

13 JUNE 2022

The von der Leyen European Commission at midterm: Same priorities, different reality

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Executive summary

At the start of her term as European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen pledged that the European Union would embark on an all-encompassing socio-economic transformation. Little did she know how prophetic her words would be. Von der Leyen's 2019 political agenda included six ambitious priorities to tackle today's greatest challenges. But such plans for long-term, strategic action were soon challenged. After less than 100 days in office, Europe was hit by the COVID-19 crisis – the worst pandemic of the last century. Things became even more complicated when Russia invaded Ukraine in May this year, causing the greatest upheaval to Europe's security architecture since World War II.

At the halfway point of this Commission's term, and amid a tumultuous context, the EPC conducted a broad analysis of its successes and failures so far. How have the pandemic and the war affected von der Leyen's initial policy priorities? What are the key imperatives ahead? How can von der Leyen make the most of the remainder of her mandate to help the EU advance in this new era (*Zeitenwende*)?

Priority 1: A European Green Deal

While the level of ambition could have been higher at times, the Commission made a commendable effort to lay the foundation for real change in this field. Now, von der Leyen should focus on turning goals into action. The rationale for the Green Deal has never been stronger.

Priority 2: A Europe fit for the digital age

With flagship proposals like the Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act, the Commission successfully advanced proposals on digitalisation and new technologies. Now, it should shift from a catch-up mentality to offering anticipatory governance while continuously expanding the EU's digital infrastructure.

Priority 3: An economy that works for people

Like all previous crises, COVID-19 accelerated European integration in the EU's economic governance. Next Generation EU is possibly the most prominent example in this regard. But the Commission must now move beyond an emergency management mindset and provide bold, long-term solutions. Simplifying fiscal rules and establishing guarantees for a growth-friendly public debt reduction should top its immediate to-do list.

In addition, the Commission should make a greater effort to achieve its social targets in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Priority 4: A stronger Europe in the world

The Ukraine war might have set several changes in the EU's foreign and security policy in motion. However, the lack of consensus and clarity in this area is likely to put a spanner in the works. A significant institutional redesign is likely needed – albeit a sensitive topic for member states – if the EU, including the 'geopolitical Commission', is to emerge as a credible player on the world stage.

EU enlargement to the Balkans remains stuck in a rut, despite the Commission's rhetorical commitment to the region's integration. The current war-torn geopolitical context creates a sense of urgency to define a firm response towards the new applicants, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Yet redefining the EU's engagement with its neighbours also impels a general re-evaluation of enlargement policy based on a workable model and real political support from member states.

As for the Union's newest external neighbour, the EU-UK partnership remains fragile and conflictual. Broader cooperation on foreign and security policy and global challenges seems unlikely as long as the current UK government is in power. The Commission must continue to de-escalate and depoliticise subsequent flare-ups.

Priority 5: Promoting our European way of life

The Commission must lead by example to ensure that the momentum of solidarity for the people displaced by the war in Ukraine is sustained. However, it must not lose sight of the rest of the EU asylum and migration *acquis*. The Commission's proposals for a New Pact on Migration, presented two years ago, remain gridlocked by the political disputes on solidarity and responsibility-sharing in the allocation of asylum seekers across member states.

Owing to the impact of COVID-19, health policy has been high on the Commission's agenda. The Commission has laid the foundation for a European Health Union, with proposals to extend the mandates of the European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and establish the Health and Emergency Response Authority. Proposals should continue to be put forward to become a reality and not be subject to major delays.

Priority 6: A new push for European democracy

Upholding democratic standards as a Commission priority has been fairly side-lined so far. Combined with the Commission's tentativeness to act against democratic backsliding, progress is being made at too slow of a pace to keep up with the dramatic paradigmatic shifts worldwide. European democracy is suffering as a result.

The Commission must now react to new threats and adapt to the changing power balance in the EU – and the world – caused by disruptive illiberal voices.

More broadly, von der Leyen's promise to renew the Commission's relationship with its co-legislators – particularly establishing a 'special relationship' with the European Parliament – has not transpired. Tensions between von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel have further complicated the Commission's work. Going forward, the Commission should develop continuous interinstitutional coordination on not just international negotiations but also all issues of key strategic importance for the EU.

Overall, the von der Leyen Commission must continue to pursue its initial key priorities. However, it will now have to do so through the prism of the *Zeitenwende* currently underway. Following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the entire Union now lives and operates in a new era. The EU and its member states must make a choice: opt for a joint future or watch the old continent drift into fragmentation and irrelevance, unable to defend its own interests.

Moving ambitiously ahead will only be possible if the Commission is ready to open new frontiers and daring enough to present proposals that might have been taboo previously. It is the only way to ensure that *Zeitenwende* translates into adequate policy choices and substantial reform of the Union's governance structures. This is not the time to be cautious, and history will surely judge the von der Leyen Commission.

A crisis-stricken European Commission...

Corina Stratulat, Johannes Greubel and Perle Petit

The former German Christian Democrat defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, was a surprise choice by the European Council in 2019 for the bloc's top job. Not only did EU leaders break with the quarter-century-old tradition of selecting a fellow, former head of state or government as president of the European Commission. They also failed to pick among the *Spitzenkandidaten* of the major EU political families, as advocated by the European Parliament¹ and following Jean-Claude Juncker's election five years prior. For this reason, some even argued that the (European) Council had betrayed voters in the 2019 European Parliament election,² in which turnout actually surged above 50% for the first time in 25 years.³ But, in the end, the Parliament decided to make her the first woman to lead the EU executive, if only by the slimmest of margins.⁴

When von der Leyen came to office, times seemed simpler than for the preceding Juncker. The crises that had marked Juncker's Commission appeared to be receding when she took over. Von der Leyen was thus heartened to bid for the Commission presidency with an ambitious political agenda for "a Europe that strives for more".⁵ She announced six key priorities, describing them as "our generation's defining challenges".⁶

1. **a European Green Deal** (green transition, just transition, the circular economy, pollution, biodiversity);
2. **a Europe fit for the digital age** (digital transition, EU industry, the Single Market);
3. **an economy that works for people** (green social market economy, deepening the Economic and Monetary Union, investment and financing, the European Pillar of Social Rights, equality, the economic impact of COVID-19);
4. **a stronger Europe in the world** (a geopolitical Commission, EU enlargement, trade, EU–UK relations, rules-based global leadership, China's influence in the Indo-Pacific);
5. **promoting our European way of life** (justice, migration, asylum, internal security, education, social integration, health, the rule of law, EU values); and
6. **a new push for European democracy** (the integrity of elections, democratic participation, media freedom and pluralism, external interference, disinformation, online hate speech, strengthening the legislative process).

She pledged that, on her watch, "our Union will embark together on a transformation, which will touch every part of our society and economy".⁷ Little did she know how prophetic her words would prove.⁸ Less than 100 days later, Europe was hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis, the worst pandemic in the last century. The health emergency that roared in the EU for the first half of her mandate forced a recalibration of the Commission's initial approach: instead of having the luxury of concentrating on long-term, strategic goals, it had to shift into constant crisis-management mode. It started off on the wrong foot, as limited competences and member states' reflex to act independently prevented a joint approach which it coordinated.⁹ But it eventually found its footing with a European joint vaccine procurement and the multibillion recovery plan, Next Generation EU (NGEU), the largest stimulus package ever financed in Europe.

