

URSULA VON DER LEYEN'S DOUBLE MANDATE

 **EU ANALYSIS**

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PART 1 – LAYING THE GROUNDWORK (2019-2024)

Introduction

When Ursula von der Leyen (vdL) became President of the European Commission (EC) back in 2019, the economic situation was more stable than in previous years, enabling the Commission to look ahead and set targets for the coming decades. However, there were also significant challenges, such as Euroscepticism, Brexit, migration or global geopolitical tensions. Five years later, in 2024, vdL got reelected for a second term as President of the EC. Has the Commission really delivered on its promises over the past five years? How far, or how close, is the Commission to its objectives? How do the new priorities relate to the previous ones? Are they coherent or contradictory? Are they realistic or unattainable?

In order to comprehensively assess the coherence of the European Commission's strategic priorities over two consecutive mandates: “2019-2024 - A Union that Strives for More” and “2024-2029 - Europe's Choice”, our analysis will be divided into two separate articles. The aim of this first part is to analyse the work carried out during the 2019-2024 period. The first article will begin by briefly explaining the geopolitical context in 2019. Then, the six priorities of the 2019-2024 mandate will be examined separately, looking at the work done to achieve the objectives set, as well as their respective success and shortcomings.

The Dynamics in 2019

When von der Leyen took office in 2019, the economic situation was more favourable and stable than in previous years. The recovery from the global economic crisis of 2008 and the eurozone crisis of 2009 was well underway. By 2019, the European Union (EU) had experienced steady growth and unemployment rates were very low in many Member States. This economic stability enabled the European Commission to focus on long-term strategic objectives. The European Green Deal, one of the Commission's flagship projects, is a good example. Following growing public

awareness, a political consensus has emerged on the need to combat climate change. This consensus has paved the way for greater cohesion and cooperation in developing environmental policies. This long-term vision marked a change from the previous President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, who was often criticised for being reactive rather than proactive.

But in other ways, there were important challenges ahead, coming from the inside and outside of the Union. Internally, the



Brexit and the withdrawal agreement created a tense atmosphere, not only economically, but also by calling into question the unity of the Union. This has given greater weight to Eurosceptic and populist movements, directly threatening the integrity of the European Union. The consequences of the 2015 migration crisis have also accentuated divisions within the EU over solidarity and burden-sharing. There were also debates on reforming the EU's institutions, with a view to achieving a better balance between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission, as well as greater decentralisation. However, this was and remains a controversial subject, as others seek to strengthen the Union and make it more integrated. Externally, the European Union was also aware that it was lagging behind in the global technology race. There were growing concerns about the EU's competitiveness and innovative power, as well as the concerns of major technology companies about data privacy and security. There were political tensions on the world stage. Trade between the US and China has weakened the global economy. The EU's relations with China and Russia have also been complex, on issues of security (e.g. Crimea, interference) and human rights (e.g. Uighurs). The EU has even seen its relations with its main ally, the United States of America (US), deteriorate. As a matter of fact, the Trump administration has been reticent about trade agreements with Europe, as well as European Union countries' investments in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance.

It is in such a context, and guided by the Council's strategic agenda and following discussions with the various political groups in Parliament, that the six political priorities were defined for the 2019-2024 term of office.

The first strategy, “A European Green Deal”, revolves around the goal of being climate neutral by 2050. Based on a clean and circular economy, this deal should aim to decarbonize European industries, combat climate change and preserve the natural environment.

The second strategy, “A Europe fit for the digital age”, focuses on the use of technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, supercomputers, 5G) to promote industrial competitiveness, research and innovation, as well as to protect the online rights of European citizens vis-à-vis the major internet platforms (e.g. Apple, ByteDance, Microsoft, etc.).

Third, “An economy that works for people” strives for a greater social market economy through easier access to the labour market and better social protection. This includes upskilling and reskilling workers, improving their working conditions and setting a minimum wage. This strategy also aims to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), deepen the economic and monetary union and complete the banking and capital markets union. In simpler terms, these objectives include strengthening the banking sector (e.g. to protect depositors in all EU countries, or to avoid taxpayer bailouts), as well as achieving



greater integration of financial markets in the EU (e.g. to facilitate cross-border transactions), making it easier for SMEs to raise funds and access capital. Ultimately, this would contribute to building a more resilient and stable financial sector.

Fourth, “A stronger Europe in the world”, is about strengthening partnerships on the global stage, securing open and fair trade agreements and promoting a rules-based global order. It is crucial that the European Union remains an important player on the world stage, both economically and politically.

The fifth strategy, “Promoting our European way of life”, aims to achieve a balance concerning legal migration. While it is important for the EU to defend human

rights, promote tolerance and social justice and provide security to people seeking international protection, it is equally important to ensure that Member States have the tools to better manage migration (i.e. better control of external borders, stricter time limits, faster and more efficient asylum, return and border procedures, integration of migration in European societies).

Sixth and last, “A new push for European democracy” aims to defend and strengthen democracy (i.e. deepening relations with the European Parliament and national parliaments), fighting foreign interference (e.g. cyber-attacks, espionage programs, disinformation campaigns) and protecting media freedom and pluralism.

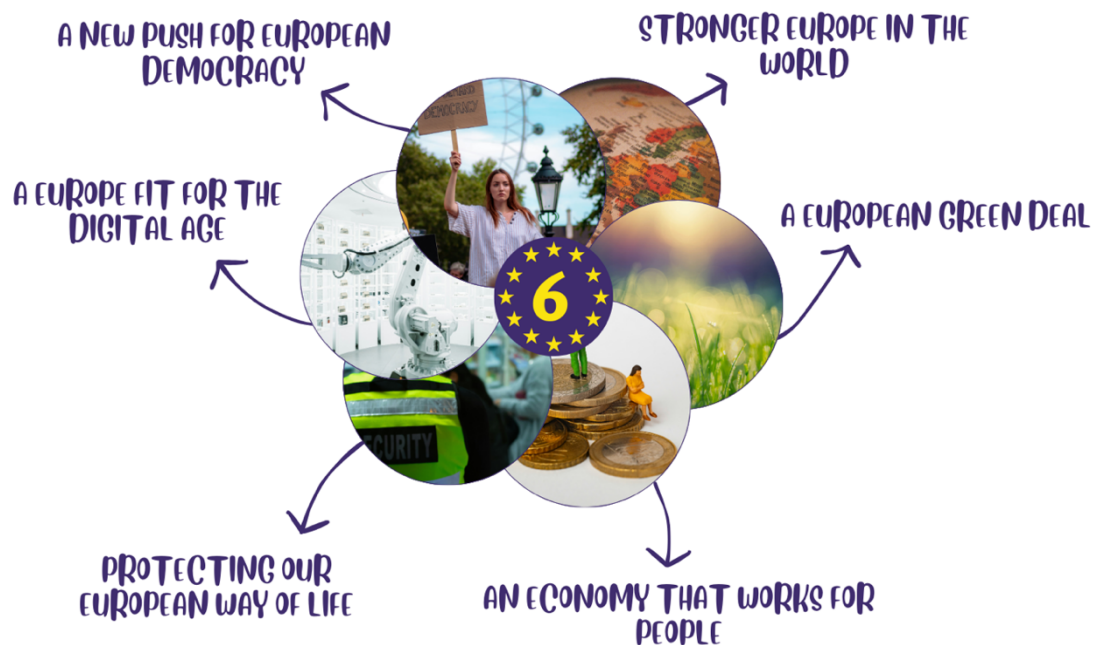


Figure 1 - The six priorities of von der Leyen's 2019-2024 Political Guidelines



Now that we've listed and explained the six 2019-2024 priorities, let's analyse them in more detail. In her policy guidelines document for her mandate, Ursula von der Leyen made several promises, set certain objectives and/or mentioned concrete

policies to be put forward. In the following section, we will discuss these key promises and assess whether the Commission has made progress towards the goals it has set for the European Union.

