



The Von der Leyen Commission: Searching for Balance in Europe

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In the increasingly politically fragmented Union, the new European Commission (EC) led by Ursula von der Leyen will be a more collegial institution, as the president finds herself obliged to share power with a trio of influential executive vice-presidents. Seeking to cement the initially fragile support for her, she built a team of commissioners with the aim of maintaining a balance in terms of the political influence of various actors and the approach to policies. With the call for a “geopolitical Commission”, she aimed to unite the bloc around the objective of boosting the EU’s role in the world. Von der Leyen’s success will depend on her ability to translate the general political balance into concrete proposals that will bridge the internal divides.

Due to complications related to confirmation hearings in the European Parliament (EP), which rejected three of the commissioners-designate presented by the new president, von der Leyen’s Commission started functioning on 1 December, a month later than scheduled. Despite the problems, she eventually managed to secure the approval of the EP (including near-unanimous support of MEPs from the three largest political groups: Christian and Social Democrats and the Liberals) and—somewhat surprisingly—won stronger backing than her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, in 2014.¹

The Commission’s New Structure

Von der Leyen’s EC is more complex than the previous one. Following the June nomination summit’s findings, the new president inserted into the structure executive vice-presidents with a privileged position among the group of vice-presidents. Frans Timmermans, Margrethe Vestager, and Valdis Dombrovskis, who were the most eminent members of the Juncker Commission, will now coordinate the work of the other commissioners in domains defined by the new president as strategic priorities: climate policy, digital challenges, and the economy, respectively (see the list of commissioners, below). These executive vice-presidents maintain responsibility for particular policy areas and control the Directorates General (DGs), which grants them stronger administrative support.² Among the rest of the vice-presidents, only the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, will have a significant administrative

¹ In the EP, 461 MEPs supported von der Leyen’s Commission, 151 opposed it, and 89 abstained. The respective numbers for the Juncker Commission were 423, 209 and 67.

² Climate policy in Timmermans case, competition for Vestager, and financial services for Dombrovskis.

apparatus at his service (the European External Action Service, EEAS). The remaining four vice-presidents will not have their own DGs.

Like her predecessor, von der Leyen chose to organise the Commission around project teams of commissioners chaired by vice-presidents.³ The system is primarily intended to move from silos to a more holistic approach in policymaking. It may also enable the new president to better coordinate Commission work. The grouping of portfolios is considered one of the factors that helped Juncker fulfil his promise of limiting the overload of legislative initiatives.⁴ Excessive and poorly developed legislative proposals have been in the past one of the major criticisms of the Commission. The Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently,”⁵ appointed in Juncker’s term, called for continuing efforts aimed at simplifying EU legislation, including reviewing or repealing some of the existing acts. In this spirit, von der Leyen pledged not to create additional regulatory burdens (“one in, one out” principle).

The clustered structure and assigning some Commissioners the task of coordinating the work of others is also a response to the challenges of college size, as creating 26 separate portfolios, each corresponding with a DG, would arguably result in excessive fragmentation. Although the issue of limiting the size of the college returned in recent years, most of the Member States opted for maintaining the principle of “one state-one commissioner.” This rule was challenged by the Brexit talks because British Prime Minister Boris Johnson refused to nominate a British commissioner after the latest Brexit extension to the end of January 2020. Finally, the new Commission consists of 27 members, one from each EU country except the UK.

The concern for creating a well-coordinated structure of the college and improving the quality of legislative initiatives goes hand in hand with the desire to establish a special partnership with the EP (this task was assigned to Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, who is also responsible for better regulation). As von der Leyen was not a *spitzenkandidat*,⁶ and her last-minute candidacy provoked protests in the EP, she has tried to show the chamber her willingness to cooperate. She offered MEPs a number of concessions, the most important being a *de facto* right of legislative initiative.⁷ She also declared her readiness to discuss reform of the procedure for the appointment of Commission president, which could breathe new life into the *spitzenkandidaten* process supported by a majority in the chamber. Von der Leyen’s college includes several former MEPs who, as the hearings revealed, enjoy a solid reputation among their former colleagues and could facilitate the Commission’s cooperation with the chamber. The result of the vote of investiture reflects a strong backing in the chamber. However, the rejection of Sylvie Goulard, arguably the commissioner-designate closest to von der Leyen, by a majority, including MEPs from the two largest political groups, shows that the EP will be a demanding partner whose support cannot be taken for granted.