The health emergency that roared for the first half of von der Leyen's mandate forced a recalibration of the European Commission's initial approach: instead of having the luxury of concentrating on long-term, strategic goals, it had to shift into constant crisis-management mode.

And then, shortly before von der Leyen's five-year mandate reached its halfway point, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine brought about the biggest disruption to Europe's security architecture since World War II.¹⁰ In response, the Commission tried to coordinate unprecedented sanctions and military assistance. The transformed geopolitical context and the host of knock-on, far-reaching consequences of the emergence of a new era (*Zeitenwende*) are likely to occupy von der Leyen for the remainder of her mandate. Challenges will continue to compete for the Commission's attention and surely keep testing its ability to stick to the principles and aspirations outlined in the 2019 political guidelines.

What has been achieved to date across the six priorities? Where has the Commission come short? How should von der Leyen make the most of the second half of her mandate? This collection of concise, critical reviews from EPC analysts answers these questions by studying specific areas in the Commission's agenda. Far from providing a

comprehensive overview, this Discussion Paper highlights some of the Commission's key wins and main shortfalls

so far, as well as the significant obstacles and categorical imperatives that lie ahead.

... but a political Commission nonetheless

Johannes Greubel

Building on her predecessor's organisational approach, President von der Leyen introduced a reinforced cluster structure for her College: three Executive Vice-Presidents and five additional Vice-Presidents lead a policy cluster, respectively (barring one).¹¹ This configuration was meant to facilitate effective work on the political priorities, with extensive preparation in project groups and crucial roles foreseen for the Vice-Presidents. As such, von der Leyen continued Juncker's course of a 'political Commission', with clear agenda-setting, select priorities and lean political leadership. In her own words,

"This team will have to stand up for [its] values [...]. I want a Commission that is led with determination, that is clearly focused on the issues at hand [...]. I want it to be a well-balanced, agile and modern Commission."¹²

In retrospect, this approach seemed politically successful – focusing her agenda on the most crucial issues of the time, with the twin green and digital transition at its heart. It also came in handy when the Commission had to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Despite some early hiccups and missteps along the road, the Commission quickly established itself as an important actor fighting the political and economic effects of the pandemic within the limits of its competences. It not only coordinated policy responses of member states but also quickly operated as a key executive actor, assuming central roles in the procurement of coronavirus vaccines and the design of NGEU.

Despite some early hiccups and missteps along the road, the European Commission quickly established itself as an important actor fighting the political and economic effects of the pandemic within the limits of its competences.

The Commission's political role, however, came at the expense of its role as guardian of the Treaties. As political scientists Kelemen and Pavone show, the political Commission follows a trend that already started during José Manuel Barroso's presidency and continued under Juncker.¹³ Infringement cases initiated

by the Commission have dropped remarkably in recent years, not because of improved state compliance by member states but rather as a political choice.¹⁴ As decisions on infringement procedures moved from the technical to the political level during the Barroso Commission, it was political consideration that drove the (non-)launch of many of these.

As such, the Commission "sacrificed its role as guardian of the Treaties to safeguard its role as engine of integration".¹⁵ The more the Commission's political nature grows, the more its role as guardian of the Treaties seems to shrink – an alarming tendency, especially for its ongoing rule-of-law disputes with Poland and Hungary and the conditionality mechanism, as already criticised by the European Parliament.¹⁶

Von der Leyen's cluster structure proved ineffective at several points during the first half of her mandate.

Furthermore, von der Leyen's cluster structure proved ineffective at several points during the first half of her mandate. Firstly, the last years displayed an apparent imbalance between portfolios. Several Commissioners received 'super portfolios' that were even extended over time. Especially for Valdis Dombrovskis, Thierry Breton and Maroš Šefčovič, it was difficult to fully deliver on all fronts due to their over-extensive dossiers.¹⁷

Secondly, the intention of the cluster approach – to tear down policy silos – was not always achieved, especially when President von der Leyen herself interfered with the structure. She was criticised, for example, at the start of this year for her personal coordination with Pfizer on vaccine procurement, and for her role in the triggering of Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol in February 2021.¹⁸ In both cases, the President retracted to only a small circle of advisers and thus invited controversy for her lack of transparency and coordination with her College and the Commission services, as well as with member states and the European Parliament. These experiences highlight how important it is that the von der Leyen Commission makes full use of internal and interinstitutional coordination in the future.

Although the Commission's general legislative record is well on track, a number of twists and measures are crucial for the rest of its mandate. The Commission President should update her Commissioners' portfolio allocation and mission letters for the next two and a half years to

react to the seismic shifts that have occurred since 2019. This includes "[c]larify[ing] responsibilities over priority deliveries" and rebalancing super portfolios for more effective delivery in the second half of the mandate.¹⁹

Priority 1: A European Green Deal

CLIMATE GOALS AWAIT CONCRETE ACTION

Annika Hedberg, Stefan Šipka, Melanie Fessler and Simon Dekeyrel

The European Green Deal, published by the European Commission in December 2019, put forward a comprehensive package of measures for a just transition to a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy. It highlighted how action is needed in different sectors and across policies. While the initial proposal could have been even more ambitious, it nevertheless provides essential direction to the EU in these crisis-driven times.²⁰

Since the start of its term, the von der Leyen Commission has put forward many initiatives to support the Green Deal. They have touched on numerous policy areas, including energy, agriculture, transport, green financing, the environment and the circular economy. Some examples include the Fit for 55 package on climate, Farm to Fork strategy, Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, Circular Economy Action Plan, Zero Pollution Action Plan, and Sustainable Finance Action Plan. While the level of ambition could have been higher at times in terms of the goals and suggested measures,²¹ the Commission has made a commendable effort to create the foundation for action.

One concrete achievement came in 2021 in the form of the European Climate Law 2021/1119, which sets legally binding EU targets to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030. However, this is only the start. The toolbox for reaching the 2030 goal – the Fit for 55 package – is currently being negotiated with the co-legislators. These talks have been affected by the war, rise in energy prices and possible disruptions in energy supply. As the Commission has suggested in its recent RePowerEU proposals, the co-legislators should be looking to, for example, enhance the EU's ambition on energy efficiency and renewable energy even more than originally envisaged, to reduce its dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

Regarding the twin green and digital transitions, more must be done to turn rhetoric into actual action and align agendas. While the Commission has accelerated its efforts to address the climate and environmental footprint of digitalisation, the use of the transition to address

the EU's sustainability challenges and build on the related existing tools has been much slower.²² In addition, member states have missed out on certain opportunities, such as using the post-pandemic recovery funds to support the twin transitions. Still, some positive initiatives have emerged, such as the Commission's proposal for digital product passports to support the transition to a circular economy.²³

Regarding the twin green and digital transitions, more must be done to turn rhetoric into actual action and align agendas.