The 6 Priorities of “A Union That Strives for More”

A European Green Deal

Climate neutral

Ursula von der Leyen's strategy for a greener Europe revolved around five key points. Firstly, she wanted to ensure that Europe becomes the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. She promised to propose a European Green Deal in her first 100 days in office. And she kept her promise, as on December 11, 2019, the Commission presented a communication introducing the European Climate Law. Although the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) was revised in May 2023, its scope was only extended to the maritime sector. The transport (road transport) and construction (buildings) sectors will be included in the ETS2, the next version of this system, which is scheduled for 2026 or 2027¹. A few months later, on October 1, 2023, the Carbon Border Adjustment Tax (CBAM), a tool for setting a fair price for carbon-intensive non-EU goods that do not meet

EU climate standards, in order to encourage cleaner industrial production in these countries², came into force after years of negotiations between the Commission, the Parliament and the Council. However, many points of the Regulation will not apply before December 31, 2024 and January 1, 2026. The revision of the Energy Tax Directive, the law setting common minimum tax rates for energy products to reduce greenhouse gas emissions³, was not achieved. After the Commission presented a proposal in July 2021, it failed to get the Parliament and the Council on board, which led to a further delay in the legislative process until 2025. The reason for this disagreement was that technical and political complexities between Member States made it impossible to align the European tax framework with national tax systems. The primary reason being that EU Member States depend differently on fossil fuels, which threatens the economic competitiveness of some countries and raises concerns about the Directive's social impact on households.

¹ European Commission. (2024). What is the EU ETS? https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/eu-emissions-trading-system-eu-ets/what-eu-ets_en

² European Commission. (2024). Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/carbon-border-adjustment-mechanism_en

³ European Commission. (2024). Revision of the Energy Taxation Directive. https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/taxation/excise-taxes/revision-energy-taxation-directive_en



A just transition

Secondly, she emphasised the importance of working towards a just industrial transition. In March 2020, the new industrial strategy was presented, which was then updated in May 2021. The new plan aligned with the objectives of the EU Green Deal, aimed to help SMEs and strengthen the Single Market by monitoring 14 industrial ecosystems (e.g. healthcare, electronics, textiles, agri-food, etc.)⁴. One month later, the Just Transition Fund was set up, providing a total of €19.32 billion for the period 2021-2027. This was a program focused on regions and sectors, with those dependent on carbon-intensive industries benefiting from the funds to facilitate the transition to a green economy⁵. Her promise to propose a European climate law was also kept. Following the adoption of the 2030 Climate Target Plan in April 2021, the Regulation on the European Climate Law was adopted in June 2021. This law established a framework for achieving climate neutrality by 2050 by setting clear stages. Some included a legally binding target of zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, an EU-wide greenhouse gas emissions reduction trajectory for the period 2030-2050, or a commitment to negative emissions after 2050⁶. The

Commission must now submit a proposal for the new 2040 climate target plan.

A sustainable Europe investment plan

Thirdly, she wanted to support European sustainable finance and investment. In this respect, the Commission adopted the Sustainable Finance Strategy in July 2021. Recently, the Regulation on Prudential Requirements for Credit Institutions and Investment Firms replaced two proposals to amend the Capital Requirements Regulation and the Capital Requirements Directive respectively. The aim of this new legislation was to ensure that climate change-related risks are consistently integrated into banks' risk management systems. At the same time, the Sustainable Corporate Diligence Directive has also come into force, aimed at disseminating sustainable and responsible methods throughout the value chain of corporate activities⁷. Her promise to present a European sustainable investment plan aimed at supporting 1 trillion euros of sustainable investment over the next decade has also been kept⁸. This mobilisation aimed to finance climate-related projects such as transport (e.g. electric vehicles, electrification of public transport), clean energy (e.g. solar, hydrogen and wind power), circular economy projects (e.g.

⁴ European Commission. (2024). European industrial strategy. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-industrial-strategy_en

⁵ European Commission. (2024). Just Transition Fund. https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/just-transition-fund_en

⁶ European Commission. (2024). European Climate Law. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/european-climate-law_en

⁷ European Commission. (2024). Corporate sustainability due diligence. https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/sustainability-due-diligence-responsible-business/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en

⁸ European Commission. (2020). The European Green Deal Investment Plan and Just Transition Mechanism explained. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_24



recycling, waste reduction), ecosystems and food systems (e.g. marine protection, reforestation efforts, reducing pesticide use, improving soil health). vdL's proposal to transform part of the European Investment Bank (EIB) into a European Climate Bank has also become a reality. In the 2021-2025 roadmap [report](#), the EIB has pledged to devote at least 50% of its financing to climate action and the environment, and to mobilise €1 trillion in climate-related investments by 2030.

More ambitious targets for 2030

Fourthly, vdL encouraged other major emitters to go beyond the Paris Agreement by raising the 40% emissions reduction target for 2030 to 55%. She first ensured that the EU led the way by presenting the “Fit for 55” package in July 2021. This is a package of 13 proposals to revise legislation and six entirely new legislative proposals, covering the building, transport and energy sectors⁹. Although several proposals are still under negotiation, it is to be believed that the “Fit for 55” package has also led to the adoption of new legislation (e.g. ETS, CBAM, and the [Effort Sharing Regulation](#)). The Commission President then tried to influence others to take more action too. For example, the EU played an important role in the global methane commitment, has a long-standing partnership with India on Climate Action and Clean Energy,

supported developing countries through climate finance at COP 27, and launched the Africa-Europe Green Energy initiative in 2022¹⁰.

Preserving Europe's natural environment

Fifthly, she wanted to protect Europe's natural environment, making many promises. In May 2020, the Commission presented the new [Biodiversity Strategy 2030](#), setting out various objectives, which was voted favourably in Parliament in June 2021. However, to date, and as part of the biodiversity strategy, only the [Nature Restoration Law](#) was published in August 2024. The strategy's other central proposal (i.e. the revision of the 2009 [Directive on the sustainable use of pesticides](#)) has had to be withdrawn for two main reasons: Member States with large agricultural industries were concerned about the economic impact, and the agrochemical industry was lobbying, arguing that it would prevent farmers from producing as they do today. Other proposals, such as the [EU Soil Strategy 2030](#) and the revision of the 2008 [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#), are due to be negotiated and announced respectively. In May 2020, the “[Farm to Fork](#)” strategy was also adopted, comprising a total of 27 legislative measures to be implemented between 2020 and 2024. All legislation aimed to cover the entire food supply chain, from production (farm) to

⁹ EPRS. (2024). Fit for 55 Package. EP Think Tank. <https://epthinktank.eu/2024/08/01/fit-for-55-package/>

¹⁰ European Commission. (2024). EU at COP27 Climate Change Conference. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/climate-action-and-green-deal/eu-un-climate-change-conference/eu-cop27-climate-change-conference_en; European Commission. (2024). India. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/india_en; European Commission. (2024). Africa-Europe Green Energy. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/africa-europe-green-energy_en



consumption (fork), with an emphasis on sustainable, environmental and public health protection¹¹. However, several proposals scheduled for 2023 were not presented by the Commission, calling into question the future of the strategy.