Political and Geographical Balance in the New Commission

As the deal sharing the EU top jobs was dominated by the largest and founding Member States,⁸ it became particularly important for von der Leyen to maintain an adequate political, geographical, and gender balance in the allocation of portfolios. Following her narrow victory in the EP in July, von der Leyen was keen to please as many stakeholders as possible through a well-adjusted proposal that took the interests and sensitivities of various Member States into account (e.g., the Greek candidate was allocated the migration portfolio, the Polish one, agriculture). Some choices were imposed on her: the European Council

³ Von der Leyen called them “thematic groups” in her mission letters to Commissioners. There were seven under Juncker, while the new president intends to create eight.

⁴ A. Gostyńska, “Von der Leyen’s bumpy road to becoming Commission President,” *CER Bulletin*, August–September 2019.

⁵ Report on the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently,” https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/report-task-force-subsidiarity-proportionality-and-doing-less-more-efficiently_en.pdf.

⁶ Literally, “leading candidate,” nominated by the EP groups, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/elections-press-kit/2/lead-candidates>.

⁷ Von der Leyen declared that the Commission would legislate whenever a majority in the EP formulated a request to do so.

⁸ Apart from von der Leyen, the new EU top job holders include a Belgian (European Council), a Frenchwoman (European Central Bank), and a Spaniard (High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy). The European Parliament’s president is from Italy.

informally agreed that as the Christian Democrats maintained the presidency of the Commission, key figures from the other two major political families—Timmermans, representing the Social Democrats, and Vestager, the Liberals—would become von der Leyen’s deputies with significant competences. This move was to ensure political balance at the top and meet the expectations of supporters of the *spitzenkandidaten* system, disappointed by the decision of the European Council to nominate a president from outside the leading candidates. Von der Leyen modified this deal somewhat by adding her fellow Christian Democrat Dombrovskis to the duo of executive vice-presidents and thus strengthening her political family within the leadership group.

At first sight, the group of Commission vice-presidents gathered by von der Leyen adequately complements the imbalance in the top jobs: apart from the High Representative, selected earlier by the European Council, the appointees included politicians from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Slovakia. However, behind this geographical balance are considerable differences in terms of competences. While key policy areas will be coordinated by nationals of countries that formed the New Hanseatic Alliance (Denmark, Latvia, and the Netherlands), vice-presidents from Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia received less substantial portfolios.⁹ The majority of tasks assigned to Věra Jourová (rule of law, transparency) and Šefčovič (interinstitutional relations, better regulation) under Juncker were in the hands of one vice-president.

On the commissioner level, France and Italy won crucial economic portfolios, covering a wide range of responsibilities, for their candidates. Thierry Breton, with the help of three DGs, will work on the preparation of a long-term industrial strategy, new legislation on digital services, and an action plan on the circular economy. In addition, he will oversee the functioning of the single market and the implementation of the European Defence Fund. The former prime minister of Italy, Paolo Gentiloni, assisted by two DGs, will work on refining the European Semester, ensuring application of the Stability and Growth Pact, and developing several tax-related proposals including a digital tax, carbon border tax, and taxes related to energy consumption.

Granted important competences, these commissioners will work under the guidance of the “Hanseatic” executive vice-presidents, who have advocated different solutions to some of the major problems. In modifying the EU fiscal rules, Gentiloni will have to look for a compromise with Dombrovskis, who is cautious about loosening fiscal discipline. Breton will attempt to agree an industrial strategy with Dombrovskis and Vestager, who in the previous term blocked the Franco-German effort to create a “European champion” through the merger of Alstom and Siemens. In this way, von der Leyen is hoping to reach both a political balance acceptable to the Member States and a balanced approach in terms of policies that could win the support of the Council and Parliament, both politically fragmented.

The V4 can be moderately pleased with the allocation of portfolios. On the one hand, the Slovak and Czech commissioners were appointed as vice-presidents, assuring the region’s presence in the top hierarchy of the EC. However, the portfolios of Šefčovič and Jourová do not contain any DGs, which can be translated into a much weaker position than the executive vice-presidents. What is more, the Czech’s value and transparency portfolio may result in tensions within the V4 about rule-of-law issues. Poland, the biggest of the V4 countries was offered the agriculture portfolio, which, although reasonable given the importance of the rural sector in the Polish economy, seemed to be below the ambitions of the Polish government, which initially was interested in economic affairs. Paradoxically, Hungary, which has experienced relatively the most difficulties¹⁰ in the acceptance process of a national nominee for a commissioner’s post, received the anticipated neighbourhood and enlargement portfolio.

⁹ Interinstitutional relations (Šefčovič), although important, offer a only few tools to influence the shape of EU policies, while the Conference on the Future of Europe (Šuica) may well become blocked by differences between Member States.

