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 29.9.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the Recovery Plan and Resilience at the Fundação Champalimaud”.

¹⁰⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.5.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Fuggerei NEXT500 Pavillon”.

Agreement, who defied odds and worked together to create a better, more peaceful future: “They believed they could change the course of history. That is their greatest lesson for us.”¹¹⁰

3.3 “As a German, I feel very guilty” – shame and gratitude

As the President of the European Commission, von der Leyen naturally talks most often about the past events from the perspective of Europe or the European Union. However, there are times when she brings up her views about history from a specifically German perspective, most notably about World War II, the Holocaust and the Cold War period when Germany was divided. In this sub-chapter, I analyze von der Leyen’s personal references to these events. She naturally has personal memories from the Cold War period and the fall of the Berlin Wall and can speak of these events from her own experience. She expresses her feelings towards the earlier events – World War II and the Holocaust – as a German although she does not remember these events personally. In comparison to sub-chapter 3.1. where the Holocaust was discussed as a collective European memory, here it is addressed from von der Leyen’s personal perspective. Whereas from the European perspective the focus is mostly on remembrance, here the focus is on guilt, responsibility and gratitude.

Contemporary history in Germany is a particularly sensitive issue. According to Seppo Hentilä, Germany has a flawed historical self-understanding and the entire nation’s relationship with its past has for a long time been fractured. These characteristic problems of coming to terms with the past date all the way back to the 19th century, to the difficulties that the formation of the nation-state faced in Germany. The issues only intensified after the traumatizing first half of the 20th century. Hentilä argues that many Germans have “historical anxiety” and they are plagued by feelings of guilt, especially because of Holocaust. The discussions around history in Germany often take place on the borderline between intellectual and emotional self-understanding which inevitably leads to history becoming political and political becoming historical. Hentilä says that especially when it comes to the Third Reich and Germany’s guilt over the Holocaust, it is difficult – even impossible – to separate moral and scientific arguments from each other.¹¹¹ In von der Leyen’s case, the issue of separation lies more in her role as the Commission President. It is not always clear whether von der Leyen approaches the past issues from a German perspective or speaks about them as a

¹¹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2022, “Address by President von der Leyen to the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas”.

¹¹¹ Hentilä 1994, 12-14, 278.

common European memory or narrative. However, as pointed out above, I have attempted to make a distinction between these two perspectives in sub-chapters 3.1. and 3.3.

“And yes, the systematic extermination of 6 million Jews is absolutely evil. The absolute evil that cannot be put into words. The worst barbarism that man can inflict on man. The crime of Nazi Germany against humanity. And as a German, I feel very guilty”, von der Leyen states on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. She stresses that the victims of Holocaust were killed “in the name of my nation” and she can never forget this deep, shameful scar in Germany’s history.¹¹² However, in von der Leyen’s speeches the personal references to the Holocaust are not only focused on guilt and shame but also on more “productive” feelings of responsibility and gratitude that lead to future oriented action. More than guilt, von der Leyen emphasizes the special responsibility she feels. She says that she, as well as other Germans, take historical and enduring responsibility for the “inhuman disruption of civilisation” and make sure that it is never forgotten.¹¹³

The responsibility is also targeted towards other European countries who helped Germany back on its feet and into the early European integration projects. Von der Leyen says that because the rest of Europe helped Germany, she feels a responsibility to do what she can to continue the work of the founding fathers and mothers who strived for a united and peaceful Europe. “Despite all the turbulence of day-to-day politics, Germany will always be grateful, in particular to the United States, the UK and France, for this. I would like to explicitly include NATO in this expression of gratitude for decades of freedom and security”, von der Leyen says in her speech at the Allianz Forum in Berlin.¹¹⁴ Here, von der Leyen is aiming to strengthen the unity not only in Europe but also within the transatlantic space.

Additionally, a deep, special gratitude is aimed towards Israel. This is clear in multiple speeches but especially in von der Leyen’s speech at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel in June 2022. She says that the reason she, a European woman of German nationality, is able to hold a speech in Israel is because of the choice made by the country and especially David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of the State of Israel and the country’s first prime

¹¹² Ursula von der Leyen, 29.1.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz”.

¹¹³ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev”.

¹¹⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, “Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin”.

minister (1955-1963). It was he who decided to take the first, historic step towards reconciliation with the Germans. “It is also to the credit of David Ben-Gurion that my country looked the victims of our crimes in the eyes for the first time. The young German democracy grew stronger because of its developing friendship with the new State of Israel. We faced our guilt and our responsibility”, von der Leyen remarks. She talks about Israel often in her speeches and has also visited the country multiple times. Amid the increasing number of antisemitic attacks in Europe and elsewhere, she arguably wants to emphasize that Germany and the EU’s relationship with Israel is as strong as ever and Europe stands committed behind the phrase ‘never again’. Von der Leyen emphasizes also that Israel’s founding father Ben-Gurion made the strong relationship possible to begin with. “I can say, without reservation, that I would not be here today if it was not for David Ben-Gurion”, she concludes her speech.¹¹⁵

Mary Fulbrook argues that in Germany there has been a widespread concern with “history as a key tool in constructing an ‘acceptable identity’ in the present”. She highlights that the political relevance of historical interpretations is fundamental. Since World War II, and again after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there have been intense processes in Germany to seek account for the past and provide a story in the present. The existence of a close relationship between historical interpretations and contemporary politics in Germany is unquestionable. Especially the history of the Third Reich is – at least to an extent – “past which will not pass away”, something continuously relevant.¹¹⁶ In von der Leyen’s speeches, this is visible in the demand to never forget which was also substantially examined in sub-chapter 3.1. Von der Leyen says, for example, that the principle of “never again” was deeply engraved into her generation of Germans so the “indelible stain” on Germany’s conscience would not be forgotten.¹¹⁷

Aside from the Holocaust, von der Leyen talks also about her memories of living in divided Germany and how it affected her views of the world: “I was lucky. I was born in West Germany, in the western part of Europe, in a free and democratic country. I vividly remember the times of the Iron Curtain.” She says also that she remembers well the “jubilant days” of 1990 when the Wall in Berlin came down and the countries behind the Iron Curtain broke

¹¹⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev”.

¹¹⁶ Fulbrook 2004, 34, 39-42, 49.

¹¹⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev”.

free.¹¹⁸ Her own memories are connected to the current situation in Europe and the awaiting enlargement of the Union. She says that the same wind of change that blew over Europe in 1990 is blowing again across the continent because Ukraine has now applied for the EU membership. Ukraine, like many other countries before, is trying to make the move further away from Russia into the heart of Europe. Comparing the 1990s to the current situation is arguably a means to build up hope in the sorrowful situation of Ukraine, hope that Ukraine will in the future have her spot in the European Union.

Another situation where von der Leyen compares her own memories of Germany in the Cold War period to the current situation is the division of the Korean peninsula. She expresses at the EU-Republic of Korea Summit dinner that she understands what it is like to live in a country divided in two. Interestingly, she also builds up hope for the future unification of the Koreas based on the success of the reunification of Germany. “I understand the pain and suffering of families torn apart by walls and barbed wires. I know the longing for family unification that even armed border guards could not extinguish. But I also know that there is nothing stronger than a human being's longing for freedom”, von der Leyen states.¹¹⁹

The Cold War is in von der Leyen's speeches addressed – for the most part – through a specifically German lens. Although von der Leyen speaks of divided Germany and the Iron Curtain, she does not really speak of the oppression in East Germany or other crimes of the Soviet Union at the time. The crimes of Communism and the Soviet Union both during World War II as well as during the Cold War are addressed in her speeches only little, especially when compared to the crimes of Nazism. Only the fall of the Iron Curtain and the new-found freedom of Eastern European countries in the early 1990s is brought up often. Thus, it can be argued, von der Leyen's emphasis on the unique nature of the Holocaust and German experiences during the Cold War perhaps take away from the possibility of other approaches. Of course, von der Leyen as a German feels the closest to the past events that involve Germany specifically and that are significant for the country. However, in her speeches she represents the President of the European Commission and, therefore, a more comprehensive view of the past crimes and conflicts could be expected of her.

The moral dimension of the use of history includes also the personal responsibility von der Leyen feels as the President of the European Commission towards her predecessors. “Starting

¹¹⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.9.2022, “Keynote address by President von der Leyen at Princeton University”.

¹¹⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.5.2023, “Speech at the EU-Republic of Korea Summit dinner”.

today, we are the guardians of the Treaties, the custodians of the Lisbon spirit. I feel this responsibility. It is a responsibility towards our predecessors, our founding fathers and mothers, and all that they have achieved”, she proclaims at the start of the mandate of her College of Commissioners in December 2019. Another important duty that von der Leyen discusses is that as a European leader, she is called “to shape the course of history”, that is, to make significant decisions that affect Europe’s future.¹²⁰ Here again, von der Leyen builds a bridge between the past, the present and the future. Based on the responsibility towards the actors of the past, European leaders today need to strive to build a better future for the succeeding generations.

Private perceptions of the past can be just as significant in politics as collective perceptions. When von der Leyen talks about the significant events in Germany in the 20th century, she often connects her own personal memories and emotions to these events: guilt, shame, responsibility and gratitude. The role of personal emotions connected to historical references in political debate is not insignificant. As German politician Carlo Schmid has remarked: “Emotions can be realities, too, especially when they can be linked to historical facts.”¹²¹ At times, von der Leyen uses her personal memories also to build a bridge from the past to the current situation in Europe. Her personal memories and emotions are also used to shape the actions of the EU and to justify personal and collective choices.

Next, I analyze the political use of history in von der Leyen’s speeches, focusing on the EU’s political successes as well as the policies and actions of von der Leyen’s first Commission.

¹²⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2019, “Statement by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the ceremony at the House of European History to mark the 10th anniversary of the Treaty of Lisbon and the start of the mandate of the new College of Commissioners”; Ursula von der Leyen, 9.1.2023, “Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the book launch of ‘La saggezza e l’audacia. Discorsi per l’Italia e per l’Europa’ with selected speeches of the late President of the European Parliament David Sassoli”.

¹²¹ Faber 1978, 64.

4 The political use of history: legitimizing the exercise of power

The political dimension of the use of history means that historical knowledge and historical arguments are used to rationalize political decisions and actions as well as to point out societal needs and deficiencies. The political dimension can also be used to justify or legitimize the exercise of power in society and certain power relations. Thus, history is used to seek answers to questions like: What should be done? What should not be done? Who is right? Who is wrong? Political use of history includes also instrumental use of historical information in everyday politics, for instance to weaken or strengthen a certain political actor. According to Grönholm and Nyysönen, it is especially common in totalitarian and authoritarian systems to use history to legitimize the use of power. However, it is not foreign in other systems either.¹²²

In von der Leyen's speeches, the political dimension of the use of history is visible mainly in legitimizing the European Union's or Commission's policy decisions and the exercise of power through historical references. She talks about, for example, how the Member States have handled some of Europe's previous crises poorly by bypassing the European institutions and how the Commission can help them handle the next one better: "This time it is different. This time we are committed to a joint solution".¹²³ She calls many of the Commission's proposals, decisions and negotiated agreements as "historic" and explains the need for them by comparing the present to the past. Comparing the past and present can be useful in versatile circumstances, either to demonstrate that the current situation is unprecedented or to explain how a similar situation was not handled well in the past and thus the need for new policies. She uses a particularly large number of historical references in connection with the European Green Deal, her first Commission's flagship initiative.

Von der Leyen talks also a lot about her time in local politics in Germany and later as a Federal Minister: what kind of policies she advocated for and what she was able to achieve. According to von der Leyen, she has learned many things during her twenty years in politics that now help and guide her work as the President of the European Commission. Often her

¹²² Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 21.

¹²³ Ursula von der Leyen, 23.7.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the conclusions of the Special European Council meeting of 17-21 July 2020".

memories are used to legitimize and explain the need for the current policy decisions of the Commission.

I discuss the political use of history in von der Leyen's speeches in the following three sub-chapters. First, I talk about the political successes of the European Commission prior to von der Leyen's term. In her speeches von der Leyen draws inspiration and motivation from the past success stories of the Union. In the first sub-chapter, I also examine the Commission's use of authority during crises. Von der Leyen's first Commission's main priority during 2019-2024 was the European Green Deal and she talks about it perhaps more than any other specific theme during her first term. Hence, the second sub-chapter is completely dedicated to historical references regarding the Green Deal: the reasoning for it as well as the EU's previous climate commitments and actions. In the third sub-chapter, I discuss von der Leyen's personal history in politics: first at the local level, then at the Federal Ministry in Germany.