A year later, in May 2021, the “Zero Pollution Act” was announced: “Chemical Strategy for Sustainability”, “Zero Pollution Action Plan for Water, Air and Soil”, and “Review of measures to combat pollution from large industrial installations”¹². As part of this action plan, the revision of ambient air quality legislation, the Urban Waste water Treatment Directive, as well as the Water Framework Directive, the Groundwater Directive and the Environmental Quality Standards Directive are about to be adopted. Only the Mercury Regulation has yet been adopted. The new

Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), also part of this section, was presented in March 2020 and focuses on sectors such as packaging, textiles, construction or food, among others¹³. Since then, the Commission has produced over ten proposals, ranging from batteries and waste shipment to goods repair. Some have already been adopted, such as the Batteries Regulation, the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), the Right to Repair Directive or the Regulation on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) of September 2023, which limits microplastics intentionally added to products. Others are still on the negotiating table, such as the revision of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive and the Construction Products Regulation.

Remarks

Overall, Ursula von der Leyen's Commission has produced a large number of legislative texts. The strategies, revisions to existing policies and new legislation form a solid basis for Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Her ambitious European Green Deal has been a landmark, and she managed to deliver 12 out of her 15 promises. The new European Climate Law, the introduction of the CBAM and the EIB's role in the European Climate Bank are all major achievements. But there are also shortcomings.

The revision of the Energy Taxation Directive, which is essential to bring taxation fully aligned with climate objectives, has been postponed until 2025, and the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS2) for the traffic and construction sectors will not be fully integrated until 2026/2027. The circular economy action plan is another example. The European Court of Auditors (ECA)

¹¹ European Commission. (2024). Farm to Fork strategy. https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

¹² European Commission. (2024). Zero Pollution Action Plan. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/zero-pollution-action-plan_en

¹³ European Commission. (2024). Circular economy action plan. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/circular-economy-action-plan_en



report shows that the policies have only led to a substantial increase in circular economy activities in the Member States, still far from matching the expectations of the Commission. Moreover, there is not even clear evidence that the Circular Economy Action Plan is correlated with the slight increase in circular economy activities. The ECA says that the 2030 targets to double the share of recycled materials look difficult to achieve. As for food and biodiversity, these are areas that have been somewhat neglected. Despite an ambitious new biodiversity strategy, only the Nature Restoration Act has been adopted. There is no doubt that initiatives to preserve Europe's ecosystems have not progressed as planned.

In addition, several proposals forming part of the “Farm to Fork” strategy planned for 2023 have been delayed or have not been presented. As a result, there has been no innovation in food systems, and no support for farmers making the transition to environmentally-friendly practices. What's more, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is currently out of step with the aims of the Green Deal. The necessary changes in the agricultural sector are therefore not fully taken into account. One recommendation, made in the report by the Institute for European Environmental Policy, could be to create an emissions trading scheme, as exists for roads and transport, for the agri-food sector, a heavy carbon footprint sector. Making polluters pay for the carbon they emit would therefore considerably reduce pollution and biodiversity loss, while promoting sustainable production and consumption through incentives for farmers.

Finally, the actual implementation of these policies by Member States has often been delayed. France, for example, has had difficulty implementing the ‘farmer to consumer’ policy¹⁴. Bulgaria has also found it difficult to comply with EU policies on energy efficiency, particularly in the building sector¹⁵. Germany has been criticised for its slowness in reducing the use of pesticides¹⁶. Poland has even taken legal action against some of the legislation in the ‘Fit for 55’ package (land use and forestry law, new rules on car emissions, law on pollution allowances in the EU's carbon market stability reserve)¹⁷. Although work is still needed in various areas of the EU's Green Deal, the Commission could move forward by helping Member States to effectively implement the policies they have developed. The next step would be to put in place mechanisms that take into account the political, social and economic needs of specific countries, to ensure that national and local actors play their part.

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¹⁴ Trompiz, G., La Hamaide, S. (2024). Why are farmers protesting in France and other parts of Europe? Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-are-french-farmers-protesting-2024-01-29>

¹⁵ European Commission. (2024). Commission publishes new Recommendations on draft National Energy and Climate Plans from Bulgaria and Poland. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-publishes-new-recommendations-draft-national-energy-and-climate-plans-bulgaria-and-poland-2024-04-26_en

¹⁶ Cavallito, M. (2023). Germany, the reduction in the use of pesticides is still too slow. Resoil Foundation. <https://resoilfoundation.org/en/agricultural-industry/germany-pesticides-reduction>

¹⁷ Taylor, K. (2023). Poland files lawsuit against key EU climate policies. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/poland-files-lawsuit-against-key-eu-climate-policies>



A Europe Fit for the Digital Age

Digital age within safe and ethical boundaries

Ursula von der Leyen promised to publish a coordinated European approach to the human and ethical implications of AI within her first 100 days. She has kept her promise by making the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI available in November 2019. When it comes to AI funding, a significant amount comes from the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027. Indeed, several programs under the MFF have allocated billions to AI, such as the Digital Europe Program, Horizon Europe, InvestEU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), and even the Connecting Europe Facility. The EU could also count on public-private investments, such as the EIB's co-investment of €150 million in 2020. She also promised to regulate the digital market. She announced a Digital Services Act (DSA), which she presented in October 2022. Its complementary tool, the Digital Markets Act (DMA), was published a month earlier. Together, the DSA and the DMA aim respectively to protect the fundamental rights of users of digital services and to promote fairness and competitiveness within the European Single Market¹⁸. Finally, the digital transformation of the Commission itself is difficult to assess. However, it is worth noting that in June 2022, the Commission published a

strategic plan to support the implementation of a Digital Commission. This strategy is built around five main axes: digital partnerships, interaction, empowerment, sovereignty and autonomy, and security and resilience.

Empowering people through education and skills

Building on the 2018-2020 action plan, the Commission proposed the new Digital Education Plan 2021-2027 (DEAP) in September 2020. Thirteen actions have been defined, revolving around two pillars: fostering the development of a high-performance digital education ecosystem and strengthening digital skills and competencies for digital transformation¹⁹. Implementation of each of the DEAP actions is either completed (4 actions completed) or underway (9 actions underway). Last year, in April 2023, the European Commission also issued two recommendations, one on the key elements of digital education and the other on improving digital skills in education and training. This year, the Commission is expected to present its assessment of the DEAP and propose modifications and/or additional measures if necessary. In order to support students' experience and formation, the Commission also revised the Erasmus + budget. vdL promised to triple the budget, but failed to do so. It increased by 78.2% instead of 200%, going up to 26.2

¹⁸ European Commission. (2024). The Digital Services Act. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en; European Commission. (2024). The Digital Markets Act. https://digital-markets-act.ec.europa.eu/index_en

¹⁹ European Commission. (2024). Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027). <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>



billion for the 2021-2027 period, compared to 14.7 billion for the 2014-2020 period.

