

WORLD

Von der Leyen makes bid for 2nd EU term

Ukraine conflict and bleak forecast for economy add to challenges facing bloc

By CHEN WEIHUA in Brussels
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European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has announced her bid to seek a second term amid multiple challenges in the European Union. She made the announcement on Monday afternoon in Berlin after a meeting with her party, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. The party is part of the center-right European People's Party, or EPP, the largest political group in the European Parliament. The EPP will decide on her candidacy when it meets in Bucharest on March 6 and 7. EPP President Manfred Weber said on the X platform on Monday that "a strong Europe needs strong leadership from the @EPP and Ursula von der Leyen".



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen holds a news conference after the CDU Federal Executive Committee meeting in Berlin on Monday. KAY NIETELD VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

"The world today is completely different from it was in 2019. We've been through a lot together over the past five years, and I think you could say we've accomplished more than we could ever imagine," the 65-year-old von der Leyen said. "In these five years, not only has my passion for Europe grown, but, of course, also my experience of how much this Europe can achieve for its people." She described the last five years as challenging as it had been extraordinary. Von der Leyen was faced with Brexit after taking office on Dec 1, 2019. A few months later, the world was hit with COVID-19. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has hurt EU member states since it broke out nearly two years ago, when EU economies were already battered by the pandemic. The European Commission's Winter Forecast released last week marked down growth in both the EU and eurozone for 2024 and 2025. Deutsche Bundesbank, Germany's central bank, warned on

Monday that the country is likely to plunge into recession. Public discontent in the EU has been rising over issues such as migration, rising living costs and lack of progress on the Green Deal. Farmers in some EU states have continued their protests, including in the Czech Republic's capital Prague on Monday.

Triggering protests Von der Leyen's words in support of Israel over the Israel-Palestine conflict have triggered some protests, including a protest letter by more than 800 former and current EU staff members. At her news conference on Monday, she did not really talk about climate change. Instead, she focused on competitiveness, migration and defense. She had earlier mentioned that she wanted to create a new commissioner for the defense post and boost the EU's military might. Lai Suetyi, an associate professor of the Center for European Studies at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, said von der Leyen's potential second term means continuity for the current policies of the European Commission. "This is important in our time, which has already been full of changes and uncertainties," she said.

Highlighting the challenges ahead for von der Leyen, Alberto Alemanno, EU law professor at the Belgium-based College of Europe, said she could face pressure from her own party to "undo her major achievements during her tenure — from delaying climate action to suspending the enlargement and reform" of the 27-nation bloc. "For @vonderleyen to shape a new majority, she'll need to deliver on EU reform, defense and rule of law ... and not backtrack on environment and migration," Guy Verhofstadt, a member of the European Parliament of the Renew group, said on X. Von der Leyen, regarded as a pro-US politician, got the job in 2019 after winning a narrow victory with the support of EPP, the Socialists & Democrats and the liberal Renew group. But the widely expected rise of far-right parties in the June 6-9 European elections is likely to pose a challenge to her bid to keep her job for another five years. Surveys among voters show that extreme-right, anti-immigrant parties may gain more seats in the next European Parliament elections, pushing EU legislation toward the right.

Agencies contributed to this story.



Knocked down

Workers clean up a residential street where a large tree branch fell, knocking out power and damaging vehicles on Monday in Los Angeles. Another atmospheric river storm is triggering heavy rains in California two weeks after a powerful storm brought widespread flooding, mudslides and power outages to parts of the state. More damage was possible as heavy rains were expected to douse southern California into Wednesday. MARIO TAMA VIA AFP

Kishida cabinet's approval rating reaches record low

By JIANG XUEQING in Tokyo
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Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has seen his cabinet's approval rating drop to 14 percent — the lowest since he took office in October 2021 — with experts saying that it is evidence that the public is fed up with his administration's inability to clean house amid the ongoing political funds scandal. The nationwide poll, conducted on Feb 17 and 18 by the Mainichi Shimbun, one of the major newspapers in Japan, showed that the approval rating for the Kishida cabinet fell by 7 percentage points from the previous survey conducted on Jan 27 and 28, hitting the lowest level since former prime minister Taro Aso's cabinet in February 2009. Kishida's disapproval rating rose by 10 percentage points from the previous survey to 82 percent. This is the first time that the disapproval rating has exceeded 80 percent since July 1947, when the Mainichi Shimbun first asked about cabinet approval ratings in its opinion polls. The prime minister currently faces