¹⁰ The candidacy of László Trócsány, rejected by the EP’s Committee on Legal Affairs over his personal finances, was replaced by Olivér Várhelyi, who was approved after clarifying (in an additional round of questions) his impartiality and independence from the government of Viktor Orbán.

Political Priorities

Climate protection, digital challenges, and the economy constitute the triad of top priorities reflected in the structure of the College of Commissioners proposed by von der Leyen. Climate policy, in particular, gains in weight, as under Juncker it was not among the key themes around which the project teams of Commissioners were built. In focusing on climate, von der Leyen is reacting to the growing attention this issue received during the election campaign, and that is also visible in public opinion polls.¹¹ Von der Leyen decided to split the climate and energy portfolio but did so in order to create an even more comprehensive climate strategy baptised as a European Green Deal. The executive vice-president responsible for that task will coordinate the work of other commissioners and thus should be in a better position to mainstream the measures related to climate protection into other policy areas (not only energy). In order to win stronger backing for her climate policy offensive, von der Leyen accompanied her call for greater emission reductions with a pledge to create a Just Transition Fund.¹² It is to provide more generous support for the necessary changes, especially to countries where the green transition could entail considerable costs. However, neither the president nor the commissioners who will be managing the new instrument have specified its size or source of funding.

Migration is among the second-tier priorities. The vice-president responsible for preparing reform of migration and asylum policy was also given oversight of issues related to the labour market and internal security. The entire portfolio was initially labelled “Protecting our European way of life.” In combining these areas, the new president has attempted to create a more joined-up approach to these difficult and divisive issues but also hide it behind a name she believed would resonate well with the electorate. However, some (mostly left-leaning politicians and academics) characterised the description as an ill-advised choice that reproduced the radical right’s portrayal of migrants as a security threat for the EU. Von der Leyen initially stood by her decision, but eventually managed to find a way out of the dilemma by changing “protecting” to the more positive “promoting.”

The president’s declarations and mission letters sent to commissioners-designate show that she stands by several significant proposals around which her predecessor was not able to build consensus. These include introducing a digital tax and enlarging the scope for qualified majority voting. She underlined her commitment to establishing a mechanism making the disbursement of EU funds conditional upon respect of the rule of law. Von der Leyen has also backed a number of ideas that circulated in the debate on the future of Europe: a carbon border tax, common rules for establishing a minimum wage in all Member States, European unemployment benefit reinsurance scheme, and a conference that would debate EU treaties reform.

On several issues, the new president and commissioners-designate remained relatively vague. Flexibility in applying the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact is one of them. It can be expected that, just as under Juncker, it will be a contentious issue and it is difficult to predict to what extent the college will be more accommodating towards countries using fiscal stimuli to boost growth. As regards migration, while von der Leyen opposes the Dublin regulation, it is still unknown how her Commission will try to reform the current rules.

While Jean-Claude Juncker claimed in 2014 that his would be a “political Commission,” von der Leyen wants a “geopolitical” one. This declaration can be viewed as an effort to focus the attention (of her collaborators, Member States, and pundits alike) on global challenges rather than internal discord. To tackle problems such as climate change and mass migration, the EU needs to cooperate with third countries. However, major powers, such as China and Russia, question various aspects of the rules-based order promoted by the EU. By announcing her geopolitical ambitions, von der Leyen wants to display the Commission’s determination to strengthen Europe’s position in global politics and mobilise the Member States to cooperate more closely towards the same aim. In addition, she is drawing a line between her and her

¹¹ According to Eurobarometer, 22% of Europeans mentioned climate change among the two most important issues facing the EU—an increase of 14 percentage points compared to spring 2017 (Standard Eurobarometer 91, spring 2019). This makes climate change the second most important issue after immigration.

¹² The idea of creating such a fund was earlier presented by the EP, which, in a resolution adopted in November 2018, called for €5 billion to be devoted to this aim.

predecessor. Juncker's political ambitions were sometimes criticized as an attempt to go beyond the role ascribed to the Commission president and dominate the Member States. Von der Leyen wants to dispel fears that she strives to do the same.

For the V4, von der Leyen's priorities give rise to mixed feelings. Her focus on promoting higher emission-reduction targets is problematic, especially for the Czech Republic and Poland, both still highly dependent on coal for their energy generation. The Just Transition Fund makes von der Leyen's approach more balanced in their eyes, but it will likely be insufficient to match expectations. The shape of the single market may also become a bone of contention. Von der Leyen seems to be relatively close to French President Emmanuel Macron's vision of the single market, focused on promoting convergence (of wages, taxes, and social protection standards) rather than removing barriers to competition. Therefore, discord is likely over what constitutes a level playing field, especially given the fact that responsibility for establishing the latter was assigned to a Frenchman. On the other hand, von der Leyen's support for strong transatlantic relations is appreciated by the V4. As regards the rule of law, the replacement of Timmermans by Jourová as the vice-president responsible for this portfolio offers some hope to the Hungarian and Polish ruling parties that the new president wants to avoid escalation and some sort of *modus vivendi* can be found.