Remarks

In the field of AI, the EU has taken numerous steps, the most important being the adoption of the world's first-ever AI law: the EU AI Act. Depending on the risk level of its AI system (minimal, limited, high and unacceptable risk), the company developing it is subject to certain rules such as compliance and risk assessment, cybersecurity requirements, mitigation systems, human monitoring or prohibition of the AI system. In early 2024, the Commission also presented its AI innovation package to support innovators and startups. Yet AI is just one disruptive technology among many, such as data, the Internet of Things (IoT), smart cities, robotics, supercomputing, cloud computing, blockchain, Fintech, quantum, Web 4.0 and virtual worlds. In this respect, the Commission has proposed some very interesting legislation aimed either at harnessing the full potential of these technologies, or at regulating them. Examples include the Regulation on Markets in crypto-assets, the Regulation on a pilot regime for market infrastructure based on DLT, the Data Governance Act or the Data Act. The Commission has also taken concrete steps, such as the creation of Simpl, the open-source platform supporting data access and interoperability between the European data spaces defined in the Data Act²⁰. The EU's supercomputing capacity of 500 machines has almost doubled since 2018. To date, the EU is home to nine supercomputers under the EuroHPC Joint Undertaking (LUMI in Finland, LEONARDO in Italy, MARENOSTRUM in Spain, MELUXINA in Luxembourg, KAROLINA in the Czech Republic, DISCOVERER in Bulgaria, VEGA in Slovenia, DEUCALION in Portugal and JUPITER in Germany), three of which rank among the top ten in the world²¹.

However, a key critic is that too much legislation was aimed at regulating to protect European values (i.e. human rights, freedom, equality, the rule of law, democracy) or filling legal loopholes, rather than promoting an innovative environment. Yet, growth and innovation are essential in the technology sector. This complex regulatory landscape, with its overlaps but also fragmentation, legal uncertainty, misinterpretation or poor implementation, contributes to holding back the potential of European industry. In addition, the European workforce is severely lacking in digital skills, a problem that the Digital Education Action is expected to solve. Using data from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) to assess the level of DEAP success, improvements are observed. For example, from 2022 to 2024, the number of individuals with at least basic digital skills increased (from 53.92% to 55.56%), as did the number

²⁰ European Commission. (2024). Simpl: Cloud-to-edge federations empowering EU data spaces. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/simpl>

²¹ European Commission. (2024). Our supercomputers. https://eurohpc-ju.europa.eu/supercomputers/our-supercomputers_en



of individuals with skills above basic (from 26.46% to 27.32%) and the number of ICT graduates (from 3.90% to 4.50%). Given that the level of implementation varies according to differences in digital infrastructure and resources, it is also relevant to examine the state of digital infrastructure and the digitization of businesses and public services. Again according to DESI, from 2020 to 2024, Internet usage increased (from 89.68% to 93.03%), as did 5G spectrum (from 20.42% to 73.40%), the number of unicorns (from 98 to 263), electronic information sharing in businesses (from 35.90% to 43.30%) and digital public services for citizens (from 76.90 to 79.44). As set in the Digital Targets for 2030, the percentage of individuals with basic digital skills should be at 80% (+24.44%), the number of unicorns should be around 450 (+187), and everyone should have access to key public services (+20.56%).

So, even if these figures look good, they're not enough to enable the EU to achieve its objectives. This poses a direct threat to the EU's competitiveness and its hopes of being at the forefront of technological innovation and competing with the USA and China. The number of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates remains too low. Yet it is crucial to have these experts available in critical areas such as cloud computing, cybersecurity, AI or software development. The gap between the skilled workers needed and those available in the current workforce is also still too wide, and the EU's investment in R&D does not allow it to attract the world's best talent. So, while Ursula von der Leyen has kept her promises, she should now intensify and accelerate work on digital literacy, innovation clusters, talent creation and attracting experts.

An Economy That Works for People

Supporting Small Businesses

There are 25 million micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the EU²². That's 99% of all EU businesses, employing 100 million people and generating around 56% of the EU's total

GDP²³. To make Europe a more attractive place to start and grow small businesses, the Commission presented an SME strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe in March 2020, which is based on three pillars²⁴. Firstly, to support the green and digital transitions, the Commission has set up European Digital Innovation Hubs. They act as bridges between businesses, the public sector and other relevant stakeholders to promote collaboration and

²² Statista. (2024). Number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the European Union from 2008 to 2024, by number of enterprises. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/878412/number-of-smes-in-europe-by-size/>

²³ Eurostat. (2023). Micro & small businesses make up 99% of enterprises in the EU. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20241025-1>

²⁴ European Union. (2021). An SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe. <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/european-initiatives/sme-strategy-sustainable-and-digital-europe>



knowledge transfer. They also allow companies to test technologies before making major investments and provide training to improve the digital skills of their employees. Secondly, to reduce the regulatory burden and improve market access, SMEs can receive support and advice through the Enterprise Europe Network and facilitate market access through Small Business Standards. Thirdly, to improve access to finance, vdl promised to set up a public-private fund dedicated to the shares that SMEs can make available to the public for the first time, i.e. initial public offerings (IPOs). While efforts have been made to improve the Capital Markets Union (CMU), no specific fund for IPOs have been proposed. At best, the Commission published a report in October 2020 concluding that EU intervention was needed before, during and after the IPO.

Deepening the Economic and Monetary Union

Ursula von der Leyen promised to support reforms, public investment, stability and growth. Her work continued in the same direction as the proposal establishing the Reform Support Programme, introduced in May 2018 by the previous Commission, to support Member States with priority reforms with a budget of €25 billion²⁵. The objectives were to provide financial support for reforms (Reform Implementation Tool), to provide technical expertise (Technical

Support Instrument) and to help Member States prepare to join the euro (Convergence Facility). In June 2019, the proposal for a Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness, a financial instrument of around €17 billion that Member States can use for reforms and public investment, was also introduced²⁶. However, both proposals were withdrawn because of the pandemic crisis and the urgent need to act. The Commission replaced them with the RRF and the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) in February 2021. The RRF finances reforms and investments for EU countries until December 2026, to make their economies stronger, more resilient and more sustainable, and to prepare them for the green and digital transitions. By February 2024, €225 billion had been used to fund cohesion, digital, health and other projects, out of a total of €648 billion in available funds²⁷. The TSI is the tool that provides expertise to Member States to guide them in the design and implementation of reforms. For example, Member States can request support in implementing the new Pact on Migration and Asylum by asking the TSI to provide analysis and recommendations to help them prepare their national implementation plans.