4.1 "We have been able to lead change" – political successes

"The lesson is: If there is a political will, there is a way to make it happen. That is the lesson to learn from the past", von der Leyen proclaims in her speech on future enlargement of the EU in October 2022.¹²⁴ She speaks often about the political successes, the well-known historic accomplishments of the European Union, such as the European Treaties and the establishment of the Single Market. On the other hand, von der Leyen discusses her Commission's response to the numerous crises during her first term – mainly the pandemic and Russian aggression in Ukraine – by comparing it to the EU's response in previous crises, often illustrating how the EU is doing more and better this time around. In this sub-chapter, I examine the historical references to the political successes of the European Union over the past 30 years as well as to the policy decisions made during previous crises.

The creation of the European Union is, naturally, presented as one of the most important success stories of the past few decades. Von der Leyen describes how Europe was able to move from the 'Eurosclerosis' or 'Euro-stagnation' of the early 1980s to the Single European Act (1986) aimed at creating a single market in Europe by 1992 as well as to the Maastricht Treaty (1992) which established the European Union. How was this reversal possible? Von der Leyen's answer is simple: it was thanks to people like von der Leyen's predecessor Jacques Delors (Commission President 1985-1995), passionate Europeans who could sense

¹²⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 28.10.2022, "Public Address by President von der Leyen in Bosnia and Herzegovina".

and capture the underlying energy in the European institutions during the 1980s. Von der Leyen says that the initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s reflect “this European ideal, as Jacques Delors liked to call it”: the belief in Europe as a strong community, united in diversity.¹²⁵

Von der Leyen talks about the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty a few times in her speeches, often emphasizing the difficult economic situation in Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s when the negotiations for the Treaties took place. She compares those circumstances to the current situation in Europe. An especially stark connection is drawn to the COVID-19 pandemic. Von der Leyen’s first Commission sought to establish a European Health Union – an initiative to strengthen cooperation among Member States on health issues – based on the lessons learned from the pandemic. “When Delors took office, Europe was in the middle of a crisis, although of very different nature. They called it ‘euro-stagnation’ – so Europe’s incapacity to move forward. (...) He said: ‘We are in a situation, where the Community can seize the favourable winds, or else, once again, miss its chance.’ So today, the winds are stormy. But just like then, there is a chance that Europe cannot miss”, von der Leyen states at an event promoting the Health Union in December 2020.¹²⁶ Following the example of people like Jacques Delors and taking note of the past successes, Europe can once again “relaunch” itself and create optimism in the middle of a crisis. Von der Leyen also builds an image of the European Health Union as a *must*.

The Single European Act that Delors strongly promoted was successful, and the common market was officially launched in Europe on January 1st, 1993. Therefore, the European Single Market celebrated its 30th anniversary during von der Leyen’s first term. The long-standing success of the Single Market gets a lot of attention in von der Leyen’s speeches. Its triumph is also strongly linked to the EU’s past enlargements: “Trade between the ‘old EU’ and the new central and eastern European Member States has grown fourfold since 1989, with Germany being a particular beneficiary. (...) The enlargements have been an economic success story without precedent, demonstrating that, in a larger Union, we not only share our prosperity but also increase it. Now our Union is approaching another crossroads.”¹²⁷ The

¹²⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 31.1.2024, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the ceremony of honour for Jacques Delors”; Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the S&D event ‘A strong and inclusive Health Union’”.

¹²⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the S&D event ‘A strong and inclusive Health Union’”.

¹²⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.11.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau”.

example of past success is, therefore, presented as economic justification for “completing the union”, that is, for concluding the membership process of Western Balkan candidate countries as well as Ukraine. Here, von der Leyen creates a link between the past, present and future and, at the same time, simplifies the complex process of European integration and the EU’s enlargements into a simple success story.

Another European success story initiated in the 1980s that von der Leyen often recites in her speeches is the Erasmus+ exchange programme, offering students at higher education institutions an opportunity to study or trainee abroad in Europe. “After 30 years, we can proudly say that Erasmus is one of the greatest unifying achievements in the history of our Union”, von der Leyen proclaims when receiving the Empress Theophano Prize for the European Commission in October 2020. She also talks about Sofia Corradi, an Italian pedagogist known as the “mother of Erasmus” who had the idea for the student exchange already back in the 1960s.¹²⁸

Talking about the past success stories of the European Union – the Treaties, the Single Market, the Erasmus programme – often comes back to the same observation in von der Leyen’s speeches: Europe does not appreciate its achievements enough. “As we Europeans were enjoying the fruits of great achievements such as Erasmus, we started taking them for granted. But we must not. During the last decade, we have lived through crises that have shaken our European Union to the core”, she notes.¹²⁹ The crises von der Leyen talks about include the financial and euro crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and, most recently, the pandemic. The point is that Europe can – and should – again find its purpose and rebuild solidarity, trust and unity. The European successes highlighted in von der Leyen’s speeches changed the continent profoundly. In the 1980s and the 1990s Europe chose to “master and shape its future”, to go back to the European ideal, as Jacques Delors said. Von der Leyen compares these significant past developments to the current advancements in the EU, specifically the NextGenerationEU.

NextGenerationEU is the EU’s temporary recovery instrument of more than 800 billion euros, designed to repair the immediate economic and social damage caused by the pandemic.

¹²⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Empress Theophano Prize award ceremony”.

¹²⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Empress Theophano Prize award ceremony”.

Initiated originally in May 2020 by a Franco-German initiative and adopted in December 2020, the goal of the plan was for Europe to emerge from the health crisis “greener, more digital and more resilient”.¹³⁰ NextGenerationEU is a constant topic in von der Leyen’s speeches and, as mentioned, it is often compared to the previous, profound developments in the EU’s history: “Just as Erasmus was then, NextGenerationEU is now. It is a programme of unprecedented scale and scope. And it can become the next great unifying project for our Union”. Von der Leyen says also that NextGenerationEU is “an investment of the century”, comparable to the Marshall Plan (officially European Recovery Program) that enabled the reconstruction in Western Europe after World War II.¹³¹ Naturally, by comparing the EU’s new initiative to the past successes, von der Leyen aims to highlight the historic nature and the importance of NextGenerationEU. It is also a way to create hope in the midst of a crisis and faith that Europe will get through the pandemic and find sustainable solutions for the future.

Explaining the crucial importance of the recovery plan with the help of past successes is important in von der Leyen’s speeches because NextGenerationEU was not easy to agree on between the Member States. NextGenerationEU was initially seen as taboo-breaking and the idea of joint debt did not please everyone. Johansson, Kreiling and Wetter Ryde state that “a familiar pattern of conflict soon emerged” in the discussions on the initiative, pitting those in favour of more spending against those who preferred a more restrained joint response. Eventually, however, the so-called frugal states were in a minority when both Germany and France supported recovery funding based on joint debt. Dealing with the pandemic was a key priority for von der Leyen’s Commission, and therefore being able to pass NextGenerationEU was in itself a huge political victory.¹³²

Also, the COVID-19 pandemic itself and the EU’s solidary response even before the adoption of NextGenerationEU is compared to the past in von der Leyen’s speeches, most prominently to the Eurozone crisis that lasted from 2009 to the mid-2010s. The EU’s response to the pandemic is presented in the speeches as rapid and successful in comparison to the slow and

¹³⁰ “Recovery plan for Europe”. European Commission’s website. <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/recovery-plan-europe_en> [read 25.3.2026]

¹³¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 10.6.2021, “Rede von Präsidentin von der Leyen auf der von Bundespräsident Steinmeier und der Deutschen Bundesstiftung Umwelt organisierten digitalen Woche der Umwelt, per Videokonferenz“; Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Empress Theophano Prize award ceremony“.

¹³² Johansson et al. 2022, 18.

divisive response to the economic crisis a decade earlier. Von der Leyen says that in the past crises, Member States did not trust each other and bypassed the European institutions. However, now the situation is different because the virus hit all European countries with comparable strength: “Ten years ago, during the financial and euro crisis, we saved the Union and the euro from breaking up. But we have to be honest with ourselves, this came at a cost: Our economies then developed in opposite directions. (...) These rifts are still visible and tangible today. Some of the initial reactions to the corona crisis seemed to repeat patterns and to trigger bad memories. But then, something remarkable happened. In the face of the deepest health crisis, Europeans rediscovered the value of what we hold in common.”¹³³

Von der Leyen emphasizes that Europe has learned its lessons from the euro crisis, and this time, Member States have put their common trust on the European institutions. The common European response to the pandemic is justified by the sheer, unprecedented magnitude of the crisis: biggest global health crisis for a century and deepest recession for decades, as von der Leyen herself describes the situation. Von der Leyen highlights that the common European recovery plan is much more effective than the intergovernmental solutions by Member States during the financial crisis. “We learned the lessons from the past when we were too divided and too delayed. And the difference is stark: last time it took 8 years for the Eurozone GDP to get back to pre-crisis levels. This time we expect 19 countries to be at pre-pandemic levels this year with the rest following next”, she declares in her State of the Union Address in September 2021.¹³⁴ Comparing the EU’s response to the past is also a reminder for Member States in the case of future crises: trusting and giving power to the European institutions will work better than trying to come up with intergovernmental solutions.

Europe’s rapid and united response is praised and compared to the past also in the case of the Russian war in Ukraine. The war was von der Leyen’s main focus in her 2022 State of the Union Address: “Fifteen years ago, during the financial crisis, it took us years to find lasting solutions. A decade later, when the global pandemic hit, it took us only weeks. But this year, as soon as Russian troops crossed the border into Ukraine, our response was united, determined and immediate. And we should be proud of that. We have brought Europe’s inner

¹³³ Ursula von der Leyen, 23.7.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the conclusions of the Special European Council meeting of 17-21 July 2020”; Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Empress Theophano Prize award ceremony”.

¹³⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.9.2021, “2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”.

strength back to the surface.”¹³⁵ Here, von der Leyen is highlighting the old wisdom in the words of Jean Monnet: Europe is forged in a crisis. Each crisis in the past fifteen years has made Europe better and faster in its response and the solidarity among Member States stronger. She puts further emphasis on this insight in another speech in January 2024 by saying that in the early 1990s, there was also war on European Soil (the Yugoslav Wars) as well as other major geopolitical upheavals, however, Europe came out of that period stronger and bigger. Today once more, war is raging on the EU’s borders, geopolitical tensions are on the rise. Europe has again a chance to come out of the crisis bigger and more powerful.¹³⁶ In this speech, von der Leyen is not only strengthening the idea of Europe being forged in a crisis but also promoting the EU’s enlargement, specifically in the case of Ukraine.

Anna Kyriazi states that it is common for Commission presidents to narrates crises as being amenable to the European integration project. A part of their crisis communication and policy-making is to provide public justification and answers to questions like why further integration would be the preferred solution in a crisis.¹³⁷ As illustrated above, von der Leyen, at times, justifies the need for further integration by the example of the past actions and successes.

“Yes, it has been difficult sometimes, yes, the road has been bumpy – but in the very end, we have been able to lead change”, von der Leyen summarizes Europe’s ability for improvement over the years in various sectors of society.¹³⁸ The past success stories of Europe as well as the past crises and the EU’s response to them all lead back to the same conclusion: difficult circumstances can help Europe renew and relaunch itself. In the 1980s and the 1990s, von der Leyen’s predecessors were, despite difficult economic situation and geopolitical tensions, able to lead profound changes and make significant positive developments with the Single Market and Erasmus for example. Today, in a crisis-prone time period, Europe is again focusing on renewal and “building back better” through a united response, learning from past mistakes. Thus, the example of the predecessors remains as an important guideline.

¹³⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, “2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”.

¹³⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 11.1.2024, “Rede von Präsidentin von der Leyen anlässlich des Neujahrsempfangs der Industrie und Handelskammer Köln“.

¹³⁷ Kyriazi 2026, 24.

¹³⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 5.3.2020, “Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the BusinessEurope Day 2020”.

4.2 “It is the environment, stupid!” – the European Green Deal

“People of faith believe that Creation was entrusted to us, human beings, but does not belong to us. Our responsibility is to preserve it, to take care of it, and pass it on to future generations. But for too long, humanity has forgotten this responsibility. Generation after generation has exploited nature beyond our planet's boundaries. We took, we polluted, we disposed. And this has to stop. We need a new model, which gives back to nature instead of taking away from it. This is the European Green Deal.”¹³⁹ This is how Ursula von der Leyen described the need for the European Green Deal less than three years after its’ launch. The European Green Deal was her first Commission’s leading initiative that was officially presented in December 2019, immediately after von der Leyen’s Commission took office. The Green Deal is one of the largest legislative packages in the EU’s history. It aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050, in pursuit of the temperature goal set out in the Paris Agreement of 2015.¹⁴⁰ Naturally, von der Leyen spoke of the Green Deal frequently during her first term in office, often demonstrating the need for ambitious climate action with the help of historical references. In this sub-chapter, I examine these references connected to the European Green Deal.