Right from the start, the von der Leyen Commission recognised that 'no one should be left behind' and has made efforts to support a just transition. Examples include financial support for the most affected regions through the Just Transition Mechanism, as well as the European Climate Pact, which connects people and organisations to take climate action. However, while these ongoing initiatives show goodwill, much more must be done to empower, enable and support citizens in the transition. With the Russian war on Ukraine now exacerbating energy and food costs, it is essential to take measures that support people – and the planet – in both the short and longer terms. Rather than subsidise harmful practices like fossil fuel heating, the EU member states should provide targeted socio-economic support, such as emergency income in the form of consumption cheques or reduced labour taxes, to help the vulnerable.

In many ways, COVID-19 solidified the Green Deal. As a result, it became *the* growth strategy for the EU; the solution to addressing the pandemic's economic repercussions and the direction for a sustainable recovery. Now the Commission – and the EU more generally – is faced with a new challenge: the implications of the Ukraine war for Europe's green transition. As the EU looks to address the war's multiple repercussions, from the humanitarian and refugee crises to the impacts

on EU energy and food systems, there is a huge risk that it will fall for short-sighted reactions, decisions, policies and investments. When it comes to energy and food, the danger is that the EU will resort to subsidising and supporting practices that actually accelerate climate change and ecological destruction and harm people's health and our economy.²⁴

As the von der Leyen Commission heads into the second half of its term, the rationale for the Green Deal is stronger than ever, and it is in the EU's interest to turn these set goals into real action.²⁵ The Green Deal provides the vision and solutions for the EU to address the multiple ongoing crises and challenges. To ensure that the reactions and measures of today lead to both short- and longer-term benefits, the Commission should aim for win-win results for the planet, European business and citizens.

Priority 2: A Europe fit for the digital age

CATCHING UP AND INNOVATION GO HAND IN HAND

Andrea G. Rodríguez

The von der Leyen Commission's approach towards digitalisation and new technologies was presented in the 2020 strategy, Shaping Europe's Digital Future. Owing to the work of its predecessors, the Commission proposed a human-centric approach to digitalisation across three streams: (i) improving digital access and skills across Europe and using technology to support the green transition; (ii) updating the digital rulebook and establishing a governance framework for data in Europe; and (iii) fighting disinformation and protecting users from cyber threats and technology misuse. In addition, the Commission published, in 2021, the Digital Compass, a strategic document that sets four strict goals: skills promotion, new digital infrastructure, and the digitalisation of the public and private sectors.

To this end, during the first half of its mandate, the Commission successfully put forward highly ambitious proposals. Two flagship policies are the Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act, which identify the big players in the digital market and set special obligations for them to facilitate transparency, accountability and market access. Other important milestones are the Data Governance Act 2018/1724 and Data Act, which will regulate and facilitate the sharing of company and non-personal data to foster innovation in the EU economy. These are complemented by the revised Network and Information Security Directive, which strengthens the Union's level of cybersecurity,²⁶ and the Artificial Intelligence Act, which proposes a risk-based approach to artificial intelligence development in Europe.

Still, in the second half of its mandate, the Commission should shift from a catch-up approach to offering anticipatory governance, especially in the case of emerging and disruptive technologies. And while facing challenges that require immediate responses, it should learn from its mistakes to ensure better coordination. An example lies in the case of improving 5G cybersecurity,

where member states' different perceptions of Chinese vendors combined with the passivity of the EU institutions led only to the publication of a '5G security toolbox' months after many countries had already taken action. In the next two years, proactivity will be important for addressing future challenges, such as the cybersecurity of Open Radio Access Networks.²⁷

In the second half of its mandate, the European Commission should shift from a catch-up approach to offering anticipatory governance, especially in the case of emerging and disruptive technologies.

On new technologies, while the Commission's initial proposal focused on upgrading Europe's digital landscape, the Digital Compass correctly identifies the need to invest in cutting-edge innovation to guarantee a strong digital market and boost the Union's strategic autonomy. Investing in Europe's digital infrastructure is as important as advancing the agenda of emerging tech. For that, it is necessary to guarantee not only sustained investment but also a strategic vision for where best to invest resources and establish more digital partnerships, like the one signed with Japan.

Priority 3: An economy that works for people

THE EU'S ECONOMIC RESILIENCE DEMANDS LONG-TERM THINKING

Francesco De Angelis

The EU's economic performance has been rather sluggish in the last decade. The GDP of member states took years to return to pre-2008 financial crisis levels, with productivity growth also lagging.²⁸ A few months before the start of the COVID-19 crisis, in the last quarter of 2019, the EU's GDP growth recorded 0%.²⁹ On top of that, the overall eurozone governance remained vulnerable, despite reforms made in the early 2010s (i.e. European Semester, Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, European Stability Mechanism). No common instruments for absorbing economic shocks and boosting public investments (which drastically dropped after the financial and sovereign debt crises)³⁰ were in place, and the banking union remained incomplete.

President von der Leyen took office in this complicated context. A major commitment in one of her political guidelines was to deepen the Economic and Monetary Union. To this end, initiatives were taken to establish a fiscal tool for the eurozone (i.e. Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness), complete the banking union, exploit the flexibility of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) to sustain the economy, and reform the European Semester. Following these efforts, the Commission launched a comprehensive review of its economic governance in February 2020. The reform process was unfortunately put on ice due to the COVID-19 crisis and only relaunched in October 2021.³¹

Not only did the COVID-19 crisis help accelerate EU integration, as past crises have also done. Member states were also able to inject massive liquidity into their economies.

The coronavirus outbreak reshaped President von der Leyen's priorities and the overall debate on the EU's economic frameworks. Not only did the COVID-19 crisis help accelerate EU integration, as past crises have also done.³² Member states were also able to inject massive liquidity into their economies as SGP rules were put on hold, thanks to the activation of the general escape clause (GEC). Equally impressive is that in 2020, the Commission contributed towards common instruments like the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), which has granted loans to finance short-term job retention schemes, and NGEU,

funded by EU-level debt issuance. Pending the fulfilment of several targets and milestones, the latter will provide member states with resources (i.e. a total of €800 billion) to deliver the green and digital transitions.

After two difficult years of the pandemic, the EU's economy was finally enjoying a strong recovery when the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought about a new era of uncertainty. For the EU as a whole, the real growth for 2022 is now expected to be at +2.7%, down from the previously projected +4%.³³ Moreover, Europeans now face inflationary pressure due to the spike in energy and commodity prices and supply bottlenecks. Member states and citizens have and will continue to be hit differently by the economic consequences of the war, as some countries have a greater dependence on Russia's gas and trade links with the Kremlin than others.³⁴ In response to these macroeconomic shocks and to smooth the war's impact on member states, the Commission adopted a new state aid framework and proposed to extend the GEC for another year, until the end of 2023.

Investing in defence, fostering public investments and absorbing both symmetric and asymmetric economic shocks are European objectives that will not be reached by simply relying on member states' initiatives and balance sheets.