issues surrounding a slush fund scandal, undisclosed policy activity expenses, and secret cabinet funds. However, Kishida and Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party seem to show no serious commitment to addressing these issues, said Ukeru Magosaki, co-representative of the Association for Inheriting and Propagating the Murayama Statement. It appears the Kishida administration believes that the public anger will fade away over time, Magosaki said, but the common people are strongly holding onto their indignation. "Amid increasing criticism and distrust from the public, Kishida is seen as the breeding ground for the issue of 'politics and money' and the root cause of political fundraising parties, which have come to be associated with slush funds," said Kazuyuki Hamada, a former member of the House of Councilors and a former Japanese parliamentary vice-minister for foreign affairs. Kishida has been seen through by voters for merely changing LDP factions into policy groups, Hamada said, which is unlikely to restore public trust.

"It is a daunting task for Kishida, whose approval rating has fallen below 20 percent, to win the next LDP leadership election," he said.

Suspensions raised Concerning kickbacks from fundraising party revenues, citizens are suspicious that, just when it seemed like corruption would be eradicated, it was later revealed that the standard for prosecuting lawmakers is whether they acquired over 30 million yen (\$199,551) in slush funds within a period of five years and whether they colluded with secretaries or others, and the investigation was halted, said Kumiko Haba, professor emeritus at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo. "Currently, it coincides with the period for citizens' tax returns, and at the individual level, citizens are required to declare amounts up to 10,000 yen. However, LDP politicians face no consequences of up to 30 million yen. This collusion between the LDP's corruption and the National Tax Agency is unacceptable," Haba said. She said the current LDP leader-

ship election predictions show Kishida's chances are quite low. "To win and regain support, it would require properly addressing the backdoor money issue by disciplining parliament members whose involvement has been revealed and taking a tough stance against corruption," Haba said. "However, the fact that even Kishida himself has been implicated in the scandal and unable to take action is the biggest blunder," she added. Haba said it seems necessary to dissolve the parliament and hold fresh elections to properly seek the people's trust. However, the opposition parties are not prepared for elections, and with no cooperation among them, a change in administration is difficult at present, she added. It will be difficult for the Kishida cabinet to regain support at present, said Magosaki, from the Association for Inheriting and Propagating the Murayama Statement. Various efforts will be made to divide the opposition forces, especially to prevent cooperation between the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party, he said.

US may ease deadline for auto emissions set for 2030

By HENG WEILI in New York
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The United States may be decelerating its emissions reduction timetable for cars and trucks in what is being described as an attempt to address concerns by the auto industry and workers in a presidential election year. "In a concession to automakers and labor unions, the Biden administration intends to relax elements of one of its most ambitious strategies to combat climate change, limits on tailpipe emissions that are designed to get Americans to switch from gas-powered cars to electric vehicles, according to three people familiar with the plan," The New York Times reported on Saturday. US President Joe Biden's adminis-

tration is set to ease proposed yearly requirements through 2030 of its plan to cut emissions and boost electric vehicle sales, two sources told Reuters on Sunday. The reported easing of the rules comes in a presidential election year, as Biden attempts to navigate demands for climate action with the economic concerns of the auto industry and workers. Former US president Donald Trump, the leading contender for the 2024 Republican nomination, criticized United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain over the endorsement on Truth Social, his social media site. In April 2023, the EPA proposed requiring a 56 percent cut in new vehicle emissions by 2032. Under the initial EPA proposal covering

2027-2032, automakers were expected to aim for EVs to comprise 60 percent of their new vehicle production by 2030 and 67 percent by 2032. The EPA's revised regulation is expected to be made public as soon as next month. White House climate adviser Ali Zaidi, who has held talks with automakers on tailpipe rules, said in a statement on Sunday that the US is "harnessing the power of smart investments and standards to ensure US workers will lead, not follow, the global auto sector". **Climate concerns** EVs accounted for about 8 percent of US auto sales in 2023. Tesla by far leads in US sales of electric vehicles, which account for only 4 percent of Ford's sales and 3 percent of General

Motors', The Washington Post reported. Some climate activists said the EPA's easing of the rules shows that longtime US automakers are not competing with Tesla and Chinese EV companies like BYD, CNN reported. Automakers are "pretty much opposed to the rules", Dan Becker, director of the safe climate transport campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity, told CNN in an interview. "They had fallen all over themselves to make EVs, they're now trying to run the other way as fast as they can," he said. "They're trying to wring the last profits they can out of gas-guzzling vehicles." Agencies contributed to this story.

International Education Column

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