Conclusions

The Commission's new structure suggests that von der Leyen will adopt a more collegial approach than her predecessor, acting as a *primus inter pares* rather than a domineering leader. Given her lack of experience as a head of government and the circumstances of her appointment (experienced commissioners included in the deal as her deputies, lack of stable support in the EP), she arguably had little choice in this respect. It does not mean that her Commission will be a meek one. With seasoned former commissioners as her closest associates, she has a team that can stand up to Member States and act as an effective guardian of the treaties.

Her effort to create a more comprehensive approach to key policies is sensible, but could also lead to disputes between members of the college over competences. Similarly, forcing cooperation of commissioners with different political views shows a consensual approach and could contribute to breaking the deadlock on important issues, but the new president runs the risk of provoking turf wars within the institution.

However, even the best approach to organising the work of the Commission may not be enough to find solutions to issues that have long divided the Member States and where von der Leyen's predecessor failed to achieve progress (e.g., migration, new taxes, future of the eurozone). Recent debates on relations with Russia, the role of NATO, and enlargement show that the shift of focus towards the geopolitical dimension is not bound to bring about greater unity.

As a large number of Macron's ideas have found a place among von der Leyen's priorities and Breton has been assigned a key economic portfolio, France's influence becomes more prominent on the eve of the term. Yet, the rejection of Sylvie Goulard by the EP shows that Macron's grip on EU politics is not whole. What is more, the Commission's structure, in particular the interdependence of different portfolios, shows the limits of the French vision of integration. The strengthening of the New Hanseatic Alliance sends a signal to Macron that the Franco-German tandem will not be the sole engine of the European project. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent this coalition will be cohesive and whether the three "Hanseatic" executive vice-presidents—who hail from different political families—will cooperate smoothly.

Commissioners from the V4 countries seem unlikely to play leading roles in the new Commission. While the group managed to prevent Timmermans from becoming Commission president, it failed to convince von der Leyen to entrust its member candidates with strategic economic portfolios. The governments of Hungary and Poland will be glad to see Timmermans away from the rule of law portfolio, but the Dutchman will remain their main interlocutor, as economic adjustments stemming from the climate transition will be a major challenge for the V4 in the current term. Von der Leyen's consensual approach and determination to bridge the gaps between the Member States is her major asset in the eyes of the V4, wary of the re-emergence of an East-West divide.

Table. The European Commission 2019–2024

Position	Name		Member State
President	Ursula von der Leyen		Germany
Commissioners		Portfolio (title)	
Executive Vice-Presidents	Valdis Dombrovskis	An Economy that Works for People	Latvia
	Frans Timmermans	European Green Deal	Netherlands
	Margrethe Vestager	A Europe Fit for the Digital Age	Denmark
Vice-Presidents	Josep Borrell Fontelles	High Representative, A Stronger Europe in the World	Spain
	Věra Jourová	Values and Transparency	Czech Rep.
	Margaritis Schinas	Promoting Our European Way of Life	Greece
	Maroš Šefčovič	Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight	Slovakia
	Dubravka Šuica	Democracy and Demography	Croatia
	Thierry Breton	Internal Market	France
	Helena Dalli	Equality	Malta
	Elisa Ferreira	Cohesion and Reforms	Portugal
	Mariya Gabriel	Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth	Bulgaria
	Paolo Gentiloni	Economy	Italy
	Johannes Hahn	Budget and Administration	Austria
	Phil Hogan	Trade	Ireland
	Ylva Johansson	Home Affairs	Sweden
	Stella Kyriakides	Health and Food Safety	Cyprus
	Janez Lenarčič	Crisis Management	Slovenia
	Didier Reynders	Justice	Belgium
	Nicolas Schmit	Jobs and Social Rights	Luxembourg
	Kadri Simson	Energy	Estonia
	Virginijus Sinkevičius	Environment, Oceans and Fisheries	Latvia
	Jutta Urpilainen	International Partnerships	Finland
	Janusz Wojciechowski	Agriculture	Poland
	Olivér Várhelyi	Neighbourhood and Enlargement	Hungary
Adina Vălean	Transport	Romania	

Source: The European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024_en.