The Commission's proposals for reforming the economic governance and other EU actions (expected post-summer 2022) will have to consider this new context. Fiscal rules must be simplified and guarantee growth-friendly public debt reduction. Moreover, with some taboos broken (e.g. issuing common debt), permanent instruments must be part of the debate, regardless of political resistance. Investing in defence, fostering public investments (in addition to NGEU), and absorbing both symmetric and asymmetric economic shocks are European objectives that will not be reached by simply relying on member states' initiatives and balance sheets. In this regard, in February 2022, the European Policy Centre recommended establishing a common central investment capacity for the twin transitions.³⁵

The EU's economic policy frameworks cannot return to the pre-pandemic or pre-Ukrainian war *status quo*. The one-off nature of SURE and particularly NGEU (and its Recovery and Resilience Facility) might have been legally and politically justifiable. However, they should not be treated as contingent emergency solutions and

put back in the drawer. Building on these instruments' positive experiences, the European Commission should foster political consensus among member states in the second part of its mandate, focusing on the need to equip the Union with central fiscal tools, including through EU-level borrowing.

The von der Leyen Commission weathered the storm of the COVID-19 crisis successfully and reacted to Russian aggression firmly. But now, it must show ambition and shift from an emergency management mindset to provide long-term solutions to improve the resilience of EU economic policy.

WILL MEMBER STATES COMMIT TO A SOCIAL EUROPE?

Laura Rayner and Tommaso Grossi

The headline ambition of the section dedicated to Europe's social pillar in von der Leyen's political guidelines was to present an Action Plan that fully implements the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which was first put forward in November 2017. A year and a half after von der Leyen began her stint as Commission President, such an Action Plan was released, backed by the motto, *It is time to deliver*.³⁶ However, EU member states are yet to commit to some concrete actions, let alone consider how the EU's priorities will change in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

For example, one of the Commission's set goals is to reach an EU employment rate of at least 78% for 20- to 64-year-olds by 2030.³⁷ Following the COVID-19 crisis, EU27 countries recorded an average employment rate of 73.1% in 2021.³⁸ But while unemployment is at historic lows, rising salaries are failing to keep up with galloping inflation, and many European workers face real wage cuts.³⁹ Moreover, geographical variations of employment distribution still persist across member states. In 2021, less than 70% of the population aged 20 to 64 were employed in Italy (62.7%), Greece (62.6%), Romania (67.1%), Spain (67.7%), and Croatia (68.2%).⁴⁰ Significant regional differences also exist within the same country. For example, Italy's rates drop dramatically to 40% in some southern regions, while northern regions perform starkly better.⁴¹

Recent years have also seen structural changes take place in labour markets, primarily brought about by digitalisation. New forms of work are increasingly common, yet, too often, gig work⁴² contributes more to labour insecurity than economic opportunities.⁴³ While atypical work⁴⁴ may ease access to employment, the concurrent lack of labour rights or social protection is worsening economic, social and health inequalities.⁴⁵ The scarring effect of the 2009 eurozone crisis and COVID-19 pandemic is also evident when looking at practices of wage dumping, an increasingly salient topic across member states.⁴⁶ Eurostat figures show that, in 2019, 9% of workers were at risk of poverty.⁴⁷ COVID-19 exacerbated this figure, impacting wages and wage-setting across Europe,⁴⁸ particularly for low-wage occupations and sectors like manufacturing and construction.

The Action Plan recognises the need for policies and measures which tackle in-work poverty, inequality and unemployment. However, emphasis on job *quality* is lacking. Besides contributing to positive employment trends, the green and digital transitions must also result in qualitative jobs that guarantee adequate wages and fair working conditions. While the Commission acknowledges the twin transition as a priority, the EPSR implementation is still heavily dependent on member states' levels of commitment and pledges to tackle growing health, economic and social divides.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan recognises the need for policies and measures which tackle in-work poverty, inequality and unemployment. However, emphasis on job *quality* is lacking.

If member states already lack the much-needed commitment to tackle such issues, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to sap their sense of obligation even more, provoking additional disruptions to the social model that the EU claims to be seeking. Considering Germany's *Zeitenwende* – a 'turning point' in its foreign policy –, Finland and Sweden joining NATO, and the size of European rearmament spending pledges, the EU will soon have more military resources than any country other than the US. The Commission envisions measures and actions to strengthen the European defence, industrial and technological base and promote military expenditures as essential. Pledging to coordinate defence spending on behalf of member states to increase effectiveness, the Commission also stated that such investments cannot come from the EU budget but rather from national finances.

As a result, with resources given to new priorities, the 'weaponisation' of the EU economy is likely to have negative consequences for the fight against social challenges – including those related to the inclusion and integration of Ukrainian refugees. The EU clearly cannot afford a long-term economic war. Its impact on an already fragile social core would be severe and dangerous.

In view of the difficulty of managing the post-pandemic competition of resources and with war raging on our continent, the importance of the European Semester process has been reinforced. Through its monitoring and dialogue process, member states' significant slippages in achieving social goals can be highlighted and corrected, and upwards convergence across the EU maintained. This coordination in delivering social policy will be particularly crucial in light of the Commission's decision to coordinate the purchase of more military tools.

Moreover, although currently viewed as a temporary adjustment, linking payments from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) to the implementation of the Semester's country-specific recommendations has

been an important step forward from the von der Leyen Commission. This approach should be maintained even after the RRF is implemented to boost compliance with the Commission's recommendations.

Priority 4: A stronger Europe in the world

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S GEOPOLITICAL DREAM

Marta Mucznik

At the beginning of her mandate, European Commission President von der Leyen vowed to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' and boost the EU's role on the world stage. To this end, she *inter alia* pledged to push for qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) so as to enable the Union "to act fast".⁴⁹ She also stated her intention to strengthen the EU's defence capabilities and build a "genuine European Defence Union".⁵⁰ These promises echo High Representative Josep Borrell's repeated calls for the EU to boost its strategic autonomy and learn the language of power in the context of rising geopolitical competition and an increasingly volatile security environment.⁵¹

Also underpinning von der Leyen's vision is the idea that different internal policy fields are increasingly interconnected with the EU's foreign and security affairs, and therein lies the potential of its international clout. To this end, she strengthened the role of the High Representative and worked to bridge different internal and external dimensions of the Union's work. If COVID-19 and rising US–China competition have intensified the need for EU global leadership, Russia's war on Ukraine is the ultimate test of Europe's ability to respond to unfolding events swiftly.

It is precisely in matters of war and peace that lies the dilemma of achieving a geopolitical Commission. The European Commission's impact on promoting the EU's role on the world stage is still limited in scope and highly reliant on the ability to find consensus between the member states.

However, it is precisely in matters of war and peace – traditionally the domain of member states – that lies the dilemma of achieving a geopolitical Commission. The European Commission's impact on promoting the EU's role on the world stage is still limited in scope

and highly reliant on the ability to find consensus between the member states.

Since 24 February, the EU – heavily supported by the Commission – has displayed unparalleled resolve in support of Ukraine and against Putin. It worked around the clock to propose consecutive rounds of far-reaching sanctions against Russia, delivered unprecedented military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and committed billions of euros to support member states hosting refugees. Nevertheless, the overall EU response has also exposed the limits of the Union's and the Commission's geopolitical leverage. Divisions among the member states occasionally threatened unified military support for Kyiv and the reach of sanctions.⁵² For example, Hungary blocked the adoption of the sixth sanctions package against Russia for several weeks.