The Commission also worked on economic stability and growth, focusing on the Stability and Growth Pact, a set of rules designed to manage the public finances of

²⁵ European Commission. (2018). The Reform Support Programme and the European Investment Stabilisation Function explained. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sl/memo_18_3971

²⁶ European Commission. (2019). Commission proposes a governance framework for the Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_19_4372

²⁷ European Union. (2024). Recovery and Resilience Facility. https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en



EU countries in order to make economic conditions more stable. The Pact began to be reviewed in February 2020, and a proposal for reform was presented in November 2022. The aim of the proposal was to improve the effectiveness of the economic governance framework, the tool that helps Member States achieve their economic and fiscal policy objectives. This is an urgent necessity, given the alarming levels of debt in some countries (e.g. Belgium, France, Greece, Italy and Poland) and the need to update the rules. Discussions were held on an ongoing basis and measures were taken, such as with the activation of the General Escape Clause in 2020. This was a tool enabling countries to spend more without breaching the deficit and debt limits in response to the pandemic (the deficit must be kept below 3% of gross domestic product and the national debt below 60% of GDP). However, the economic situation remains problematic and a more pro-growth fiscal stance has not been adopted. One of the arguments put forward is that governments are still responsible for budgetary policies, but are unable to reach agreement because of conflicts of interest. This directly undermines the work of the Commission, which sees its work significantly modified by the Council, reducing the scope and impact of legislation.

Banking Union is another key aspect of ensuring economic stability and integrity. It is a set of banking policies initially managed by the Member States, but which were transferred to the EU level after the 2008 financial crisis and the 2009 eurozone

crisis. Its foundations are the Single Supervisory Mechanism and the Single Resolution Mechanism. Together, they form the two pillars of the Banking Union, giving the European Central Bank powers over the EU's financial system and creating a central institution responsible for ensuring that the failure of a bank does not harm the economy as a whole or cause financial instability. The Single Resolution Fund, part of the SRM Regulation, enhances the effectiveness of bank resolution with minimal cost to taxpayers and the economy, which vdL has pledged to continue supporting. In this respect, the Eurogroup (i.e. the finance ministers of the EU countries) has agreed that the European Stabilisation Mechanism will support the SRF as a mechanism of last resort (i.e. if the SRF runs out of funds or in the event of a major crisis). Von der Leyen also promised to complete the Banking Union, referring to its third pillar, the European Deposit Insurance Scheme (EDIS), which was proposed in 2015 and has still not been completed. The Commission has also proposed to review the banking crisis management and deposit guarantee framework in 2023, to work on issues such as taking into account national and regional levels when assessing disruptions to the economy, and to make the framework more robust and credible. Despite the Commission's 2015 EDIS proposal and the 2023 proposal, discussions continue in the Council as governments are unable to reach agreement. Countries with strong national deposit systems, such as Germany, fear that stronger banking sectors will end up covering the risks of weaker sectors. They



are therefore not dissociating their banking systems, which is preventing the completion of the Banking Union.

Finally, the President of the Commission also affirmed her determination to strengthen the euro's international role. The reality is that it has remained fairly stable rather than improving, remaining the second most important currency in the international monetary system and raising interest rates, while indicators, such as outstanding international deposits and loans, and global currency exchanges, are tending to decline²⁸.

To coordinate all this work, in 2010 the EU set up the European Semester, under which the Member States meet once a year to discuss their economic and budgetary plans and priorities. In June 2024, the Commission published the European Semester Spring Package, which focuses on long-term competitiveness, macroeconomic stability (i.e. the performance and behaviour of the economy as a whole), and structural change and challenges. As promised, it also examines progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2020, particularly in the country-specific recommendations (i.e. reports addressing recommendations directly to a specific country). In fact, the Commission has started to use the SDG indicators in monitoring the performance of Member States, such as poverty reduction (SDG 1),

education (SDG 4) and climate action (SDG 13). The Parliament has also been empowered, but with certain limitations. The European Parliament has access to a platform to examine and discuss these reports and their recommendations. The Parliament was also involved in the creation of NextGenerationEU, the recovery fund to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. However, the EP's influence on fiscal and economic decision-making remains limited by the treaties, which means that MEPs have little influence on major decisions (e.g. Eurogroup decisions, the ESM, the Stability and Growth Pact).

Europe's social pillar

With regard to social rights, the Commission presented an Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights in March 2021, setting out 20 principles organised around three chapters: more and better jobs and equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. The plan aimed to achieve a 78% employment rate by 2030, a 60% participation rate in annual adult training by 2030, and a 15 million reduction in poverty and social exclusion²⁹. In terms of specific actions, the Commission worked on improving employment opportunities and conditions for young people through the reinforced Youth Guarantee. The aim was to respond to the criticisms levelled at the previous version of the Youth Guarantee by helping young people to continue their

²⁸ ECB. (2024). The international role of the euro. <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/ire/ecb.ire202406-0b56ba4f71.en.pdf>

²⁹ European Commission. (2024). European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en



studies, take part in skills enhancement programs and find apprenticeships and traineeships³⁰. It also facilitated youth organisations' access to the European Social Fund + (ESF+).

Ursula von der Leyen also promised to work towards the creation of a European Unemployment Benefit Reinsurance Scheme to protect and support the unemployed. However, this was never presented due to the complexity of the negotiations and the fact that, at the same time, the 2020 pandemic required an immediate, large-scale response. As a result, it was replaced by the temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency in 2020, as part of the response to the pandemic. It was intended to provide financial assistance of up to €100 billion to Member States needing to cope with increased public spending to safeguard employment.

The Commission President also promised to present a law guaranteeing a minimum wage for workers in the Union. This is the Adequate Minimum Wage Directive, proposed in October 2020 and adopted two years later. The aims are to introduce clear criteria for setting minimum wage rates, align wage growth rates with increases in the cost of living, and a collective bargaining coverage target of 80%³¹. To support this objective, the March 2021 Recommendation on European Child Guarantee was

presented, advocating access for children in need to a range of key services (e.g. access to appropriate housing, healthy food, education with school-based activities). The Commission has also encouraged the implementation of the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive, which grants rights such as paternity leave, parental leave and carer's leave, as well as flexible working arrangements. In September 2022, after noting that eleven countries had not fully transposed the Directive, the Commission sent them a reasoned opinion. Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Spain were given two months to comply. In November 2023, Belgium, Ireland and Spain were referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) for failure to transpose the Directive, and will have to go to court to face possible fines.

Finally, Ursula von der Leyen's last promise was fulfilled when Europe's Beating Cancer Plan was presented in February 2021. This plan aims to support, coordinate and complement the efforts of Member States at the stages of prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment, as well as to improve the lives of cancer patients and survivors³². As part of this plan, a new Council Recommendation on cancer screening, offering breast, cervical and colorectal cancer screenings to the qualified population by 2025, was presented in 2022,

³⁰ European Commission. (2024). The reinforced Youth Guarantee. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/youth-employment-support/reinforced-youth-guarantee_en

³¹ European Commission. (2024). Adequate minimum wages in the EU. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/rights-work/labour-law/working-conditions/adequate-minimum-wages-eu_en

³² European Commission. (2024). A cancer plan for Europe. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-of-life/european-health-union/cancer-plan-europe_en



as well as a Directive protecting workers from exposure to asbestos in the workplace, a mineral used in many industries, in November 2023. Proposals for recommendations on vaccine-preventable cancers and smoke-free environments are currently under discussion.