The Green Deal as von der Leyen’s first Commission’s flagship initiative was extremely ambitious with its targets and strict deadlines. Von der Leyen herself called it Europe’s “man on the moon” moment: something historic and of comparable importance to the first steps on the moon.¹⁴¹ As Henriette Müller points out, the Commission President is commonly assumed to “sell” the Commission’s political agenda to the other EU institutions as well as to the wider public.¹⁴² This mission is indeed visible in von der Leyen’s speeches when it comes to the Green Deal. Not only does von der Leyen explain the need for the clean transition with the widespread protest movements in Europe in 2018-2019 but also with references to the oil crisis of the 1970s, the decades-old dependency on Russian oil as well as the ever-worsening natural disasters that are now more intense than ever before in European history.

¹³⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Opening Session of the Conference "Reconstructing the Future for People and Planet – a New European Bauhaus Initiative", organised by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences”.

¹⁴⁰ Johansson et al. 2022, 12; “The European Green Deal”. European Commission’s website. <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en> [read 5.12.2025]

¹⁴¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.1.2021, “Discours de la Présidente von der Leyen à l'occasion du 90ème anniversaire des Grandes Conférences Catholiques”.

¹⁴² Müller 2020, 2.

The Green Deal was indeed, at least in part, a response to the massive protest movements around Europe in 2018-2019 that demanded urgent climate action explicitly from the European Union. Climate change was one of the main themes around the European Parliament elections held in May 2019 and political groups campaigning for climate action made substantial gains. In her speeches, von der Leyen recognizes the impact of the protest movements that were often led by teenagers and young adults as well as her Commission's willingness to respond to their demands. "We heard you, we heard you loud and clear – and here is the answer", von der Leyen declares in the European Parliament Plenary at the debate on the European Green Deal in December 2019.¹⁴³ Talking about the protests of European citizens as a direct reason for new EU legislation aims to add to its legitimacy. Emphasizing that the demand for the Green Deal came from the grass roots makes it harder to criticize. Additionally, it increases the feeling of "us" making decisions in the European Union instead of "them". Perhaps von der Leyen is also aiming to divert attention away from the influence and pressure that some of the Parliament's political groups had in the adoption of the Green Deal.

Von der Leyen emphasizes often in her speeches that the environment is the most central issue for her generation and for the generations to come. She compares the current situation to the devastations of World War II and the reconstruction that followed: "The stakes are just as high as they were in 1950, when Schuman presented his declaration – the devastation of war and conflict at the time still fresh in his memory. But let us be under no illusion. There is just as much at stake because climate change can easily develop the destructive power of war". Here von der Leyen talks about climate change as an existential threat, a possibly destructive crisis which can kill people or leave them without their homes. This kind of rhetoric is likely used to make the listeners take climate change seriously and motivate them for action. Von der Leyen emphasizes also that there is no need to be discouraged. She believes that Europe is, and has always been, at its best when it is 'reverse-engineered'. Europe can be the boldest when it first sets an ambitious goal or has to act out of necessity, often without precedence or competence.¹⁴⁴ Now, with the European Green Deal, it is again possible for Europe to pull out of the crisis stronger.

¹⁴³ Ursula von der Leyen, 11.12.2019, "Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the European Green Deal".

¹⁴⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.5.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the inaugural event of the Conference on the Future of Europe".

Climate change and global warming are not new nor surprising phenomena. Von der Leyen says that science and politics have been discussing them for decades and for just as long, we have understood the need to cut greenhouse emissions. Already in 1972, the ‘Limits to Growth’ report, commissioned by the Club of Rome organization, acknowledged that fossil-based growth was unbearable for the planet. “Stop economic and population growth – or else our planet will not cope”, von der Leyen summarizes the substance of the report at the Beyond Growth Conference in 2023. Despite the controversy and criticism the report has sparked over the years, von der Leyen highlights that there is one point that the report got right beyond any doubt: a growth model centered on fossil fuels is obsolete. According to her, this assessment has been confirmed time and time again since 1972.¹⁴⁵ Emphasizing long-term research behind climate action adds to the Green Deal’s legitimacy and also highlights the urgency of the situation. Essentially, von der Leyen is stating that what the EU is doing now with the Green Deal, should have been done already decades ago.

Only a year after the ‘Limits to Growth’ report was published, a substantial oil crisis began. The global crisis was a result of the Yom Kippur War and the decision of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to implement an oil embargo on some countries. As a result, oil prices quintupled between 1973 and 1974.¹⁴⁶ Von der Leyen says that the following generations have paid – and are still paying – the price for the political decisions Europe made during and immediately after the crisis. Not only did Europe continue its dependency on oil but fossil fuels were also massively subsidized: “Back then, our predecessors chose to stick to the old shores and not lose sight of them. They did not change their growth paradigm but relied on oil”. However, now the European Commission, through the Green Deal, is finally choosing a new path that aims to create a greener future for Europe. “We are choosing to discover new lands”, von der Leyen concludes.¹⁴⁷

During the oil crisis, some European countries banned driving on Sundays or set lower speed limits on motorways. Others instead rationed gasoline or told people to only heat one room in their house. The solution was not to look for alternative sources of energy but rather alternative sources of production. Oil exploration only spread. Von der Leyen says that during

¹⁴⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.5.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Beyond Growth Conference in the European Parliament”; Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Maersk name-giving ceremony”.

¹⁴⁶ Domonkos 2023, 1-2.

¹⁴⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 15.5.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Beyond Growth Conference in the European Parliament”.

the oil crisis only a few visionaries understood that the problem was the fossil fuels themselves, not just their price. As an inspirational example, she mentions Denmark's actions during the oil crisis: "When the oil crisis hit, Denmark started to invest heavily into harnessing the power of the wind. They laid the foundations for its global leadership in the sector and created tens of thousands of new jobs. This is the way to go!".¹⁴⁸

Grönholm and Nyssönen state that in political use of history, the past can be used to seek answers to questions such as "what should be done" and "what should not be done". This is quite evident in von der Leyen's speeches. The above-mentioned example of Denmark in the oil crisis acts as inspiration and motivation for other European countries in their work against climate change. At the same time, most other countries and the European leaders' actions during the crisis instead fall more into the "what should not be done" category. Von der Leyen's attitude towards her predecessors' actions seems indeed quite harsh. Some sympathy is shown, however, in her 'State of the World' Address at the World Economic Forum in January 2022. Von der Leyen says that the world is a very different place now than it was 50 years earlier and parallels to the past situation can be tenuous. She also says that we now have far more options at our disposal than political actors did back then. In the 1970s, less than 1% of electricity worldwide was generated from renewable sources whereas now the number has jumped up to close to one third.¹⁴⁹ In conclusion, it is – or at least should be, in theory – much easier to "do the right thing" now than it was before.

Instead of sympathy, however, more prominent in von der Leyen's speeches is judgement. Von der Leyen talks about the oil crisis at length in five speeches during her first term and mentions each time how much the following generations have suffered from the political decisions made during and soon after the 1970s crisis. Parallels are also clearly drawn to the energy crisis that started in 2022 with Russian energy blackmail.

The European Union's climate policy ambitions are highly intertwined with energy issues which became especially clear in the light of the rising energy prices during the winter of 2021-2022. Prices were already on the rise before the beginning of Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the war fueled the increases as the EU tried to lower the energy dependency on

¹⁴⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, "2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen"; Ursula von der Leyen, 20.1.2022, "'State of the World' Special Address by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum, via videoconference".

¹⁴⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 20.1.2022, "'State of the World' Special Address by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum, via videoconference".

Russia. Russia essentially provoked an energy crisis among the EU member states. However, Europe was able to avoid the worst-case scenario by quickly diversifying energy suppliers and reducing the use of fossil fuels. “We have not forgotten, Putin’s deliberate use of gas as a weapon and how it triggered fears of blackout and an energy crisis like in the 70s. Many thought, we would not have enough energy to get through the winter. But we made it”, von der Leyen states in her State of the Union Address in 2023.¹⁵⁰ Here, the energy crisis of 2022 and the EU’s response is compared to the oil crisis of the 1970s. Von der Leyen emphasizes that the EU was able to handle this crisis much better and decrease the use of fossil fuels which the European leaders weren’t able to do 50 years earlier. In the spirit of the previous sub-chapter about the EU’s political successes, the Union’s ability to quickly diversify away from Russian gas and invest massively in alternative energy sources is presented in the speeches as a major political success by von der Leyen’s Commission.

Von der Leyen urges Europe to follow the example of the Baltic and Eastern European countries who understood the dangers of the dependency on Russian oil already years earlier. In her speech at the Tallinn Digital Summit in 2022, von der Leyen congratulates Estonia on all their hard work: “Ever since you broke free from Soviet rule, you have been working very hard to get rid of Russian fossil fuels and to disconnect from the Russian grid. You have invested heavily in renewable energy, in LNG terminals, in new interconnectors with the rest of Europe”. Von der Leyen reminds Europeans that the actions of the Baltic states have cost them a lot over the years, however, continuing the dependency on Russian fossil fuels is going to be even more costly. Therefore, all of Europe should follow the example that the Baltic States have been setting for years.¹⁵¹

The European Union naturally had climate commitments and targets already before the Green Deal was adopted. As mentioned above, a backdrop for the Green Deal is the Paris Agreement of 2015. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change that was adopted at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21). The treaty’s goal is to hold the increase in the global average temperature well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and preferably limit the increase to 1.5 °C.¹⁵² Von der Leyen calls the Paris Agreement

¹⁵⁰ Johansson et al. 2022, 13, 20; Ursula von der Leyen, 13.9.2023, “2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”.

¹⁵¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 10.10.2022, “Keynote address by President von der Leyen at the Tallinn Digital Summit”; Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, “2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”.

¹⁵² “The Paris Agreement”. United Nations Climate Change website. <<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>> [read 2.2.2026]

“humanity’s life insurance”. She mentions the Paris climate goals in her speeches often and the European Union’s continued commitment to stand behind the targets. However, she also voices concerns that not all the countries and regions in the world are holding onto their Paris commitments, when it comes to, for example, financial support for poorer countries from the main polluters. “Greater support was promised in Paris, and that promise has been kept by Europe, but not by others”, she states at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s 15th Economic Summit in 2021. She says also that the current commitments of many countries are not enough to keep the world on track with the goals that were agreed upon in Paris.¹⁵³ This is where the European Green Deal comes into play: von der Leyen wants Europe to act as a frontrunner and an inspiration in order to strengthen global unity around climate action.

Although the European Green Deal and the goal of climate neutrality in itself is unprecedented, von der Leyen reminds Europeans that this is not the first time that Europe and the world have gone through a major transformation. The targets of the Green Deal are challenging to achieve but positive progress is not impossible. As an example, von der Leyen takes the global action of nearly 200 countries to phase out harmful chemicals after scientists discovered a dangerous thinning of the ozone layer in 1987. According to a United Nations report from 2023, the ozone layer is now on track to recover fully in the next decades.¹⁵⁴

Von der Leyen provides another example closer to the present day: the Emissions Trading System on industry appliances, installations and power plants that the European Union put in place in 2005. Von der Leyen says the success of the system proves that carbon pricing works and that positive progress to tackle climate change is possible. At a high-level event on carbon pricing in November 2021, she says that since the launch of the Emissions Trading System, the EU has been able to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions on those sectors by 45%. “And what it has proven is that it helped us decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions. So you can prosper while cutting emissions. To give you a broad number: Since 1990, we have

¹⁵³ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.4.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Global Leaders Summit hosted by U.S President Joe Biden on the occasion of Earth Day”; Ursula von der Leyen, 15.11.2021, “Opening address by President von der Leyen at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s 15th Economic Summit”; Ursula von der Leyen, 25.10.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Sustainable Energy Week”.

¹⁵⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 6.6.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Green Week 2023, via video message”.

reduced the greenhouse gas emissions by 30%, while growing by 60%”, von der Leyen summarizes.¹⁵⁵

The entirety of the European Green Deal, as seen through the historical references in von der Leyen’s speeches, is a mix of cautionary examples from the past, encouraging examples of positive progress and global commitments combined with European ones. References to the past are important in explaining the need for ambitious climate action in the first place and also in strengthening the legitimacy of the European Green Deal. The widespread climate protests and success of environmental parties in the European elections in 2019 tells clearly that priorities of citizens have changed, and the EU should follow their lead. As von der Leyen puts it: “Today it is no longer: “It is the economy, stupid”, but “it is the environment, stupid!””¹⁵⁶

4.3 “I have been in politics now round about 20 years” – achievements and lessons learned

“Jean Monnet, the most famous of our Union’s founding fathers once met Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. As he recounted in his memoirs, he never forgot this encounter nor something Saint-Exupéry said: ‘The greatest profession is to unite people’. This was the meaning of his commitment. It is also my own”, von der Leyen states in her speech at Toulouse Capitole University when talking about the life of Saint-Exupéry, a famous French author.¹⁵⁷ During her first term in office, von der Leyen talked often in a similar way about her political commitments and the principles that have guided her career. She also reminisced on her time as a Federal Minister in Germany and the lessons she learned during those years that now help her to be a better Commission President. In this sub-chapter, I analyze the references to von der Leyen’s personal past focusing on her political career.