EU countries have displayed exceptional unity in the face of one of the most severe crises since World War II. But will this deliberate and unanimous political last over time? There are reasons for doubt.

While the war accelerated transformations in the EU's foreign and security policy fields, the lack of EU consensus and clarity over a host of issues that have lingered for a long time could resurface. There are still profound differences between member states over the meanings of EU strategic autonomy and strategic sovereignty, defence spending and sanction coordination, and the perception of threats on Europe's eastern borders.

During the first half of the Commission's mandate, the EU kept expanding its toolkit and boosting its defence capabilities to realise its full geopolitical might.⁵³ The problem is that it has often lacked the political will to act in the absence of an imminent threat, like today's ongoing war in Ukraine.

Adapting to 21st-century global power politics will take much more than simply promising a geopolitical Commission and learning the language of power. It may also require a significant institutional redesign if the EU is to practice what it preaches and emerge as a credible player on the world stage. The war has renewed momentum in favour of von der Leyen's early call to introduce QMV in the CFSP. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) conclusions (i.e. proposal 21.1) suggest that European citizens also agree with the Commission President. The question remains: Will member states be ready to take that geopolitical leap forward?

IF AND HOW TO ENLARGE REMAIN THE QUESTIONS

Corina Stratulat

Since the beginning of her mandate, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen referred to the Balkans as “an absolute priority”,⁵⁴ echoing the supportive tone of the Brussels’ executive towards the region, which has become too familiar over the years. Essentially every Commission Communication on enlargement starts by reaffirming the European perspective of the Balkan countries and identifying the policy as “a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth in the whole of Europe.”⁵⁵ The enlargement packages published in 2020 and 2021 were no exception. The Commission’s political endorsements for the region are important, of course. But this bold narrative continues to sound more aspirational than realistic.

Like its predecessors, the von der Leyen Commission has resorted to ingenious tactics to keep a weary enlargement process rolling and help the Balkan countries advance towards the EU.

Like its predecessors, the von der Leyen Commission has resorted to ingenious tactics to keep a weary enlargement process rolling and help the Balkan countries advance towards the EU.⁵⁶ In February 2020, the College adopted a new methodology for accession negotiations based on French proposals. This is a sequel to previous reforms of the Union’s tools and methods, undertaken under the stewardship of the Commission since at least 2011.⁵⁷ This initiative helped persuade France and the Netherlands to lift their 2019 block on opening EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The following month, Tirana and Skopje received the Council’s green light to start negotiations. Then, last October, the Commission also adopted a €30-billion Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans to support the region’s economic recovery and green and digital transitions, and relaunch its economic convergence with the EU.

And yet, the enlargement dossier has remained stuck in a rut. The implementation of the new methodology has been delayed since Bulgaria’s refusal in November 2020 to approve the EU negotiation framework for North Macedonia over issues of history and language. Albania’s path has also been held up as a result. Sofia’s veto ignores the good track record of reforms in North Macedonia and instead allows domestic concerns to influence its position on enlargement, just like other EU capitals have done many times before.⁵⁸ Member states’ constant fickleness

on enlargement has also precluded agreement on granting the long-overdue visa liberalisation to Kosovo and inviting the Balkans to participate in the CoFoE.⁵⁹

The enduring divergence between member states and the European Commission continues to weaken the latter’s authority on enlargement and the credibility of the membership perspective. As a result, frustration has been growing in the Balkans,⁶⁰ making it difficult for the EU to extract ever-stricter concessions from the region. Instead, the latter is looking increasingly for pragmatic alternatives in regional coalitions and with other powers.

But while the member states’ haphazard commitment undermines the transformative leverage of the policy, the Commission’s ever-expanding and refined box of enlargement tools and tricks has also proven its limits. As its own assessments indicate, for all its technical benchmarks and complex conditions, the Commission is still short on answers on how to consolidate democracy, resolve statehood and bilateral issues, create functioning market economies, and reconcile war-torn, multi-ethnic societies in the Balkans.⁶¹ It also does not help when the commissioner in charge of enlargement is accused of playing down democratic criteria for certain forerunning countries in the Balkans.⁶²

And yet, despite all the current struggles of the enlargement process, the membership card was recently put on the table for Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, posing as some sort of solution to the new war. President von der Leyen has been keen to move Kyiv swiftly through the formal steps that lead to candidate status. However, irrespective of the Commission’s promised *avis* this June, member states continue to be divided on the subject. This will prove problematic, as their unanimous approval is necessary for any decision on enlargement.⁶³

The new geopolitical context fosters a sense of urgency to define a firm response toward the trio of new applicants. But redefining the EU’s engagement with its eastern neighbours also impels a re-evaluation of ongoing enlargement policy, more generally. Can the existing approach be extended to the EU-hopeful countries in the East? If not, should it also change for the Balkans? Various reform proposals are competing for attention, including creating a system of EU accession in stages or a European political community.⁶⁴ Such fresh ideas are welcome.

However, revising – again – the enlargement method cannot substitute for the member states’ lack of political will to open the door to new members. The process would just keep dragging on counterproductively. The merits of the 2020 ‘new approach’ have not even been properly tested out, given the delays in commencing negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Why try to fix something that might not be broken? And will new procedures offer effective solutions to thorny issues like the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, the impasse in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the persistence of autocratic leaders in the region?

They should be the focus of any potential upgrades. In addition, the Union should also prepare its absorption capacity if new accessions are to ensure that further ‘widening’ continues to go hand in hand with the further ‘deepening’ of integration.

Finally, alternatives to full membership warrant consideration, especially for new applicants beyond the Balkan countries. Promising the European perspective should not be the EU’s reflex option indefinitely unless it is buttressed by real political commitment and a workable model of engagement. The von der Leyen Commission should set up an expert group to wrestle with these issues and help it define a proper strategy for its vicinity.

IS THE EU–UK PARTNERSHIP DOOMED TO CONFLICT?

Emily Fitzpatrick

In her political guidelines, Commission President von der Leyen called for the delivery of an “ambitious and strategic partnership” with the UK to foster a stronger Europe in the world.⁶⁵ Negotiations on a future relationship began during her first 100 days in office and continued until a last-minute deal was struck on 31 December 2020. The EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) is far from the ambitious and strategic partnership envisaged; rather, it is the thinnest of all possible models of association that the EU has with its neighbours.⁶⁶ This is the result of both parties’ ‘red lines’, an unnecessarily short negotiating period imposed by the UK, and the Westminster’s pursuit of an ideologically driven Brexit that privileged political notions of sovereignty over economic considerations.⁶⁷

In terms of ambition, the TCA does not match the stated aims for cooperation agreed between the parties in the 2019 Political Declaration that accompanied the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement. For example, there are little to no provisions on mobility or foreign and security policy. In fact, the short timeframe for negotiation meant that arrangements governing several policy areas were not finalised.⁶⁸ Since the signing of the TCA, the European Commission unilaterally adopted decisions on key areas for economic cooperation, such as an adequacy decision on data protection and an equivalence decision on one element of financial services. But it can also revoke these following future reviews. Additionally, the TCA left several arrangements to be decided between the EU and UK, for instance, on electricity trading or the UK’s participation in Union programmes. Decisions on such arrangements are to be taken jointly in the committees of the TCA’s newly-established governing structure.