A Union of equality

Ursula von der Leyen has promised to promote gender equality in the European Union. Although there was no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, the Commission communicated the gender strategy in March 2020 and has been very active in its fight against gender inequality. In 2022, it finalised the Directive on improving gender balance on company boards, which sets quotas for the number of women and men in company management positions. In line with this objective, she has ensured equality at all levels of Commission management positions, with a percentage of 48.5% women by 2024, and 44% female representation in the College of Commissioners for the period 2019-2024³³. As part of her promise on gender equality, the Directive on pay transparency was adopted in 2023. It aims to promote equality for equal work between men and women in the private and public sectors, before and during employment, as well as the employer's obligation to communicate information on gender equality within the company (e.g. the gender pay gap, including bonuses and benefits, the proportion of men and women). However, the first report

is due in 2027, or 2031 if the company has between 100 and 149 employees.

Another important achievement was the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention in October 2023, following the CJEU ruling that the EU could accede to the convention without the consent of all Member States and a year of pressure from the European Parliament. The first legal tool developed at EU level, the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, was then adopted in 2024, condemning online and offline violence and strengthening victim protection, access to justice and support. One objective that was not achieved, however, was the addition of violence against women to the European Treaty. Although the Commission and Parliament strongly advocated this addition in order to provide legal protection for women, Member States disagree on the definition of this notion, on what should be considered violence against women, and on the extent of the EU's involvement in national criminal law.

Fair taxation

Another of Ursula von der Leyen's crucial objectives concerned corporate taxation in the EU. The Commission's aim was to tackle the tax practices of multinational companies, strengthen cooperation between Member States and combat tax fraud. In addition to existing legislation, such as the 2016 ATAD Directive and the 2017 ATAD Directive (Anti-Tax Avoidance

³³ Apelbat, M. (2024). Gender equality: Will the new European Commission achieve its goal? Brussels Times. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/1169604/1169604>



Directives), the Commission worked to complete the tax regulatory landscape. During vdL's first term, the Directive on Administrative Cooperation (DAC), which aims to combat tax evasion by encouraging the exchange of information, has been amended twice. Once in 2021, with DAC7, which focuses on information sharing by digital platforms, and a second time in 2023, with DAC8, which extends tax transparency rules to crypto-asset transactions. The 2021 Country-by-Country Reporting Directive requires multinationals to publish the taxes paid in each EU country, and the 2022 Minimum Corporate Taxation sets a global minimum of 15% for companies and has been agreed with the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD). vdL has also pledged its support for the 2016 proposal for a Common

Corporate Tax Base. As the Council was unable to reach agreement on this dossier, it remained blocked. The Commission therefore worked on a new proposal for a new legislative framework for corporate taxation, which proposes a single tax base to harmonise national taxes in EU countries for members of the same group. This dossier is currently under discussion in Parliament and the Council. The European Commission has also made considerable efforts to combat tax fraud, with the launch of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) in 2021. Working closely with Eurojust, Europol and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), EPPO combats cross-border VAT fraud and other types of fraud affecting the EU's financial interests.

Remarks

Overall, the priority of improving the economic situation to create a more stable environment more conducive to SME expansion, while ensuring fair taxation and creating better social policies where women and men are equally represented, cannot be considered a success. This is not due to the fact that the Commission has not kept its promises or has proposed ineffective solutions, but mainly to the complexity of the issues and the unanimity required between Member States for the adoption of a large majority of the legislation.

One of the most difficult parts of this priority was in regards to fair taxation. Given the very complex nature of 27 decentralised and different tax systems, vdL's Commission has been trying to fill the gaps in transparency, collaboration and enforcement. The Commission has also been heavily involved in state aid investigations. But the results of the decisions have often run counter to the Commission's conclusions. For example, in 2019, the General Court of the EU rejected rulings that Starbucks had benefited from illegal tax advantages in the



Netherlands³⁴. In 2023, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that Amazon did not benefit from state aid³⁵. Yet, more recently, in September 2024, the CJEU ruled that Apple had benefited from state aid in Ireland and fined it €13 billion³⁶. This was a landmark decision, prompting the Commission to continue its efforts to ensure that multinationals pay their taxes. Similarly, her work to deepen the Economic and Monetary Union has been difficult. Whereas the Recovery and Resilience Facility has been a good response to the common challenges faced by EU countries (e.g. energy crisis, COVID-19, socio-economic issues), and has helped to support green and digital transformations, it has also led to some problems. For example, the pace of financial progress is not constant, targets are difficult to achieve, grant allocations need to be revised, leading to delays in payment claims and impacting on the speed and cost of implementation. The effectiveness of the reforms is another point of contention, with varying levels of effectiveness and progress. The main factors are communication, lack of technical capacity and skilled personnel, labour shortages and disruption to supply chains and logistics. The European Semester could be the solution. However, it seems that the recommendations, particularly those relating to macroeconomic imbalances, made by the Commission are not always implemented, which undermines the effectiveness and relevance of the European Semester reports. With regard to the Banking Union and the international role of the euro, while the backstop of the Single Resolution Fund has been approved and completed, the Banking Union lacks its centrepiece, EDIS. This means that in the event of a major bank failure, the EU will be very vulnerable due to its fragmentation. It is essential that governments show greater commitment to strengthening the banking union before the next financial crisis erupts.

Another important point in her 2019-2024 political guidelines was to improve the conditions for SMEs to scale up in Europe. The Commission worked on the development of tools to overcome, or at least provide assistance, regarding the complexity of the regulatory landscape and recover from difficult shocks (i.e. Covid-19, war in Ukraine, international trade tensions). According to the SME Performance Review 2023-2024, despite inflation still being a problem, employment grew (+1.8%) and has fully recovered from the pandemic, the number of SMEs is growing (+2.2%), and growth rates are positive. The EU must keep on its efforts to help SMEs, if not do more and deliver its missing part; a private-public fund to support IPOs.

With the aim of creating a more integrated Union, but in the face of considerable criticism, the EU has been working on the CMU, which aims to improve the flow of capital, raise funds more

³⁴ Rios, B. (2019). EU justice dismisses Starbucks tax ruling case, upholds Fiat. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/competition/news/eu-justice-dismisses-starbucks-tax-ruling-case-upholds-fiat/>; DW. (2019). EU court rules in Starbucks' favor in tax dispute. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-court-rules-in-starbucks-favor-in-tax-dispute/a-50558612>

³⁵ Adriaansen, P. Et al. (2023). EU top court confirms Amazon and Luxembourg win in EU state aid case. Loyens Loeff. <https://www.loyensloeff.com/insights/news--events/news/eu-top-court-confirms-amazon-and-luxembourg-win-in-eu-state-aid-case/>

³⁶ van Dam, H., et al. (2024). CJEU rules against Apple in landmark State aid case. <https://www.loyensloeff.com/insights/news--events/news/cjeu-rules-against-apple-in-landmark-state-aid-case/>



easily across borders, and reduce dependence on bank financing by diversifying funding sources (e.g. crowdfunding, venture, equity markets). Over the past few years, the Commission has drawn up a new CMU action plan, proposing 16 actions based on three pillars: making financing more accessible to EU businesses, making the EU a safer place to save and invest for the long term, and integrating national capital markets into a Single Market. For example, in 2021, the Commission presented four legislative dossiers: a Regulation establishing the European Single Access Point, a Regulation amending the European Long-Term Investment Funds, a Regulation amending financial market instruments and a Directive guaranteeing greater transparency, which were published in 2023 and 2024. Yet capital markets remain highly fragmented and have not been sufficiently deepened. The measures taken by von der Leyen will only take effect in a few years' time, and the measures taken previously in 2015 have not materialised or produced the expected results. A great deal of work and collaboration is therefore required to achieve this.