When von der Leyen first got involved in active politics, she was elected to the local council of her hometown, Hanover. After that, she became a Cabinet Minister in the government of Lower Saxony, responsible for social affairs, health care and families. Von der Leyen says that the concept of politics that has guided her work since those early years is something she

¹⁵⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 2.11.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the high-level event on carbon pricing organised by the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition and Canada”.

¹⁵⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 3.12.2021, “Ansprache von Präsidentin von der Leyen beim 14. Deutschen Nachhaltigkeitstag”.

¹⁵⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.6.2023, ”Speech by President von der Leyen at Toulouse Capitole University”.

learned from her father: “I could summarize it in three lines: politics as a service to the community; politics as a personal responsibility; and politics as vision and pragmatism. This is what led me to become involved in politics at the local level over twenty years ago”.¹⁵⁸ Von der Leyen’s father was a civil servant at the European Commission, and she talks about him often especially in the beginning of her first term. As mentioned already earlier, von der Leyen explains her political commitment and her devotion to Europe frequently through her father.

In her speech at the European Committee of Regions’ (CoR) plenary in 2020, von der Leyen talks through the initial stages of her political career and her main takeaways from those early years. “You realise that it makes a big difference how politics is implemented on the ground. Local and regional politics is never abstract. It is about families, workers, communities. And it is about people who care about their communities”, she summarizes her thoughts. Von der Leyen says that the lesson she has always tried to keep in mind, in Berlin and later in Brussels, is that local and regional governments have their finger on the pulse of Europe’s citizens and that they should be listened to. Not only can they help solve minor everyday problems but also “master the great challenges of our time”.¹⁵⁹ It is natural that von der Leyen emphasizes her early involvement in local politics and the importance of European regions when holding a speech at the CoR plenary. She is expressing that she knows from personal experience how big of a difference local governments can make in citizens’ lives. In the same speech she declares that the regions and cities will be at the core of the EU’s pandemic recovery plan.

Von der Leyen’s first federal ministerial post in 2005 was to head the Family/Seniors/Women’s Ministry. After the next elections in 2009, von der Leyen became the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs which was a logical transition, considering her persistent focus on minimum wage, women’s employment opportunities and expanding childcare. However, her appointment as the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs faced strong resistance from her peers at the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 12.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen to the European Committee of the Regions' plenary at the European Week of Regions and Cities”; Ursula von der Leyen, 25.1.2021, “Discours de la Présidente von der Leyen à l'occasion du 90ème anniversaire des Grandes Conférences Catholiques”.

¹⁵⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 12.10.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen to the European Committee of the Regions' plenary at the European Week of Regions and Cities”.

¹⁶⁰ Mushaben 2022, 27.

According to Joyce Marie Mushaben, many of von der Leyen's proposals during her time as a Federal Minister between 2005 and 2019 received reservations or rejection from CDU's male hardliners and sometimes even Chancellor Angela Merkel. These proposals included guaranteed childcare, paternal leave, corporate quotas and family-friendly Bundeswehr reforms. However, all of these provisions, considered 'radical' at the time, have since then become the law of the land.¹⁶¹ Von der Leyen talks about these policies also as the Commission President, clearly proud as having been among the forerunners of family-friendly reforms in Germany. As an example of a successful step into the direction of gender equality, she talks about the incentives for paternal leave she introduced as a family minister and their impact. "Today, more than a third of German fathers take time with their baby at home. And they love it", she states at the Women's Forum Global Meeting in November 2020.¹⁶²

It is clear in von der Leyen's speeches that the position that best prepared her to become the Commission President was her post as the Minister of Defence for six years in Merkel's government. During those years, von der Leyen was able to promote policies close to her heart when it comes to, for instance, equality, women's rights and the battle against racism. In her speeches she often recounts the small steps in the right direction that she witnessed and took part in as the Minister of Defence. The goal is arguably to demonstrate that there has been positive progress with equality and women's rights but a lot of work still remains to be done – and the EU should take a greater role with these matters.

Von der Leyen was appointed as Minister of Defence in 2013 and worked in the post until her appointment as the President of the European Commission in the summer of 2019. Her appointment as Defence Minister surprised many spectators. Mushaben states that Merkel's decision to appoint von der Leyen could be interpreted as an attempt to rebuild trust towards a branch that had been tainted by scandals during the terms of von der Leyen's predecessors. During those years von der Leyen encountered procurement scandals and a few new crises of her own but was able to promote family-friendly reforms as well as special initiatives focusing on mentoring, diversity training and women's leadership. Many of these proposals and new measures were mocked at first by the military hardliners. However, they have since then become popular among the troops and the standard operating procedure for the Bundeswehr. These measures include for example new uniforms for pregnant soldiers, work-

¹⁶¹ Mushaben 2022, 21.

¹⁶² Ursula von der Leyen, 18.11.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the 2020 Women's Forum Global Meeting".

life balance policies, childcare portals, female mentoring programmes and new basic training modules on human rights, equality, diversity and sexual harassment among other things.¹⁶³

In her speech at the high-level event 'After Halle: from words to action against anti-Semitism', von der Leyen recalls how she reintroduced Rabbis as chaplains in the Bundeswehr together with Christian priests after 100 years. She says that the decision wasn't only important for Jewish soldiers but also for the rest of the armed forces: "It is a way to learn about the different cultures that together build a common European culture. And it is a way to understand one another. To understand that, in our diversity of backgrounds, we are all part of the same community".¹⁶⁴ As a Minister, she also contributed to the permanent structured defence cooperation in the EU, also known as the European Defence Union. Von der Leyen says that the defence cooperation was already discussed in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, but its full potential has not yet been realized. In order for Europe to become even stronger, more effective and more sovereign, the EU should make the best of the defence cooperation possibilities between the Member States.¹⁶⁵

At the European Parliament Plenary in June 2020, von der Leyen talks about something she witnessed as Defence Minister. At the time, German armed forces had a recruiting system in place that had favoured similar traits in soldiers for decades. Skills, such as speaking Arabic or Farsi, were not valued although these skills could save lives in a mission abroad. "At that time, the attitude was: 'Ah, but the system does not allow this. We have never done this before'", she states in her speech. However, through analysis and reflection, the German armed forces were able to change the system and make it fairer for the soldiers and better for Germany. Von der Leyen told the story as an encouraging example for Europeans: "It is always possible to change direction if there is a will to do so".¹⁶⁶ She emphasizes her wish to see the EU promote similar progress across the continent and to get to the bottom of why racism still endures in Europe.

Sometimes as a justification for new policies or initiatives, von der Leyen explains that she knows what works best based on her previous post as a Federal Minister. "When I took office

¹⁶³ Mushaben 2022, 28, 32.

¹⁶⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 10.12.2019, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the high-level event 'After Halle: from words to action against anti-Semitism'".

¹⁶⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 18.12.2019, "Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the 10th anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights".

¹⁶⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 17.6.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary – 'We need to talk about racism – openly and honestly'".

[at the European Commission], I vowed to create an instrument to protect workers and businesses from external shocks. Because I knew from my experience as a Minister for Labour and Social Affairs that these schemes work”, she explains in her State of the Union Address in September 2020.¹⁶⁷

Another example is the directive for adequate minimum wages across Europe that the Commission proposed in 2020. In her speech at a conference organized by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), von der Leyen says that during her time as a Minister in Germany, she worked a lot with unions and employers to improve the reconciliation of work and family and to introduce minimum wages in some economic sectors. Around the same time, she started also supporting the idea of a national minimum wage in Germany and now as the President of the European Commission, she wants to promote adequate minimum wages across Europe.¹⁶⁸ The directive was adopted in October 2022. It stirred up a great deal of criticism, especially in some Member States that do not apply legal minimum wages but instead define them through collective bargaining or other means. Johansson, Kreilinger and Wetter Ryde emphasize that this directive “serves as an illustration of the challenges facing the EU institutions when addressing social inequalities in the EU”, that is, issues dear to von der Leyen.¹⁶⁹

Von der Leyen mentions in her speeches also some important people she met while working as a Federal Minister that made a deep impression on her, “men and women who, with their commitment, have changed for the better the life of many others”. One of them was Jim Mattis whom von der Leyen met first in 2017 when she was Defence Minister in Germany and Mattis Secretary of Defence in the United States. It was a difficult time period in the transatlantic relations, with President Donald Trump at the helm in the United States, threatening to leave NATO. Mattis became a reassuring presence at the Pentagon for von der Leyen and her European colleagues: “With him at the helm, we were confident someone in their inner circle of the US administration knew the value of the transatlantic alliance. And we knew, we could count on him as a reliable friend”. This personal memory was told at the

¹⁶⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 16.9.2020, “State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary”.

¹⁶⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 3.2.2021, “Opening speech by President von der Leyen at the ETUI-ETUC Conference: 'Towards a new socio-ecological contract'”.

¹⁶⁹ Johansson et al. 2022, 14.

award ceremony of the Henry Kissinger Prize in November 2021. The prize was awarded to Jim Mattis.¹⁷⁰

The personal memory with Jim Mattis is a part of a larger theme in von der Leyen's speeches in 2021-2022 that represents Europe's collective sigh of relief as President Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump as the President of the United States in January 2021. Europe could again have a trusted ally on the other side of the Atlantic. Some months after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, von der Leyen says in her keynote address at Princeton University: "I have been in politics now round about 20 years, 14 of them in the government of Angela Merkel. Never ever have I experienced such an intense, trustful and detailed cooperation with the White House. And therefore, I think the saying is right: When you face a crisis, you know who your true friends are".¹⁷¹ The objective here is to emphasize the longstanding transatlantic relationship but also the completely new phase in the relations between the United States and Europe that was sealed with their common support of Ukraine.

Prior to von der Leyen's political career which started in the early 1990s, she trained as a medical doctor. Still, as the President of the European Commission, her past profession is clear in many ways. She has a strong focus on global health issues, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through the European Health Union initiative. Von der Leyen says that as a medical doctor, she learned that science and technology can not only improve our lives but also save lives. "And this is why as politicians, I believe it is our duty to draw on both scientific knowledge and lived experience to design policies that work. This has always been my guiding principle throughout my career", she remarks and continues by emphasizing that she has seen digital technologies transform healthcare.¹⁷² In all her political posts she has experienced the power of data and digital opportunities but equally the disappointment if, in the face of a complicated political task, the needed databases are missing. This is why, when von der Leyen became President of the European Commission, she wanted to make digital innovation as one of her Commission's headline priorities.¹⁷³ This

¹⁷⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Conference of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities"; Ursula von der Leyen, 18.11.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony of the Henry A. Kissinger Prize 2021".

¹⁷¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.9.2022, "Keynote address by President von der Leyen at Princeton University".

¹⁷² Ursula von der Leyen, 19.10.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the annual meeting of the U.S. National Academy of Medicine"; Ursula von der Leyen, 12.12.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the World Leader for Peace and Security Award".

¹⁷³ Ursula von der Leyen, 18.7.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the International Conference on Industrial Informatics, via video message".

example illustrates a similar reasoning for policy decisions as in the above-mentioned scheme for protection from external shocks as well as in the adequate minimum wages directive: von der Leyen knows what works based on her personal past experiences.

Von der Leyen's insistence on certain issues as the Commission President regarding social equality, women's rights, family friendly proposals and global health all stem from her earlier career in medicine and in politics. She has focused on similar themes since her early years in local politics in the 1990s. The references in von der Leyen's speeches to her earlier career aim to strengthen the legitimacy of the Commission's specific policy decisions and to justify the need for them. Through these references, von der Leyen also reflects on how she ended up to where she is now and explains her strong commitment to Europe.

In the final chapter, I delve into the ideological use of history in von der Leyen's speeches through the themes of democracy, European common values and women's rights.

5 The ideological use of history: democracy and human rights

The ideological dimension of the use of history reflects how different ideologies use historical knowledge and narratives to reinforce the central theses of one's own doctrine and, at the same time, to question and dispute any competing ideas. Typical questions linked to the ideological dimension are for example: What is the truth? What is the relationship between the past, the present and the future? Usually behind the ideological use of history is a myth or a romanticized narrative shared and maintained by the community, often based on a shared past. The ideological dimension can include appropriation of history and seek to explain who can be considered an 'heir' and who has the 'right' to remember.¹⁷⁴

In their article, Grönholm and Nyysönen explain the ideological dimension mainly through totalitarian and authoritarian systems, such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The only example the authors give from liberal democracies is the stance of the post-soviet Eastern European countries to Soviet Communism and National Socialism. Therefore, I have taken some liberty in defining the ideological dimension in the context of the European Union and Ursula von der Leyen's speeches. I regard in this dimension the references to history that are used to strengthen the belief in what could be considered the "central idea" of the European Union: democracy, rule of law, human rights, equality and so on. At the same time these references are often used to question other type of systems, like those of Russia and China, in some instances even the United States. Important are also the references to Europeans as the "heirs" of the founding fathers and mothers. So, somewhat similarly as in Grönholm and Nyysönen's examples from authoritarian systems, von der Leyen defends the European way of life while actively distinguishing Europe's democracy from other 'ideological' systems.