Yet such technical cooperation is vulnerable to political tensions. Most recently, the UK accused the Commission of delaying the adoption of a protocol that would facilitate UK participation in Union programmes, including Horizon Europe, in light of the ongoing dispute regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol.⁶⁹

The current state of the partnership could not be described as ‘strategic’ either, as the TCA does not provide avenues through which the parties can cooperate to address broader global challenges.⁷⁰ This is exemplified by the TCA’s limited provisions for cooperation on security and defence, migration and energy supply – all needed for the war in Ukraine. Barring limited provisions governing energy, EU–UK cooperation in response to the war has taken place on an *ad hoc* basis and is nowhere near the level it would have been at if the UK were still a member state. What’s more, the latest threats by the UK government to unilaterally disapply elements of the Northern Ireland Protocol have undermined Western unity at a time when it is most needed.⁷¹

The current state of the EU–UK relationship could not be described as ‘strategic’, as the Trade and Cooperation Agreement does not provide avenues through which the parties can cooperate to address broader global challenges.

Midway through the Commission’s mandate, the EU–UK partnership can be characterised as fragile and conflictual rather than ambitious and strategic. Given the low levels of trust engendered by the UK government’s persistent failure to fulfil obligations under the Withdrawal Agreement, the extent to which the EU can engage institutionally with the UK in other policy areas is questionable.⁷² Broader cooperation on foreign and security policy or global challenges (e.g. climate change, technological development, relations with China) seems unlikely as long as the Johnson administration, with its allergy to institutional structures and disregard for the EU as a collective foreign policy actor, remains in power.

In the longer term, the TCA is scheduled for review in 2025 or 2026, by which time a general election in the UK will have occurred. Should a different government – one more open to cooperation with the EU – come to power, this will be an opportunity to reset relations and scale up the EU–UK partnership, perhaps along the lines suggested by French President Emmanuel Macron.⁷³ On the other hand, if the Johnson administration remains in office, EU–UK relations will continue to be conflictual as long as sparring with the EU is perceived as politically beneficial for the Conservative party. For the von der Leyen Commission, the task in the second half of its mandate will remain focused on de-escalation and depoliticisation as subsequent flare-ups – be it on the Northern Irish Protocol, fisheries or the level playing field, for example – emerge over time.

Priority 5: Promoting our European way of life

STILL SEEKING THE BALANCE BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Silvia Carta

When President von der Leyen unveiled her College in September 2019, the new “Protecting our European way of life” portfolio sparked fierce criticism. That this broad priority includes asylum and migration policy was seen as reminiscent of the far-right rhetoric and harshly opposed by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).⁷⁴ While the title was later adjusted to milder wording – from “protecting” to “promoting” – this early controversy was just the start of a rocky road in accomplishing the long-awaited reform of the EU’s asylum rules.

Despite an extensive round of consultations with national governments and other stakeholders by both Vice-President Margaritis Schinas and Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson,⁷⁵ the ensuing 2020 New Pact on Migration and Asylum has so far not been successful in building consensus. Considering that it was the disagreements between the two co-legislators and within the Council that sunk the 2016 effort to overhaul the Common European Asylum System, their task was never going to be easy. Some experts initially praised the Commission’s efforts to find compromise in the face of increasingly frequent border incidents, pushbacks and instances of diverging asylum standards.⁷⁶ However, almost two years later, the New Pact proposals are gridlocked by the same political disputes on solidarity and responsibility-sharing in the allocation of asylum seekers across member states that blocked the previous reform attempt.

In addition, the von der Leyen Commission has done little to distance itself from its poor track record in tackling the implementation gaps that make the present asylum legislation ineffective.⁷⁷ It also failed to fight rule-of-law backsliding (i.e. solidarity with migrants and refugees is often criminalised) and attacks on civil society, citizens and organisations helping refugees.⁷⁸ Case in point is the derogatory measures it proposed in December 2021 to support member states facing migrant arrivals sponsored by Belarus. These proposals raised major concerns as the Commission appeared willing to accommodate – rather than counter – systematic pushbacks and violations of EU law.⁷⁹

As displacement from Ukraine reaches a record high of 6.8 million refugees,⁸⁰ new challenges for the Commission lie ahead. First of all, the EU’s unwavering support for Ukrainians via the Temporary Protection Directive 2022/382 must be maintained and translated into concrete access to rights and services. The Commission will play a key role in ensuring that protection standards are implemented effectively in all member states and that corrective measures are available to support those hosting the largest number of displaced people. Second, as the newly activated temporary protection scheme

takes hold, the shortcomings of the ‘regular’ EU asylum system remain, with the risk of creating a two-tier system differentiating Ukrainians from other refugees.

The von der Leyen Commission will have the delicate task of sustaining the present momentum of solidarity while ensuring that support for temporary protection beneficiaries does not translate into the further erosion of the right to asylum in the EU.

At this juncture, the von der Leyen Commission will have the delicate task of sustaining the present momentum of solidarity while ensuring that support for temporary protection beneficiaries does not translate into the further erosion of the right to asylum in the EU. The Commission has the potential to offer guidance and political leadership to member states. This has been the case so far in the context of the Ukraine war. Nevertheless, the rest of the EU asylum and migration *acquis* should not be left behind. While additional legislative reforms remain in the hands of the member states and the European Parliament, the von der Leyen Commission can certainly make compliance with existing asylum norms a priority in the second half of its mandate.

FOUNDING THE EUROPEAN HEALTH UNION

Elizabeth Kuiper and Danielle Brady

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, health policy has been high on the agenda of the von der Leyen Commission for almost the entirety of the first half of its term. While initiatives like the Pharmaceutical Strategy and Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan (EBCP) featured in the Commission’s 2019 priorities, the global health crisis saw health policy gain significant prominence. The Commission has laid the foundations for a European Health Union (EHU) with proposals to extend the mandates of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and establish the Health and Emergency Response Authority (HERA).

In response to the pandemic, these initiatives aim to strengthen the EU’s resilience against cross-border health threats. The expansion of the ECDC’s mandate affords it the capacity to mobilise and deploy an EU Health Task Force to assist national responses. The EMA’s mandate will simultaneously be reinforced to monitor and mitigate

the risk of shortages of critical medicines and medical devices, provide scientific advice on medicines, and coordinate studies and clinical trials. The construction of the EHU has continued with the proposal for a ‘European Health Data Space’ (EHDS), and a further building block is anticipated in 2022 Q4 when the review of the Pharmaceutical Strategy will be published.