Ursula von der Leyen's social priority is difficult to assess in terms of responsibility, as the Commission has no direct competence to adopt social issues such as employment, social protection or working conditions. Instead, it proposes recommendations, which have no legally binding status and are implemented by EU countries. Yet vdL's Commission has achieved good results in social policy through coordination efforts and non-binding funding mechanisms. The European Social Fund +, worth some 99 billion euros, supports youth employment, childcare, social inclusion and skills development. What's more, the targets set by the European Commission are achievable, and EU populations are on the right track. Employment has risen by almost 5% since the 2020 pandemic, reaching 75.3% in 2023³⁷. This is just 2.7% short of the target set for 2030. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion represent 95.1 million EU citizens, or 21.3%³⁸. By 2030, there should be no more than 80 million, reducing the number to around 17.9%. Wage growth also increased by 1.07%, from January 2020 to January 2024³⁹. Working conditions should also continue to improve in order to adapt to changes in the labour market, namely a growing number of women and a more skilled but ageing workforce. However, it is important to bear in mind that economic turmoil and inflation constantly threaten the stability of the labour market, which could have an impact on the long-term targets set by the Commission for 2030. As with the Work-Life Balance Directive, and given its limited capacity to legislate, the Commission must continue to supervise Member States to ensure that they apply the strongest national commitments on these issues, and that they implement social policies in a comprehensive and uniform manner.

Regarding the fight for women's rights, protection and equality in European societies, the Commission has done considerable work. According to the Gender Equality Index, equality between women and men has steadily improved since 2013, rising from 63.1 in 2013 to 70.2 in

³⁷ Eurostat. (2024). Social Scoreboard. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/dashboard/social-scoreboard/>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ ECB. (2024). Wages and salaries, Euro area 20 (fixed composition) as of 1 January 2023, Quarterly. <https://shorturl.at/pkoDP>



2013 (100 meaning full equality). Internally, its 50/50 target was almost achieved by the end of its first term. However, where action needs to be taken outside the Commission's control, gender balance remains a challenge and improvements need to be made. The [2024 report on equality between women and men in the EU](#) shows that women are represented at just over 30% in national parliaments, 33.4% among senior ministers, 40% in the European Parliament, just over 20% in the EU's financial institutions and between 15% and 40% in large companies (depending on whether the company has adopted non-binding measures, quotas or no quotas). These results are part of a wider context in which Member States are reluctant to change and are unable to reach agreement. For example, violence against women has not been added to the list of EU crimes in Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), mainly because EU countries have been unable to reach a consensus. In addition, six EU countries have not ratified the convention: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. Poland has also announced its intention to withdraw from the Convention, but nothing has yet been enacted.

A Stronger Europe in the World

Free and fair trade

When it comes to trade, Ursula von der Leyen logically called for a closer relationship with one of the EU's most important allies: the United States. After a period of trade tensions and tariff disputes under the Trump administration, relations have improved under the Biden administration⁴⁰. In 2021, two major disputes were resolved: no more harmful tariffs on Airbus and Boeing for five years and the suspension of tariffs on steel and aluminium⁴¹. In 2021, the two partners launched the EU-US Trade and Technology

Council (TTC), which serves as a coordination platform for important global trade, economic and technology issues, to discuss areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. In view of deepening its transatlantic economic relationship based on shared democratic values, the EU pushed for the promotion of green technologies and a circular economy, and also worked on the introduction of a global minimum tax rate of 15% for companies in 2024⁴².

The Commission has also concluded Fair Trade Agreements (FTAs) with other countries outside of Europe, notably with Singapore and Vietnam, and is also discussing new agreements (e.g. Mercosur,

⁴⁰ Adebahr, C., et al. (2022). How the Transatlantic Relationship Has Evolved, One Year Into the Biden Administration. Carnegie. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/01/how-the-transatlantic-relationship-has-evolved-one-year-into-the-biden-administration?lang=en>

⁴¹ European Commission. (2021). Press Release: EU and U.S. agree to suspend all tariffs linked to the Airbus and Boeing disputes. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1047

⁴² European Commission. (2025). Minimum Corporate Taxation. https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/taxation/business-taxation/minimum-corporate-taxation_en



India, Thailand and the Philippines). Such FTAs are aimed at reducing barriers to the importation and exportation of goods (e.g. reducing or eliminating tariffs, subsidies, quotas, prohibition). More importantly, vdL promised to conclude bilateral agreements with New Zealand and Australia. A free trade agreement has been concluded with New Zealand and was signed in June 2023. This 27-chapter agreement covered sustainable food systems, cross-border data flows, animal welfare, energy and raw materials, among other things. The second FTA promised, with Australia, was suspended in October 2023, despite six years of work and the conclusion of agreements. No clear explanation has been given, but one reason could be that the EU and Australia traditionally behave in a protectionist way, which makes trade relations very difficult. Negotiations are not expected to be reopened before 2025. When it comes to transparency and sustainability requirements, the Commission has apparently also made considerable efforts. In fact, Chapter 19 of the bilateral agreement with New Zealand, Chapter 12 of the FTA with Singapore and Chapter 13 of the FTA with Vietnam are dedicated to sustainable development. The Commission also made available reports on negotiation rounds, information on meetings and dialogues as well as position papers and decisions. It is also important to note that sixteen events, including civil society dialog meetings, have taken place to provide responses to ongoing individual

negotiations and the EU's overall trade agenda.

However, it can also be argued that while considerable transparency efforts have been made during the negotiation phase, there is still room for improvement to increase transparency in the implementation phase, despite the phase being strengthened. In fact, the appointment of a Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO) in July 2020, Mr Denis Redonnet, was the first ever EU CTEO appointed, making sure that the trade rules are well implemented and enforced with the trading partners of the EU⁴³. Some of his tasks are to ensure that the EU has effective tools to settle investment disputes and protect itself from coercive measures, guarantee that trading partner countries respect the commitments they have made, launch investigations when more information on potential trade barriers is needed, or coordinate dispute settlement procedures between the EU and non-EU countries, for example in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO)⁴⁴.