Von der Leyen talks often about the value of democracy in Europe and how countries wishing to join the European Union do so specifically because of the strength and appeal of European democracy. For example, in the 2019 European People's Party Congress von der Leyen said that the Eastern European countries that broke free from Soviet Union thirty years earlier did so "because they all yearned for the European dream" and "their desire for democracy was stronger than any ideology". She also compares Europe often to other entities, for instance,

¹⁷⁴ Grönholm and Nyysönen 2019, 22.

stating that Europe has a long tradition in balancing the power of government and market whereas Russia has been constantly moving in the opposite direction.¹⁷⁵

When it comes to von der Leyen's personal ideology and values, especially clear in the speeches is her persistence on women's rights, gender equality and family-friendly reforms, although von der Leyen has never embraced the 'feminist' label. She talks about the struggles she has faced – and still faces today – as a woman and how she will not stop working for gender equality until it is a reality in all European countries. "It has been a long road, and we will keep walking", she promises on International Women's Day in 2021.¹⁷⁶

In this sub-chapter, I examine three distinct themes when it comes to ideological use of history in von der Leyen's speeches: democracy, the distinction between *us* and *them* as well as women's rights. Democracy is the backbone of the European Union and in von der Leyen's speeches it is portrayed as a promise that must be renewed every day. Threats against European democracy cannot be accepted. In quite a similar approach, von der Leyen shapes a distinction between us and them in her speeches. In Europe's contemporary history, "us" has sometimes been more inclusive than at other times. The role and composure of "them" – the other - has also shifted. In von der Leyen's speeches Russia, China and Iran, even the United States are, at times, the *other*. For von der Leyen personally, the most important, somewhat ideological issue throughout her life has been women's rights. Von der Leyen has been particularly vocal about equality and women's rights issues during her political career. In her speeches, she discusses how breaking glass ceilings as a woman has affected her life and how far women's rights have progressed during her lifetime – although plenty of work still remains to be done.

5.1 "Our continent has marched towards democracy" – defending the system

During von der Leyen's crisis-prone first term as the President of the Commission, the EU's strength and cohesion was frequently called into question, mainly because of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the democratic decline in some Member States, mainly Hungary and Poland, created credibility issues for the Union. These problems are often apparent in von

¹⁷⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 20.11.2019, "Speech by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen at the 2019 EPP Congress in Zagreb"; Ursula von der Leyen, 10.11.2019, "Laudatio speech for Axel Springer Award winner Shoshana Zuboff by President-elect Dr. Ursula von der Leyen".

¹⁷⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.3.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the International Women's Day Celebration".

der Leyen's speeches. She speaks of democracy as the foundational idea of the European Union and as the highest aspiration of the founding fathers and mothers. She also highlights that Europe is the freest and most democratic region in the world and Europeans should do everything they can to defend it based on their past experiences of nationalism and authoritarianism. Additionally, the democratic decline in the EU - the threat from within – comes to the fore often. In this sub-chapter, I examine von der Leyen's historical references in connection with democracy.

The references to the democratic foundation of Europe in von der Leyen's speeches are drawn all the way back to the first democracies of Ancient Greece. Von der Leyen says that democracy was born more than 2000 years ago in Europe. She calls Europe “a democracy of democracies” and says that the values enshrined in European democracies stem from the Enlightenment, the legal thinking of Rome as well as the philosophy of Greece.¹⁷⁷ Von der Leyen rarely references anything beyond the 20th century in her speeches. However, when it comes to democracy in Europe, the connections are drawn more often between the present day and the distant past, perhaps to emphasize that despite challenges, European democracy has prevailed for thousands of years. Karl-Georg Faber points out that the further in history an event is, the less often it will usually be mentioned in political debate unless it has particular relevance to the current issue.¹⁷⁸ With Brexit and the issues with democratic decline, emphasizing the long traditions of democracy has been especially topical for the European Commission in recent years.

The connection between the ancient Greek democracies and modern European democracies lies in the enduring principles: “The values that inspired the founders of Athenian democracy should still guide us today. The idea that power belongs to citizens. The idea that we are all equal before the law. The idea that free speech is a fundamental right. This is the immortal gift that Greece has given to the world.” Von der Leyen adds that the democratic values of Greece have spread across continents and oceans over the years because all the people in the world share the aspiration for freedom.¹⁷⁹ Democracy is often directly connected to freedom

¹⁷⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.4.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Raisina Dialogue”; Ursula von der Leyen, 13.1.2020, “Closing remarks by President von der Leyen at the solemn undertaking by the College of Commissioners before the Court of Justice of the European Union”; Ursula von der Leyen, 27.8.2022, “Address by President von der Leyen at the plenary session on European affairs in Taizé”.

¹⁷⁸ Faber 1978, 44.

¹⁷⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 29.9.2022, “Keynote address by President von der Leyen at the 10th annual Athens Democracy Forum”.

and peace in von der Leyen's speeches: the best way to ensure peace and the freedom of the peoples of Europe is to promote democracy and democratic values.

Promoting democracy reflects also the moral duty towards the founding fathers and mothers of the EU. "Our founders only meant to lay the first stone of this democracy. They always thought that future generations would complete their work", von der Leyen states in her State of the Union address in September 2022. In another speech a few months later, in January 2023, she quotes David Sassoli, the late President of the European Parliament, who said that the European Union is not an accident of history but, instead, Europeans are the children and grandchildren of the people "who found the antidote to the disease of nationalism".¹⁸⁰ The antidote against nationalism was naturally democracy and peaceful cooperation among sovereign nations. Continuing the work of the founding fathers and mothers is presented as every European's honor and obligation since "we are the heirs of the post-war generation" as von der Leyen declares.¹⁸¹

Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, controversially argued in his famous book *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992 that the competition between ideological systems was over. Western-style democracy as well as the liberal economic system had prevailed. The general perception in the 21st century has been that Fukuyama spoke too soon. Also, von der Leyen mentions the 'end of history' in her speeches a few times in connection with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Cold War. Interestingly, however, she thinks there is something to be learnt from the West's naive self-satisfaction: "Back then, we assumed that the competition between systems had been decided once and for all. You all know the term Fukuyama coined about the "end of history. (...) This thesis did not prove true. But it's still worth looking back to draw the right conclusions for the future."¹⁸² The "right conclusions" von der Leyen is talking about are directed mainly towards Russia and China. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many in Europe believed a democratic transition could be possible for Russia although there were signs early on proving the opposite. Europe built

¹⁸⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, "2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen"; Ursula von der Leyen, 9.1.2023, "Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the book launch of 'La saggezza e l'audacia. Discorsi per l'Italia e per l'Europa' with selected speeches of the late President of the European Parliament David Sassoli".

¹⁸¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 21.7.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the award ceremony for the 'World Peace & Liberty Award' to the European Commission".

¹⁸² Ursula von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, "Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin"; Ursula von der Leyen, 11.11.2019, "Rede der gewählten Kommissionspräsidentin Ursula von der Leyen bei der Jahresversammlung des Wirtschaftsbeirats Bayern".

dependencies on Russia for decades before realizing how dangerous it was while a similar situation was developing with China. Now, the competition between systems is once again visible but this time Europe has learned from its past naiveness and can read the situation better than in the days of Fukuyama's book. In conclusion, Europe has been able to learn from the past.

The fight between democracy and autocracy is a frequent theme in von der Leyen's speeches. As demonstrated above, von der Leyen talks about the victory of democracy against other systems but, at the same time, emphasizes that the threats towards our democracy remain. "We have not forgotten that in World War II, democracy won over fascism and autocracy. This triumph set the foundation of our peace order. And this is not only about the past, but it will also define our future", she proclaims in her speech at the Hudson Institute in October 2023.¹⁸³ She speaks frequently of the connections between the past and the current situation when it comes to democracy. Grönholm and Nyssönen state in their article that the question of the relationship between the past, the present and the future is often discussed around the ideological use of history: to explain where the system and the values guiding it has come from and how it will prevail in the future.

Von der Leyen emphasizes in her speeches that one of the reasons why Europe should promote democracy is because democratic progress can easily spread. The last 50 years of Europe's history is in itself proof of the power of democracy "to give people hope that positive change is possible". Another reason to promote democratic values, as noted earlier, is that it is the best way to promote peace in Europe: "Because – and this is right – war is unthinkable in a community of like-minded democracies".¹⁸⁴ The power of democracy in Europe's history is in von der Leyen's speeches essentially connected to two time periods: the so-called third wave of democracy in the 1970s in Greece, Spain and Portugal as well as the fall of the Iron Curtain and new-found freedom of Eastern European countries in the early 1990s. Von der Leyen states that especially for Greece, Portugal and Spain, the European integration was about democracy.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ursula von der Leyen, 19.10.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Hudson Institute".

¹⁸⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.12.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2021 via videoconference"; Ursula von der Leyen, 17.5.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the general debate 'United for Europe' of the Council of Europe Summit".

¹⁸⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2020, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Empress Theophano Prize award ceremony".

The examples of the past enlargements and the democratic progress in Europe act as inspirational examples for the EU's current candidate countries who are working towards membership. As von der Leyen summarizes: "The history of our Union is one of young democracies getting stronger together. It is the history of Germany's rebirth after the war. It is Greece, Spain and Portugal moving fast from dictatorship to democracy in the mid-1970s. It is the democratic uprising that brought down the Iron Curtain. It is the long path of reconciliation in the Western Balkans. A path that must lead all the six Western Balkan countries to join our Union."¹⁸⁶ European democratic progress and integration is presented here as a straightforward, almost predefined chain of events.

The examples of the past democratic progress are also reassurance in a world where the right of might and autocracy seem to gather more and more space. Von der Leyen illustrates that democratic change is always possible and it is never too late to change direction. It wasn't too late for Portugal and Spain who were under dictatorship for around 40 years, it wasn't too late for Eastern European countries who had been under the Soviet Union for decades and it is not too late for any country today who wants to make positive changes towards a democratic future.

However, many of the references to democratic progress reflect at the same time concerns of democratic decline. Von der Leyen says that although Europe "has marched towards democracy" for more than 70 years, the gains of this long journey are not assured. During these peaceful years, Europeans have started to take democracy for granted: "Especially those, like me, who have never experienced what it means to live under the fist of an authoritarian regime. Today we all see that we must fight for our democracies." Although democracy has in some form prevailed in Europe for a long time, it will not be able to survive without constant efforts to defend it. Von der Leyen says that Europeans have learnt the importance of improving and updating our democracy "because we know how quickly and how devastatingly history can change".¹⁸⁷

Throughout her first term in office, von der Leyen talks about the threats European democracies are facing from within the system. She says that in the past few years or few

¹⁸⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.6.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the preparation of the European Council meeting".

¹⁸⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, "2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen"; Ursula von der Leyen, 22.9.2022, "Keynote address by President von der Leyen at Princeton University".

decades, there seems to have been a substantial political and cultural shift resulting in concerning trends jeopardising democratic societies.¹⁸⁸ These trends include for example the rising racism and antisemitism as well as restrictions on minority rights. She describes the “autocracy’s Trojan horses” that are trying to attack European democracies from within as well as the nationalists and the populists who revile Europe and yearn for a past that never existed. She connects the current polarized political situation to Europe’s past experiences: “The rise of movements holding our democracy in contempt, barbaric violence against people of Jewish faith, men, women and children. These recent events appear before us like ghosts from a distant past. It was only a little over 70 years ago that Europe chose a different path after centuries of war and conflict. Not because it was forced to, but because it chose to”.¹⁸⁹ Von der Leyen encourages Europeans to, again, *choose* to stand up against these developments like the generations before us did. As mentioned already above, von der Leyen aims to illustrate, with the help of historical references, that Europe has survived threats towards democracy before and it is never too late to change direction.