Health policy should remain a priority in the second half of the von der Leyen Commission’s term. While the Commission has already put forward most of its proposals under the EHU, it should continue to guarantee that these proposals become worthwhile and are not subject to major delays. The risk is that the war in Ukraine and its consequences will influence much of the second half of the Commission’s term to the detriment of other topics, like the role of health at the EU level. Indeed, the Commission has already coordinated several health measures with member states to assist those forced to flee Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine and its consequences could risk influencing much of the second half of the European Commission’s term to the detriment of other topics, like the role of health at the EU level.

Putting the EHU vision into practice as set out in the various initiatives must continue to be at the fore of the EU institutions’ work in the coming months and years.

To ensure that Europe’s ambitions in cancer prevention, treatment and care are realised, the timings set out in the EBCP’s Implementation Roadmap should be adhered to.⁸¹ The EBCP’s roadmap and progress indicators will monitor developments on 10 flagship initiatives. Promptly delivering these initiatives is of utmost importance, as they will have a tangible impact on the lives of millions of cancer patients across the EU.⁸²

Additionally, the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety should ensure no delay in the Pharmaceutical Strategy review, as was the case with the EHDS. For the von der Leyen Commission to have adequate time to focus on the EHU proposals, it should publish the review in 2022 Q4, as planned. Furthermore, it should ensure the adequate funding and staffing of EMA and HERA if they are to function as envisaged.

European citizens have a strong desire for a functional EHU, as shown in the CoFoE proposals. The citizens’ recommendations for a EHDS endorse the Commission’s initiative, put forward just days before the final CoFoE event. The CoFoE participants also recommended making health and healthcare policy a shared competence of the EU and the member states. This specific proposal would require treaty change. But for now, health remains primarily a member state competence.

Over the last two and a half years, the von der Leyen Commission has demonstrated the possibilities and potential for health action within the current treaty framework. And there is still much scope for it to advance on the work that it has commenced without treaty change. Still, a conscious effort should be made in parallel to reflect on the discussions and suggestions of the CoFoE regarding the potential need for an expanded EU role in health policy.

Priority 6: A new push for European democracy

DEFENDING EU DEMOCRACY IS A DAUNTING BUT IMPERATIVE TASK

Perle Petit

During the Conference on the Future of Europe’s closing event on 9 May 2022, President von der Leyen stated that “we need to improve the way our democracy works on a permanent basis.”⁸³ However, the European Commission priority, “A push for European democracy”, appears to have been fairly side-lined. A relatively broad priority, it encompasses policy areas that range from better engaging citizens in EU-level democratic processes to protecting citizens’ fundamental rights. Despite deteriorating levels of democracy in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe,⁸⁴ this priority has the fewest proposals so far (55 compared to the 504 proposals announced in total across the six priorities). From years of tacitly condoning rule-of-law breaches and hesitating

to take a strong stance against autocratic tendencies in member states,⁸⁵ the Commission now finds itself in a situation where restoring the Union to a healthier state of democracy seems a daunting task.

In an attempt to ‘push for EU democracy’, this priority hopes to nurture, protect and strengthen EU democratic values and principles. One of the main sources of progress in this regard has been the 2021 European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), which has three top-level measures to protect democracy in the EU: (i) promote free and fair elections; (ii) strengthen media freedom; and (iii) counter disinformation. However, it is worth pointing out that, in the EU, the first non-democratic government was elected in April 2022,⁸⁶ in an election criticised as heavily biased; 2021 saw the return of extreme violence against journalists (including assassinations) and an increase in restrictive illiberal laws targeting specific

media outlets;⁸⁷ and there has been an explosion of online disinformation surrounding COVID-19 since 2019.⁸⁸

Of the three measures foreseen by the Plan, the most progress has been made in media freedom. This is favourable, as research shows that this is the democratic pillar currently most susceptible to deterioration in Eastern Europe and which has also been “severely derailed” in other parts of the EU.⁸⁹ The first half of the von der Leyen Commission’s mandate has seen a host of developments to protect media freedom, including the 2020 Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, a 2021 recommendation on the safety of journalists, a 2022 proposal for a directive protecting persons against strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and a complementary recommendation, and an upcoming European Media Freedom Act.

What is still missing are clear answers on how to deal effectively with media monopolies and make ownership in national media landscapes transparent.⁹⁰ In addition, there is a need to tackle media manipulation via disinformation from the perspective of internal actors. Disinformation is often seen as stemming from foreign interference (as reflected in the language of the EDAP), even though domestic sources of disinformation are equally prevalent, perpetrated by European political parties and national governments.⁹¹ The EU also views the internal spread of disinformation as a national issue. But it would be dangerous for the EU to leave this in the hands of autocrats, present in some member states and who oversee centralised, state-controlled media monopolies.

More progress is needed. Incremental progress is being made, but not enough to keep up with the dramatic paradigm shifts taking place across the globe. Midway through its mandate, the von der Leyen Commission must react to new threats (e.g. the repercussions of the Ukraine war on the EU’s perception as a promoter of democratic norms in its neighbourhood and worldwide). It must also adapt to the changing power balance in the EU due to the impact that disruptive illiberal voices are having on major EU decision-making and cohesion.⁹²

The EU’s current approach to backsliding and autocratisation is leaving an ever-growing gap between its democratic expectations and aspirations, and the realities of dealing with a backsliding Union.

The Commission has often shown itself as a tentative actor when taking action against democracy rule-breakers, but the assaults against democracy within the EU and against its neighbours make it important to be bolder in

this respect. The EU’s current approach to backsliding and autocratisation is leaving an ever-growing gap between its democratic expectations and aspirations, and the realities of dealing with a backsliding Union. The von der Leyen Commission should scale up its efforts to not only protect but also defend democratic rights within the Union and abroad.

Despite such worrying trends in national levels of democracy, bold steps forward have also been taken, for example, in the shape of the CoFoE – the first transnational exercise in participatory democracy at the EU scale. In her 2019 political guidelines, von der Leyen promised, “My Commission will listen to the people of Europe”.⁹³ While the Commission was not the most active proponent of the CoFoE politically (despite playing a large role behind the scenes in its technical organisation), this democratic experiment was held under its mandate successfully, producing several concrete proposals.⁹⁴ Despite the Commission being fairly cautious throughout the exercise, von der Leyen has already stated that she would announce its first response to the Conference’s final report in her upcoming State of the Union address.⁹⁵ It remains to be seen how far the response will go and if it will lead to more participatory processes being incorporated into the EU’s decision-making structure.⁹⁶

A ‘SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP’ WITH THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND CLOSE COOPERATION ACROSS RUE DE LA LOI?

Johannes Greubel

At the start of her mandate, President von der Leyen pledged to renew the European Commission’s relationship with its co-legislators “to ensure a permanent dialogue between the Commission and the European Parliament and the Council.”⁹⁷ Central is the “special relationship” with the European Parliament.⁹⁸ The new Commission would prioritise coordination with the Parliament, supporting its right of initiative and facilitating its reform of democratic standards, including the *Spitzenkandidaten* lead candidate system, in time for the next European elections in 2024.