The inner threats to European democracies inspired also one of von der Leyen’s first Commission’s priorities: “a new push for European democracy”. In her speeches, von der Leyen explains the need to strengthen democracy by saying that “our democracy could not be taken for granted, in the face of some rising and daunting challenges”. She also justifies it through the record-high turnout in the European elections in May 2019 which showed the vitality of European democratic system and the need to defend it.¹⁹⁰

Democracy is one theme in von der Leyen’s speeches which possibly in the best way ties together the distant past, the present as well as the future. Von der Leyen emphasizes actively Europe’s long-standing democratic traditions and the need to keep promoting democratic values. Perhaps part of the reason why von der Leyen describes Europe as the freest and the most democratic region in the world is to divert attention away from the impact of the inner issues the democratic decline is creating in the Union. At the same time, she is constructing an image of Europe’s old democratic tradition to emphasize that despite problems, the EU will always promote and defend democracy and will not allow anything to change that. That is

¹⁸⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.1.2024, “Address by President von der Leyen at the Hamburg Citizens' Prize Ceremony”.

¹⁸⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2022, “2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen“; Ursula von der Leyen, 23.10.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the 20th Aachener Krönungsmahl 2023”.

¹⁹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 23.10.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the High-level event on elections, via video message”.

what the founders' generation worked for after two World Wars and again after the Cold War. It is this responsibility towards the founders that still guides the work of European democratic institutions and people like Ursula von der Leyen: "No democracy is perfect. But all democracies are perfectible. This is our mission. And this is what brings us together."¹⁹¹

5.2 "Values that unite us are challenged like never before" – us against them

An important aspect of the common European identity – and any collective identity – is the focus on characteristics the group members have in common. At the same time, however, collective identities are concerned with distinguishing that specific group from other groups "notably by delineating who is 'in' and who is 'out'", as Markus J. Prutsch underlines in his study. Social groups of all kinds draw boundaries in terms of certain characteristics.¹⁹² On the European level, this differentiation between *us* and *them* focuses mostly on the common European values such as equality, human rights, democracy, freedom and tolerance. Any country, organization or group who shares these values can – at least in some situations – be considered a part of us. Likewise, countries who do not share these values or act against them are considered a part of them. In von der Leyen's speeches, especially during conflict situations, this differentiation between Europe and "the other" is clear. At times von der Leyen calls the other directly by its name, most notably Russia and China. Sometimes, however, she only talks about "some powers" or "other forces" threatening Europe. Connections are often drawn between the current clashes and past disputes to emphasize the severity of the situation. In this sub-chapter, I analyze von der Leyen's historical references in connection with the distinction between us and them. Most of the chapter focuses on Russia or the Soviet Union as it is the country most singled out in von der Leyen's speeches.

In the previous chapter (5.1.) the focus was on European democracy and the inner threats that democracy has been facing with populism and nationalism. However, in this chapter the focus is not on the inner division of the EU but instead on the external threats Europe faces as a single entity. Thus, the Member States of the European Union as well as the candidate countries and other European partners such as Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (even after Brexit) are a clear part of "us". In von der Leyen's speeches, however, many other regions are also considered to be on the same side as Europe or even a part of the same

¹⁹¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.3.2023, "Address by President von der Leyen at a joint session of the Canadian parliament".

¹⁹² Prutsch 2017, 10.

“family”. Often the connection is found in a shared past or long-standing cooperation between the regions. Specific non-European countries mentioned in von der Leyen’s speeches and considered as a part of “us” in certain situations are Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Israel, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea. When it comes to the historical references, the most notable examples are Canada and Israel.

In March 2023, von der Leyen addresses the Canadian Parliament and begins her speech by expressing gratitude towards Canada’s sacrifices in World War II. “The history of our democracies is tied together. So many Canadians have their family roots in Europe. Many of your parents and grandparents fought in Europe during two World Wars”, she utters. She adds that Germany owes its democracy also to the people of Canada and Europe is “forever grateful for the sacrifice your parents and grandparents made, and for the invaluable gift of freedom”.¹⁹³ The goal here is arguably to emphasize the long-standing, common interests of Canada and Europe that still today create a strong bridge across the Atlantic. The values that both Canada and Europe stand for are currently challenged by Russia as well as some other countries in the world. As during World War II, Canada can again help Europe to promote democracy and defend the common values, this time against a common enemy.

As mentioned already around the moral dimension of the use of history, von der Leyen talks frequently about Israel and the strong ties the country has with Europe. In her speeches, Israel’s role as a part of “us” comes down to the historical responsibility towards Jewish people as well as the common interests Europe and Israel have as democracies. “As long as I can think, I was convinced of two very simple facts. First, there is no Europe without European Jews. And second, Europe and Israel are bound to be friends and allies. Because the history of Europe is the history of the Jewish people”, von der Leyen declares in her speech at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. She continues by saying that Israel and Europe’s shared culture and values have over the years created a deep connection and a strong bond between the regions, mainly because of their belief in democracy and democratic values.¹⁹⁴

In von der Leyen’s speeches, “they” is less of a clear-cut group of countries than “us”. The countries mentioned by name as “others” in connection to historical references are Russia,

¹⁹³ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.3.2023, “Address by President von der Leyen at a joint session of the Canadian parliament”.

¹⁹⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 14.6.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev”.

China and Iran. Also, Hamas, the Palestinian Sunni Islamist militant group serving as the main authority in Gaza, is called out in von der Leyen's speeches. The "others" are described not only as a threat towards Europe but a threat towards the international order that has been built over the past 70 years. As von der Leyen declares in her speech at the Canadian Parliament in March 2023: "After the two World Wars, the world declared that all human beings are entitled to equal and inalienable rights. But today, some powers are explicitly trying to destroy this basic principle." She continues by saying that the values that unite us, that is, Europeans and like-minded partners, are challenged like never before.¹⁹⁵

The most serious confrontation – and at the same time the clearest distinction between us and them – during von der Leyen's first term was between Russia and Ukraine or Russia and Europe. Russia was the most referenced 'other' already prior to the full-scale war in Ukraine. After the attack on February 24th, 2022, however, the tone in von der Leyen's speeches towards Russia hardened considerably. At the same time, Ukraine was unprecedentedly drawn into the European family. In other words, the difference between us and them grew stronger: anyone who supported Ukraine, resisted Russia, stood by the United Nations charter and upheld global order became a part of us and vice versa. Especially during the years 2022 and 2023 von der Leyen talked frequently about Russia and Ukraine's past, for example about the the Maidan protests in Ukraine 2013-2014 and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Connections are also drawn between the current situation and World War II as well as the Cold War.

"The very reason why our Union was created is to put an end to all European wars. So it is particularly painful for me to address you today, as we face the largest build-up of troops on European soil since the darkest days of the Cold War", von der Leyen began her speech at the European Parliament Plenary a mere week before Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁹⁶ She emphasizes often in her speeches that Russia's war is "an outdated imperial war" and an attempt to pull Ukraine towards a darker past. Russia is attempting to redraw maps, rewrite history and "play the old game of 'divide and rule'".¹⁹⁷ Von der Leyen

¹⁹⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.3.2023, "Address by President von der Leyen at a joint session of the Canadian parliament".

¹⁹⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 16.2.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on EU-Russia relations, European security and Russia's military threat against Ukraine".

¹⁹⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.5.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the closing event of the Conference on the Future of Europe"; Ursula von der Leyen, 29.3.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the second Summit for Democracy, via videoconference"; Ursula von der Leyen, 6.5.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the II Cercle d'Economia Award for the European Construction".

talks about the attack not as a new or especially surprising event but instead as a part of a long-term trend of Russia's violent actions. Russia is trying to reclaim its glory days as an imperium and occupy an independent country. However, Russia's attempt will not work because the rest of the world has moved on: "Yes, Russia is trying to take us back in time. But those who have struggled to be free will not accept the bondages of an uglier past".¹⁹⁸

While Russia's logic in the war is old and familiar, a remnant of the past, there are also unprecedented features in it. Von der Leyen highlights two aspects that are 'firsts' in history: the reason for the attack and Europe's reaction. She says that Russia's war "marks the return of old demons" but what is different is that for the first time in history a country is attacked for wanting to become a part of the European Union. Also, Europe's rapid and united response to the attack has been unprecedented: "We have mobilised our unique economic power to protect Ukraine. This is also a new chapter in our Union's history – a new way of putting economic power to counter military power and military aggression, and to defend our most cherished European values".¹⁹⁹ Thus, von der Leyen highlights that Europe is a modern continent, moving forward and making changes while the only thing Russia can do is look towards the past.

As indicated above, von der Leyen speaks of Russia's war as a part of broader pattern in the country's behavior. This includes also references to the Soviet Union (1922-1991). An especially stark link is drawn between Holodomor – the man-made famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s caused by the USSR – and the current situation in Ukraine where "Russia is again using food as a weapon". Von der Leyen says that the confiscations of Ukraine's grain stocks and machinery have brought back memories from a dark past. In the 1930s, Europe and the rest of the world did not help the millions of people starving in Ukraine. Partly ridden by guilt and the weight of the historical responsibility towards Ukraine, Europe has a duty to help now: "90 years after the Holodomor, we honour the memory of Ukraine's victims. They died

¹⁹⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.11.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the international symposium "The idea of Europe" in the context of Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022, via video message".

¹⁹⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.6.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at Toulouse Capitole University"; Ursula von der Leyen, 6.5.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the II Cercle d'Economia Award for the European Construction".

in silence, starving to death, and, at that time, the world did not rise to help them. We will not let this happen again”.²⁰⁰

The Holodomor is one of the few crimes of the Soviet Union and Communism that is directly brought up and discussed in length in von der Leyen’s speeches. The other violations mentioned are the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (although very briefly), the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Soviet aggression in Vilnius, Lithuania in 1991. The violence of the USSR is mentioned altogether in six of von der Leyen’s speeches. On top of these references, von der Leyen does mention “Russia’s dark past” on multiple occasions, however, it is not really elaborated what this past entails. More than focusing on the actual crimes of the Soviet regime, von der Leyen speaks often on what happened *after* the fall of the USSR and the Iron Curtain, when the countries of Eastern Europe became free. When it comes to Russia, most attention in von der Leyen’s speeches goes to the more recent or current conflicts.

Connections are drawn between the current situation and the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014 that were followed by the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula into Russia in March 2014. As Europe had learned from the Holodomor and the inaction of the world at that time, the same is true with Crimea. Von der Leyen says that “Europe has done its homework” from 2014 and this time around knows how to support Ukraine better and to avoid making the same mistakes. The main mistake von der Leyen thinks Europe made in 2014 was to not react aggressively enough and to let Russia freeze the conflict. “Breaking all rules, negating a nation's right to exist, that is Putin's declared policy towards Ukraine. In 2014, he occupied Crimea. He then froze the conflict. And since then, he has waited for the right moment to invade Ukraine again”, von der Leyen summarizes.²⁰¹ Now, Europe must support Ukraine until a lasting, peaceful resolution is found, no matter how long it takes.

Von der Leyen emphasizes in her speeches frequently that this war is not only about Ukraine, but instead it is about defending the United Nations Charter (signed 1945), the Helsinki Final Act (signed 1975) and the Paris Charter (signed 1990), all of which are peace-oriented international agreements signed by Russia or the Soviet Union. If Ukraine lost the war, the entire rules-based global order that the world has been building since the end of World War II

²⁰⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 26.11.2022, “Statement by President von der Leyen at the "Grain from Ukraine" Summit”; Ursula von der Leyen, 24.5.2022, “Special Address by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum”.

²⁰¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 22.10.2023, “Rede von Ursula von der Leyen beim Deutschlandtag der Jungen Union“; Ursula von der Leyen, 10.2.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Industry Days 2022“.

would be called into question. “Putin even asked, in his speech on annexation: ‘Who did ever agree on a rules-based global order?’ Well, the Russians certainly did. They did when they signed the UN Charter, just like all other nations of the world, and when they negotiated the Helsinki Final Act. The rules-based global order belongs to the world”, von der Leyen proclaims at the EU Ambassadors Conference in October 2022.²⁰² Thus, supporting Ukraine is presented as a synonym to supporting the rules-based order, human rights and the UN Charter.

At the same time as von der Leyen emphasizes how much of an ‘other’ Russia is, she highlights how similar the EU and Ukraine are in their values and in their view of the future: “You have come such a long way since 2014. You have chosen firmly to be a democracy and to live under the rule of law. This choice, Ukraine has already made for itself, for its own sake.” She also says that since 2014, Ukraine has progressed a lot and the democracy has been reformed in a few years more than in the previous decades.²⁰³ Ukraine received candidate status to join the EU in June 2022. The process was rapid compared to the Western Balkan countries who have attempted to become candidate countries or Member States for years. Some were doubtful of the quick progression in Ukraine’s membership process. Therefore, von der Leyen is arguably highlighting that Ukraine has made a lot of progress in its democracy in previous years and is more than ready to be a candidate country.

Criticizing Russia in the speeches is also directly connected to countries Russia has allied with such as China. Von der Leyen deliberately talks of Russia and China often in connection to each other, for example by mentioning Russia’s violence in Crimea and then reminding the crowd about the Tiananmen massacre in China in 1989. She also speaks of the long-standing cooperation between the two countries. “China sees Putin's weakness as a way to increase its leverage over Russia. And it is clear that the power balance in that relationship – which for most of the last century favoured Russia – has now reversed”, von der Leyen states in her speech on EU-China relations in March 2023. Similarly, as with Russia, she emphasizes that the hopes of China’s alignment with the Western Model have not been fulfilled since the end

²⁰² Ursula von der Leyen, 12.10.2022, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2022”; Ursula von der Leyen, 20.1.2022, “‘State of the World’ Special Address by President von der Leyen at the World Economic Forum, via videoconference”.

²⁰³ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.7.2022, “Address of President von der Leyen to the Ukrainian Parliament following the European Council decision granting Ukraine candidate status”; Ursula von der Leyen, 29.9.2022, “Keynote address by President von der Leyen at the 10th annual Athens Democracy Forum”.

of Cold War and China has now become an openly competing system with Europe.²⁰⁴ Over the last decade or so, the relationship between China and Europe has become difficult for many reasons. Von der Leyen clearly balances in her speeches between acknowledging China's changed, more aggressive position and the need for Europe to manage good relations with China.

Von der Leyen talks also about Iran in connection to Russia: "By teaming up, Iran and Russia are undermining the basic rules and principles of our global order. And where does this end, if left unchallenged? History shows that this is a recipe for perpetual war. It is a recipe for arms races and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." She says also that several Gulf countries have been warning about Iran's threat and weapons proliferation for many years. Additionally, Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel in October 2023 is connected to the threat of Russia and Iran as well as the rules-based global order. Von der Leyen says that any success that Russia, Iran or Hamas gain will only lead to more violence "aimed at upending the existing order" that so many lives were sacrificed to create.²⁰⁵ Von der Leyen highlights that Iran or Hamas' threat can lead not only to regional instabilities but also to the imbalance of the entire international order that the world has been building since World War II. As expressed earlier, a very similar rhetoric is used also around Russia's war in Ukraine.

In her speech at the EU Ambassadors' Conference in November 2023, von der Leyen says that the current conflicts remind Europeans of the darkest chapters of our history. Hamas' terrorist attack in Israel – which killed more than 1000 people – was the worst mass murder of Jews since World War II. Von der Leyen demands support for Israel: "In the wake of the worst mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust, it is our moral duty to demonstrate our full solidarity with the people of Israel."²⁰⁶ The insistence on Israel's right to defend itself and Europe's duty to demonstrate full solidarity comes down to the international law, of course, but also the above-mentioned historical responsibility and the fact that Israel is considered a part of "us".

²⁰⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.11.2019, "Europe address - Dr Ursula von der Leyen President-elect of the European Commission - Allianz Forum (Pariser Platz), Berlin"; Ursula von der Leyen, 30.3.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre".

²⁰⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 18.11.2022, "Keynote address by President von der Leyen at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue"; Ursula von der Leyen, 19.10.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Hudson Institute".

²⁰⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, 6.11.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2023".

An interesting case in the “us against them” distinction is the United States which does not clearly fall into either of the categories. Most of the time in von der Leyen’s speeches, the United States is a part of us: a country that shares Europe’s democratic values and appreciates international cooperation. However, especially President Donald Trump’s first term (2016-2020) clearly affected how von der Leyen and Europe saw the United States as a partner. For example, in January 2021, von der Leyen says at the European Parliament Plenary that the four years of Trump presidency were long and difficult and now Europe, finally again, has a friend in the White House when President Joe Biden is inaugurated. In March of the same year, von der Leyen says that after four years, Brussels and Washington speak the same language again: the language of international cooperation and the language of democratic values “upon which the transatlantic community has thrived for over seventy years”.²⁰⁷

A major part of the distinction between us and them is to emphasize the unique nature of Europe and the strength of the democratic values unseen anywhere else. “Competition must be fair. And for this, inequalities must be tackled proactively. This is what makes Europe’s economy unique – if you compare it, for instance, to the U.S. or China. These are the founding principles of our Union”, von der Leyen states.²⁰⁸ The distinction also reflects the rules-based global order built after the World War II and the threats facing it. Von der Leyen highlights that Europe with its democratic foundation and solidarity among Member States is best suited to face these challenges compared to other regions of the world. Europe has also learned from its past naiveness: with Russia’s development since the 1990s and its actions in 2014 as well as with China’s development. While Europe has learned about the dangers of its dependencies, the distinction between *us* and *them* has only grown stronger.

5.3 “It happened because I am a woman” – von der Leyen and women’s rights

When it comes to von der Leyen’s “personal ideology”, one thing is especially clear: her insistence on women’s rights. Throughout her political career, von der Leyen has focused on women’s rights issues and family-friendly reforms, also as the Commission President. These issues are personal for her, as a woman and a mother of seven children. She talks often about

²⁰⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 20.1.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the inauguration of the new President of the United States and the current political situation”; Ursula von der Leyen, 24.3.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the AmCham EU Transatlantic Conference 2021 “Global leadership: A transatlantic opportunity””.

²⁰⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 28.11.2020, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the opening ceremony of the academic year of the Bocconi University”.

her personal struggles around these topics, for example what it was like to study medicine as a woman or to start in politics in the male-dominated Christian Democratic Union (CDU). She speaks of women's rights especially in events dedicated to the topic, such as ceremonies on the occasion of the International Women's Day or at the Pulse Women Economic Network. In this sub-chapter, I examine the references in von der Leyen's speeches to her past regarding women's rights issues.

In her speech on International Women's Day in 2024, von der Leyen reminisces on her childhood and the women's rights situation in Germany back in the 1960s and 1970s. She says that her parents taught her that men and women are equal, however, even as a girl, she could understand that women did not have equal rights. Women had to ask their husbands' permissions to work, for example. "It wasn't until I was a student that women in my country conquered the right to sign their own contract. And then we had to fight to turn our equal rights into reality", she continues.²⁰⁹ Von der Leyen talks about the personal memory to highlight how far Europe has come with equality since those times. She emphasizes that especially in the past five years – during her time as the Commission President – the EU has taken unprecedented steps for women's rights. However, von der Leyen does also remind the crowd that the work is not finished and "the path to full equality is still long". This is a common pattern in von der Leyen's speeches around the women's rights theme: first, emphasis on how much the rights of women have progressed in the past decades, then a reminder that there is still work to do and everyone needs to stay vigilant and active.

Von der Leyen also talks about women's empowerment and the things that inspired and empowered her as a young woman. She mentions in a few speeches her time in Stanford as a trailing spouse specifically from the women's rights perspective. When she left Germany in the early 1990s for the United States, it wasn't that common to be a working mother in her home country. However, in the United States, the situation was already much more progressed: "Coming to the US felt like a breath of fresh air. No one questioned my choice of being a working mom. Everyone expected both me and my husband to work and take care of the kids. I felt supported and empowered like never before".²¹⁰ According to Joyce Marie Mushaben, von der Leyen has spoken of this inspiring time also in interviews. While working

²⁰⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 8.3.2024, "Message by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the International Women's Day".

²¹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 11.11.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Atlantic Council's Distinguished Leadership Awards".

mothers in Germany still suffered from stigmatization, in the United States she saw many women who could reconcile work and family obligations thanks to diverse childcare options and full-day schools.²¹¹ This was an epiphany for von der Leyen that still affects her life and leads her work today.

Von der Leyen also compares her past, growing up as a woman in Europe to a life of a woman in Iran. At an award ceremony, the M100 Media Award 2023, the prize was given for the Iranian ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement. Massive protests had erupted in Iran a year earlier when a young woman, Mahsa Amini, also known as Jina, had died in the custody of the morality police. “When the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979, I was 21 years old. Exactly the same age as Jina when she was killed. I grew up in Europe, in a society that was not perfect. But I could strive to be myself. I could demand equal rights as a woman, without fearing state violence. I grew up in an open democracy where my fundamental rights are protected by the rule of law”, von der Leyen remarks in her laudation speech.²¹² Here, von der Leyen is presumably highlighting that women’s rights should matter as much everywhere: in Europe as well as in Iran. In the spirit of the above-mentioned distinction between us and them, von der Leyen emphasizes also the unique nature of the European democratic system based on the rule of law in comparison to Iran.

Von der Leyen talks about personal memories around women’s rights specifically in the fields of medicine and politics – the two fields she has built her career on. In medicine, she says that Europe has made a great deal of progress during her lifetime. Already when von der Leyen became a medical doctor, 50% of her colleagues were women. However, other issues persisted: “But how to reconcile our career with the choice of being a mother remained an open question. It was still “expected” to leave your job when you had kids. And for the young female doctors who chose a career, the glass ceiling was rock solid. It prevented many talented women from reaching the posts that they deserved”.²¹³ Again, she emphasizes that much progress has been achieved in Europe, but still equal work doesn’t always mean equal pay and women in leadership positions are only a lonely exception.

²¹¹ Mushaben 2022, 27.

²¹² Ursula von der Leyen, 14.9.2023, “Laudation by President von der Leyen for the Iranian ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement at the M100 Media Award 2023”.

²¹³ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.11.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the International Conference “The Role of Women in the Development of Romania”, via video message”.

After a career in medicine, von der Leyen joined the CDU in 1990 and started her political career. Rising to politics in the ranks of a male-dominated CDU was not easy for her. Mushaben states that ever since she rose to national politics in 2005, von der Leyen had to deal with “a regular stream of snide comments” about her appearance – clothing, smile, hair – as well as her personality and communication style. She highlights also that still in the 2000s and even 2010s Germany lagged behind other European countries in appointing women to political leadership positions. Angela Merkel became the first female Chancellor in Germany in 2005 and later in 2013 von der Leyen became the first female defence minister. Many other European countries had had women in higher political positions already in the 1980s and 1990s.²¹⁴

Von der Leyen highlights in her speeches frequently that she is the first-ever female President of the European Commission, leading the first-ever gender balanced College of Commissioners. “After all: Europe is a woman”, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council at the time, declared in July 2019 when the Council proposed von der Leyen as the first female President of the European Commission and Christine Lagarde as the first female President of the European Central Bank. Von der Leyen puts emphasis on this moment as something historic, something that European women have been working on for decades: “I believe that Donald Tusk’s instinct to emphasise that moment was right. Not because it was about Christine Lagarde or me, but because it was the moment when another of those heavy doors was pushed open”.²¹⁵ It was not easy, however, to manage a gender-balanced Commission, as von der Leyen often reminds Europeans. It was something she seriously had to fight for which is also proof on how much work remains to be done for full gender equality in Europe.

Still, as the Commission President, old ghosts of disrespect and belittlement, of not being treated as an equal, have come to the fore for von der Leyen. In April 2021, while visiting Turkey on a high-level meeting with Charles Michel, at the time President of the European Council, a diplomatic protocol incident occurred that became known as “Sofagate”. In their meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Michel and Erdoğan sat on chairs facing each other while von der Leyen was left standing and eventually offered to take a seat on a sofa in the same room. The move was interpreted to imply that von der Leyen, as a

²¹⁴ Mushaben 2022, 21, 25.

²¹⁵ Ursula von der Leyen, 16.9.2023, “Speech by President von der Leyen on European perspectives at the Federal Delegates' meeting of the CDU's Women's Union”.

woman, was of lower rank.²¹⁶ Many European politicians, news medias and women's rights associations viewed the incident as sexist, as did von der Leyen herself. She spoke of the incident in her speech at the European Parliament Plenary shortly after the occurrence and compared it to the previous high-level meetings held with Turkey.

Von der Leyen highlights that she is the first woman to be the President of the European Commission in the history of the Union, and this is how she expected to be treated when visiting Turkey. She also remarks that she cannot find any justification in the European Treaties – the latest of which was signed in 2007 – for the way she was treated. Equality has been enshrined in the European Treaties since 1957. “So, I have to conclude, it happened because I am a woman”, she notes in the beginning of her speech.²¹⁷ The high-level political dialogue between the EU and Turkey has been held since 2015 when the political leaders decided to revitalize relations. Von der says she didn't see any shortage of chairs in pictures of the previous meetings from previous years. However, as she also points out, there weren't any women in the pictures of earlier meetings either.

In her speech, von der Leyen connects the incident to broader women's rights issues as well as to the foundation of the European Union: “Many of you will have made quite similar experiences in the past. Especially the female members of this House, I am sure, know exactly how I felt. I felt hurt and left alone: As a woman and as a European. Because this is not about seating arrangements or protocol. This goes to the core of who we are. This goes to the values our Union stands for”. “Sofagate” was therefore, according to von der Leyen, not only disrespectful towards her as a European woman but towards the entire European Union and the community built by the European founding fathers and mothers.