However, these promises never truly transpired. The von der Leyen Commission did deliver proposals to beef up democratic standards and transparency requirements for political parties and political advertising in the context of the EDAP. But other stated objectives, including the right of initiative and *Spitzenkandidaten* reform, fell off the radar. No progress was made despite the Commission’s early commitments to bring the first proposals for *Spitzenkandidaten* reform by summer 2020.⁹⁹

Since then, in early May 2022, the CoFoE called for reforming the election of the Commission President (proposal 38.4). And in April 2022, the European Parliament kick-started the process for electoral reform, including revising the lead candidate system.¹⁰⁰ It is now the Commission’s turn to live up to its promise of acting as an honest broker between the Parliament

and the Council on this subject. Since European parties will already choose their lead candidates for the 2024 European elections in one and a half years, time is running out.

More generally, the von der Leyen Commission also fell short of its pledge to coordinate with the Parliament permanently. Most notably, the latter was entirely absent in the debate on the EU response to the COVID-19. Whereas one could blame the pandemic's circumstances for this, the Commission did not put enough emphasis on fulfilling its promise to "ensure a permanent dialogue between the Commission and the European Parliament as a matter of priority", either.¹⁰¹ The Commission's proposal for the post-pandemic recovery plan, NGEU, also did not foresee a major role for the Parliament and did little more for their relations. Most recently, criticism of the Parliament's exclusion from debates on key legislative issues has surfaced in the context of the EU's green taxonomy. MEPs complained of "being locked out of the technical expert group that helped during the drafting process", leaving them limited time to scrutinise the outcome.¹⁰²

Interinstitutional frictions were not limited to the European Parliament. A tense relationship with European Council President Charles Michel has also complicated von der Leyen's mandate. Foreign policy has certainly been an area where interinstitutional coordination went wrong, leading to a power struggle between von der Leyen and High Representative Borrell, on the one hand, and Michel on the other.¹⁰⁵ This is especially disconcerting given the EU's immense challenges facing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As the EPC's Georg Riekes already concluded last year, "A solid working relationship and

a clear, practical division of tasks – not least on the international scene where Europe's uneasy, bicephalous leadership has been most damaging – is the minimum to be achieved."¹⁰⁴

The European Commission must improve its coordination both with the European Parliament and across Rue de la Loi.

The Commission must improve its coordination both with the European Parliament and across Rue de la Loi. Close relationships are crucial, especially in view of the many strategic challenges the Union has to face in the second half of this politico-institutional cycle: a joint EU response to Russia, the post-pandemic recovery, and transposing the results of the CoFoE into legislative proposals. In her 2019 political priorities, von der Leyen gave the right analogy when she said that for international negotiations, she would consult with the Parliament "following the mould set by the Brexit negotiations."¹⁰⁵ The von der Leyen Commission should heed these words and follow Michel Barnier's model of continuous interinstitutional coordination conducted during the Brexit governance –¹⁰⁶ and not just on international negotiations but on all issues of key strategic importance for the EU – to maintain a coherent and effective European approach.

The *Zeitenwende* imperative for the future

Janis A. Emmanouilidis

This midterm review of the von der Leyen Commission argues that the multiple, complex and unexpected crises of the past years have both challenged and emboldened it to take important and ambitious action. The Brussels executive made significant progress in many decisive files of its initial list of priorities. It brought a far-reaching European Green Deal, ground-breaking proposals to regulate the digital space, and much-needed support to relieve European economies from recent shocks on their way. The multibillion recovery plan, NGEU, stands out as a crucial and unprecedented step to counter the economic repercussions of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the Commission's track records in the fields of migration, foreign policy and democratic reform remain ambivalent.

Looking towards the second half of its term, the von der Leyen Commission must continue to pursue its key priorities, but now through the prism of the *Zeitenwende* currently underway. The European Green Deal, a Europe fit for the digital age, a stronger Europe in the world, a new push for European democracy, and the other initial priorities must all remain high on the agenda. But following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the entire Union now lives and operates in a new era. The watershed moment of 24 February 2022 has radically changed the geopolitical and geo-economic landscapes of Europe and beyond. The consequences of the unprovoked attack against a sovereign country in the heart of the European continent pose fundamental challenges for the Union and its allies. It has opened a major, novel chapter in the permacrisis of the past decades, altering Europe forever.¹⁰⁷

In response to the invasion, the EU27 have been more decisive, united and faster than ever before in previous crises of the past 10 to 15 years. Out of fear that this new predicament could spiral out of control, the Union and its member states have understood that there is no alternative but to counter the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Not doing so would invite the Kremlin to continue down the path President Putin embarked on over a decade ago. While many in the EU were naive about Moscow's intentions, the age of innocence ended decidedly when Russian tanks crossed the Ukrainian border.

Despite the EU27's decisive reaction to the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, this is no time for self-congratulations. Much more must be done. In the short term, a more encompassing boycott of Russian energy imports, enhanced support for Ukraine (i.e. a continuous supply of weapons), and more solidarity with those within and outside Europe hit hardest by the new crisis must remain high on the Union's agenda.

Today's reaction to the war is key – but the EU27 are also under severe pressure to start preparing for the future. This is one main lesson from the war. In the longer term, EU institutions and member states should expect and prepare for the worst to avoid the worst. This was the successful approach taken during the COVID-19 crisis and should once again guide the Union through this new, exceptional chapter of the permacrisis.

There is little time to digest and evaluate the implications of the decisions already taken. On the contrary, more ambitious joint action will have to be taken at the European and national levels. The EU27 must demonstrate the political will, unity and stamina to prepare the Union for a new era without taboos in any policy area. All efforts should focus on ensuring that the EU avoids finding itself in a position where it asks

itself – once again – why it did not act earlier and more forcefully in response to the Kremlin's belligerence. Today, many inside and outside Europe question the Union's response to Russia's antagonisms in 2008 and 2014. In the future, the EU27 should avoid having similar regrets, especially when peace on the continent is now at stake.

The EU27 must demonstrate the political will, unity and stamina to prepare the Union for a new era without taboos in any policy area.

The von der Leyen Commission will have to show decisive leadership to ensure that the EU27 remain united and deepen their level of cooperation. While the early phases of the war in Ukraine have already shown that only by acting together can the Union hope to remain an effective player, this is by no means a foregone conclusion.

The EU and its member states must make a choice: opt for a joint future or watch the old continent drift into fragmentation and irrelevance, leading to a loss of ability to defend its interests. But ambitiously moving ahead will only be possible if the Commission is ready to open new frontiers. Daring to present proposals that might have been taboo previously has become necessary. It is the only way to ensure that the notion of a *Zeitenwende* translates into adequate policy choices and substantial reform of the Union's governance structures. This is not the time for cautious approaches, and history will surely judge the von der Leyen Commission.

- ¹ European Parliament (2019), [European Parliament resolution of 13 February 2019 on the state of the debate on the future of Europe, 2018/2094\(INI\)](#).
- ² Barigazzi, Jacopo; David M. Herszenhorn; Lili Bayer; Maïa de La Baume; and Rym Montaz, "[Von der Leyen tapped to run European Commission](#)", *POLITICO*, 02 July 2019.
- ³ *European Parliament*, "[2019 election results > Turnout > Turnout by year](#)" (accessed 24 May 2022).
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