Von der Leyen emphasizes the great progress that the European Union has made with women's rights in previous decades. One such success is connected to the further progress made in Ireland. “50 years ago, married Irish women were banned from working in the public sector. But because of your accession to the European Community in 1973, this Parliament passed its first gender equality legislation. Since then, the rights of women in Ireland have come such a long way”, von der Leyen states in her speech held to the Joint Houses of the

²¹⁶ Kollias and Messis 2024, 164.

²¹⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 26.4.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 25-26 March 2021 and the outcome of the high-level meeting between the EU and Turkey”; Ursula von der Leyen, 8.3.2021, “Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the International Women's Day Celebration”.

Oireachtas in Ireland. She adds that Ireland was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage through a referendum.²¹⁸ What von der Leyen is highlighting in her speech is how many areas of Ireland's society were positively affected by the EU membership, women's rights included. Additionally, Ireland acts as an inspirational example for the rest of Europe and the world when it comes to women's rights.

Also, more recent success of the EU – by von der Leyen's own Commission – is highlighted in the speeches. Von der Leyen says that the EU legislation to have quotas for women on management boards has been stuck for a decade. However, in 2023, the Commission managed to make history with unblocking the legislation: "Within our borders, we have continued to promote the place of women in our society. It is a struggle dear to my heart. Dear to our hearts. And we can be proud that, after years of deadlock, our laws on the place of women on company boards have been adopted." Von der Leyen's Commission also "pushed through" first-ever law in Europe to end violence against women.²¹⁹ Here, von der Leyen continues on the theme of political successes that was highlighted in chapter 4.

The greatest lesson von der Leyen emphasizes when it comes to women's rights is that it is possible to change the course of history. It is possible to take action and change something that seems fixed. This is also illustrated in the examples of EU's successes in the field. "We shouldn't just wait another generation. We shouldn't wait for history to slowly take its course. My experience is that gender equality does not just happen. Every step forward has to be fought for, and can easily be lost", von der Leyen states in her speech at the international conference "The Role of Women in the Development of Romania". She adds that she has been "a first" woman on the job many times in her life and knows from experience that change does not come automatically.²²⁰ Great progress has been made in the past, through the years, but there is still a long way to go towards equality, always and everywhere, as von der Leyen concludes. Getting there requires political will and active participation from everyone.

²¹⁸ Ursula von der Leyen, 1.12.2022, "Address by President von der Leyen to the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas".

²¹⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.10.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the plenary of the European Campus Renaissance"; Ursula von der Leyen, 7.11.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the International Conference "The Role of Women in the Development of Romania", via video message"; Ursula von der Leyen, 8.3.2024, "Message by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the International Women's Day".

²²⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, 7.11.2023, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the International Conference "The Role of Women in the Development of Romania", via video message"; Ursula von der Leyen, 21.6.2021, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Women Political Leaders Summit 2021".

6 "The memory of our past has always framed our future"

"How ignorant of the past and oblivious to the future can people be?" von der Leyen wonders in her speech at the Hamburg Citizens' Prize Ceremony in January 2024.²²¹ This sentence in itself highlights a few of the principal findings of this thesis. The first insight is the importance of remembrance that von der Leyen highlights in her speeches often. Remembering is presented as something crucial in the good and the bad: remembering, on one hand, Europe's past achievements to be able to learn and be inspired by them and, on the other hand, the past atrocities to be able to avoid repeating them. The second insight is how von der Leyen illustrates the past, the present and the future as parts of the same straightforward process, like dots on a straight line. In this view, the past has direct implications for the present and the future and sometimes, it leads to simplifying complex processes and presenting them as something predefined.

The fear of history repeating itself is a particularly German issue, according to Seppo Hentilä. It is part of the trauma that the Third Reich left on the souls of many Germans. Hentilä argues that since World War II, this fear has plagued Germans at times intensely, at times less so. Many political and economic crises in the past decades have brought to the surface dread that history might be repeating itself. What von der Leyen emphasizes in her speeches, as mentioned above, is the crucial role of remembrance in making sure that "history could never come back". As Richard von Weizsäcker, the President of Germany in 1984-1994, proclaimed in his speech in 1985: "Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection."²²² In von der Leyen's speeches the importance of remembrance is visible around multiple themes in the good and the bad: the Holocaust, the pioneering work of European founders after World War II and the EU's achievements, such as the Single Market and the Erasmus+ programme, to mention a few.

Also, the continuity of history, that is, placing the past, the present and the future as parts of a straightforward process is a specifically German feature, although, of course, various forms of continuity are also present in the political culture and national mentality of all other countries. The continuity of history is something that historians in Germany have been discussing since

²²¹ Ursula von der Leyen, 25.1.2024, "Address by President von der Leyen at the Hamburg Citizens' Prize Ceremony".

²²² Hentilä 1994, 203, 207.

World War II.²²³ In von der Leyen's speeches, the continuity of history is especially visible in the discourse around European integration and the EU's enlargement. Not only does von der Leyen present the integration after World War II as an imperative process that was bound to happen but also connects the possible future enlargements of the EU as parts of the same process. Von der Leyen says that Europe shares a common history and heritage but also, and more importantly, a common destiny and a shared direction of travel. "For Europe, the memory of our past has always framed our future", von der Leyen declares in her speech at the Conference on the Future of Europe.²²⁴

There are multiple reasons why von der Leyen uses history in her speeches. Firstly, history is used to strengthen the legitimacy of the EU and to justify the need for the policy decisions made by her Commission or for exercise of power during crises. With the help of historical references, von der Leyen illustrates the changes Europe needs to make or paints a picture of the work started by the founding fathers and mothers that Europe now has to continue. Comparing the past and the present is useful to prove what worked in the past and should be reiterated and, on the other hand, what did not work and should be avoided. Secondly, history is used as a means to strengthen the unity and cohesion of Europe and to demand solidarity from the Member States. Here, also, the founders of Europe and their dream of a united, peaceful Europe play an important role. The impact of the responsibility towards earlier generations and their struggles should not be underestimated. Von der Leyen highlights in her speeches often that Europeans take for granted what our predecessors had to fight for, and Europe has a duty to preserve the treasure we have inherited.

Von der Leyen uses history in her speeches both in negative and positive light, however, it seems that the negative examples come to the fore more often. Negative history in von der Leyen's speeches includes most prominently World War II and the Cold War, the Holocaust and the financial and euro crisis that began in 2008-2009. Positive history consists mostly of the example of the founding fathers and mothers, European integration and the EU's past enlargements as well as the inspiring work of von der Leyen's predecessors.

The most dominant time period in von der Leyen's speeches is by far the 20th century. The most common topics discussed from the past are World War II, the Holocaust and the early

²²³ Hentilä 1994, 164, 175.

²²⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, 9.5.2022, "Speech by President von der Leyen at the closing event of the Conference on the Future of Europe".

integration of the European Community in the 1950s. There are also many references to the 1970s and the 1980s, specifically through the lens of von der Leyen's predecessors' work in the European Union or von der Leyen's personal memories from a divided Germany. Also, the 1990s is a frequent topic, with the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main events mentioned from the 21st century are the EU's biggest enlargement in 2004, the financial and euro crisis which began in 2008 and the Brexit process 2016-2020. Very little anything prior to World War I or the 1900s gets any attention in von der Leyen's speeches. Also, the infamously awkward topics for the EU, colonialism and imperialism, are conspicuous by their absence and not mentioned once during the years 2019-2024.

The emphasis of the World War II, the Holocaust and the Cold War from the perspective of divided Germany and the Berlin Wall come at an expense of other European historical experiences. On top of colonialism and imperialism, also the crimes of Communism and the Soviet Union are on the backburner in von der Leyen's speeches. The clearest example is the emphasis on the unique nature of the Holocaust in comparison to other crimes and genocides that happened, for example, under Communism. As expressed earlier, the Holocaust is discussed in 20 speeches while the crimes of the Soviet Union over multiple decades are mentioned only in six speeches. However, whereas the avoidance to talk about colonialism and imperialism seems deliberate, in my view the lack of addressing the crimes of the USSR comes down – at least in part – to the fact that there are so many Russian crimes to address and unpack in the present as well, which the President of the European Commission cannot ignore.

In her speeches, von der Leyen does not only talk about historical events and the actions of historical figures but also about how people of the past viewed their surroundings and their future or, in other words, what was their sense of the world. She mentions for example how optimistic and hopeful Europe's founders were about their future and emphasizes that that is their greatest lesson to us. Nyysönen and Metsälä highlight in their article that these kind of “past futures” are noteworthy for historians: how people of the past envisioned their future and how they sought to shape it.²²⁵ Von der Leyen highlights often that the *spirit* of the past actors, for example the boldness of the people rising up against Nazism or the resilience of

²²⁵ Nyysönen and Metsälä 2015, 285.

Holocaust survivors, is what Europeans should learn from. The ability to imagine and work toward a better future is presented as one of the most important takeaways from the past.

All the four categories by Grönholm and Nyysönen are well represented in von der Leyen's speeches but there are also clear differences in which themes stand out. The existential and political dimension have the most substance to them. The existential dimension is connected for example to the themes of the EU's enlargement and integration as well as the European identity. The political dimension is closely connected to one of the Commission's main tasks: justifying and explaining the need for policy decisions as well as fostering positive perceptions of the EU institutions. The political dimension is linked, for instance, to the Commission's priorities, the Treaties and the EU's actions in crisis situations.

Forgetting is an essential part of all Grönholm and Nyysönen's categories as the present defines which parts of our past are considered meaningful. This is also clearly visible in von der Leyen's speeches around every category. Even though von der Leyen speaks of history as the Commission President and represents the common interests of the EU as an entity, it is important to remember that her view of the past is subjective and constructed, not a comprehensive, all-encompassing depiction of Europe's history.

Grönholm and Nyysönen's categories are very broad and comprehensive and nearly all historical references in von der Leyen's speeches can, without issue, be fit into one (or multiple) of the categories. However, von der Leyen has some speeches where the references to the past do not seem to have a deeper meaning or reason. Von der Leyen speaks at times about history in very specific events in connection to a very specific context. For example for an anniversary of a certain organization, von der Leyen recalls on the birth story and past achievements of said organization, merely to emphasize the anniversary. Similarly, von der Leyen might hold a speech in Greece and speak of Greece's history or in Brazil and talk about Brazil's past and so on. These kind of references do not always give a lot of insight on why von der Leyen uses history or speaks of certain past events, other than to emphasize the anniversary or commemoration. These speeches were sometimes difficult to place in Grönholm and Nyysönen's categories.

Von der Leyen's speeches have a lot of fruitful material for research and they can provide a chance to study various topics: her rhetoric and argumentation style, the vast variety of themes from agriculture to cancer research and how her speeches are similar or different in

comparison to her predecessors, just to mention a few possibilities. Even with my primary data from the five-year period of 2019-2024, much more comprehensive research could have been possible. Naturally one master's thesis is not enough to cover every theme from the broad data set, thus this thesis has addressed the most important and recurrent themes in von der Leyen's speeches when it comes to the use of history.

The use of history in the institutional context of the European Union remains an interesting topic for historians as well as other researchers. Whenever someone at the EU level talks about "our shared past" or "our memories", it is always – to an extent – a matter of artificial construction. Interpretations of the past are, at the end of the day, always constructions and our memories of the past ever-changing. In their speeches, political actors reflect the reality they live in but, at the same time, also shape that very reality. This means that they can strongly influence which parts of history are highlighted in public debate and which parts are forgotten.

For now, the memory of World War II and the Holocaust have endured as recurrent topics in the speeches of the European Commission President and as parts of the often-recited origin story of the European Union. It remains to be seen if the memory of the war and genocide persist as building blocks of institutional European identity in the future as the last living Holocaust survivors are starting to pass away. In their recent global report, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany estimates that 70% of all Holocaust survivors will pass away within the next 10 years and 90% within 15 years.²²⁶ Will the institutional memory of the Holocaust on the EU level fade along with the victims? On the other hand, antisemitic attacks have increased around the world in recent years which might have given some new vigor for the remembrance of the Holocaust in Europe.

It remains to be seen, also, whether the European Union will be ready in the coming years to truly face the continent's memories of colonialism and imperialism. Small shifts have happened in the discourse already, mainly due to the European Parliament Resolution passed in 2019 on the fundamental rights of people of African descent. The Resolution recognized that the history of injustices against people of African descent "in the context of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade remain largely unrecognized and unaccounted for

²²⁶ "Vanishing Witnesses: An Urgent Analysis of the Declining Population of Holocaust Survivors". Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, 2025.

at an institutional level”.²²⁷ However, this shift was not yet visible in von der Leyen’s speeches at least during her first term. As Margaret McMillan puts it: “History is about remembering the past, but it is also about choosing to forget.”²²⁸

²²⁷ ”European Parliament resolution of 26 March 2019 on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe”. EUR-Lex website. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2021_108_R_0002> [read 11.4.2026]

²²⁸ MacMillan 2009, 113.

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