Furthermore, one of vdL's goals was to lead the reform of the WTO which had been criticised for years for its inability to achieve consensus among its 164 members. This has prevented the organisation from updating and adapting the rules of multilateral trading systems to contemporary challenges, as well as resolving disputes, dealing with violations and countering

⁴³ European Commission. (2024). Chief Trade Enforcement Officer. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/chief-trade-enforcement-officer_en

⁴⁴ Reed Smith. (2020). European Commission appoints its first Chief Trade Enforcement Officer. <https://www.reedsmith.com/en/perspectives/2020/08/european-commission-appoints-its-first-chief-trade-enforcement-officer>



protectionist measures. She wanted the EU to play a key role in lifting the organisation out of its existential crisis by updating trade rules, tackling unfair trade practices and setting labour and sustainability standards for trade agreements. Given the importance of the WTO (75% of world trade is subject to the rules set by the international trade organisation), this was a very important goal. To this end, the EU has put forward several reform proposals, such as those listed in the 2018 Concept Paper and the 2023 communication to address current policy challenges, which cover transparency, state-owned enterprises, state intervention, digital trade or inclusiveness. Initiatives have also been taken, such as the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement, which introduces an alternative dispute settlement system, or the talks for stricter requirements in the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade as part of the ninth triennial review. These measures reflect the EU's ambition to strengthen its leadership role, defend universal values and reform multilateral systems accordingly, as stated in the 2021 Joint Communication on the contribution to rules-based multilateralism.

A more active role

An important task for vdL was the partnership with the UK. In the 2019-2024 guidelines, her position was to maintain the Brexit agreement between the EU and the

UK, or “Withdrawal Agreement”, as it stood after its finalisation in October 2019. She argued that the deal, which covers separation issues, the financial settlement, UK and EU citizens' rights, Ireland, Cyprus and Gibraltar, was good enough. However, tensions had arisen during the transition period, with the EU and UK unable to agree on issues such as the free movement of people or, more importantly, the Northern Ireland Protocol. There have also been repeated delays in checks on goods moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, after the UK requested grace periods in 2021 and 2022. In 2023, the “Windsor Framework” was negotiated, adjusting certain parts of the NIP, such as the easing of customs controls on goods from Britain, but keeping the basic structure of the Washington Agreement as it was. In fact, the EU never agreed to renegotiate the fundamental aspects of the agreement. And when the UK threatened to override the Withdrawal Agreement as a treaty, the EU considered this a violation of international law and took legal action against the UK⁴⁵.

The second goal for Ursula von der Leyen was to establish a strategy with Africa. The communication on this strategy was published in March 2020, expressing the need to establish a partnership in five areas: green transition and access to energy, digital transformation, sustainable growth and employment, peace and governance, and migration and mobility. Then, following

⁴⁵ European Commission. (2022). Press Release: Commission launches infringement proceedings against the UK for breaking international law and provides further details on possible solutions to facilitate the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3676; Fella, S. (2022). The Northern Ireland Protocol: EU legal action against the UK. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-northern-ireland-protocol-eu-legal-action-against-the-uk/>



the cancellation of the 6th EU-AU (African Union) Summit in 2021, the two Unions met in February 2022 to agree on a common vision for 2030. Together, they agreed on a common vision to renew the partnership until 2030. For example, they agreed on a budget of 150 billion euros (through the Global Gateway) to support the AU's Agenda 2063 in its work towards an equitable energy transition, digital transformation and sustainable growth on the African continent.

Regarding the Western Balkans (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia), the president of the Commission, who wanted to increase relations with the region, participated in four EU-Western Balkans summits (2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023). These meetings represented the opportunity to discuss migration and financial assistance, to address disinformation campaigns and organised crime or to support the green and digital transitions. With its commitment to the enlargement process, a particular emphasis was also given to the need of these countries to carry out reforms to achieve the respect of European values and principles. In this respect, the Commission has been very active. In January 2020, it communicated a new methodology for the EU accession process, making the Western Balkans a priority, but also making the new merit-based enlargement process more dynamic and political. Two months later, the Commission also presented its new “Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020”, an agreement to increase cooperation with

the EU's six Eastern partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) on specific themes (e.g. rule of law, climate). In September 2021, the EC also adopted the new Instrument for Pre-Assistance (IPA III), which defines who should benefit from this aid, for what purpose and how the 7-year, €14.62 billion program should achieve this. As part of this budget, the €6 billion new growth plan has been adopted for the period 2024-2027. This plan aims to stimulate economic integration with the EU and within the Balkan countries, support fundamental reforms and back them financially. The Economic and Investment Plan is another milestone, which the IPA III budget will support to a value of €9 billion to fund 10 flagship investment programs (e.g. sustainable transport, clean energy, human capital).

Ursula von der Leyen also promised to increase the EU spending by 30% of the European External Action Service in the 2021-2027 MFF, which she did. The external-action budget was raised from €94 billion to €123 billion, its main objective being to support political and economic transformation of the EU partners towards a more sustainable, democratic, stable and fair model. This amount of money was used to finance tools such as the €300 million new European Instrument for Nuclear Safety, the €11 billion humanitarian aid instrument, the €89.2 billion Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), and also the IPA III mentioned above.



Defending Europe

To strengthen the defence sector, vdL promised to strengthen the European Defence Fund (EDF), the instrument to support R&D. This tool is a key component of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) aimed at supporting SMEs through better cooperation between defence companies, providing investments, and developing cutting-edge and interoperable defence technologies and

equipment. In April 2021, the Regulation establishing the European Defence Fund was established, setting a budget of nearly €8 billion for the 2021-2027 period. For example, the 2024 calls for proposals unlocked €1.1 billion for 8 calls to support projects, structured along 8 thematics covering 32 different topics (e.g. advanced radar technologies, electronic components, next generation rotorcraft, countering hypersonic glide vehicles). In 2021, 2022 and 2023, a total of 3.186 billion has been allocated to 163 defence R&D projects⁴⁶.

Remarks

Overall, the Commission's work is good, but the results are balanced. The President of the European Commission has kept 8 out of 11 promises. The 3 unfulfilled promises were dealt with by the Commission but were not enough to achieve the expected goal, mainly due to geopolitical tensions and economic disagreements between the EU and other partners. Von der Leyen's efforts in the area of trade have been partially successful, as she has laid the foundations for sustainable and transparent trade agreements. However, there is a lack of a strong enforcement mechanism to ensure full compliance with such agreements. Economic relations with the US have improved significantly since 2021 under the Biden administration. But there are also disagreements over the taxation of US tech companies and energy security with the controversies over Nord Stream 2. On the global stage, the EU's efforts to reform the WTO have proven insufficient given the complexity of international trade policy. Since the first Trump presidency in 2017, the US has blocked reform of the dispute settlement process, China is trying to protect its state-owned enterprises and subsidies, and other countries oppose stricter labour or environmental regulations as this could negatively impact their exports. This shows that the EU needs to take a more diplomatic leadership role.

Secondly, the Commission's handling of its relations with Africa and the Western Balkans has been criticised. Although a cooperation initiative has been taken between the 27 European

⁴⁶ European Commission. (2022). Results of the EDF 2021 Calls for Proposals: EU invests €1.2 billion in 61 defence industrial cooperation projects. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/results-edf-2021-calls-proposals-eu-invests-eu12-billion-61-defence-industrial-cooperation-projects-2022-07-20_en; European Commission. (2024). Result of the EDF 2022 Calls for Proposals. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-grants/calls-proposals/result-edf-2022-calls-proposals_en; European Commission. (2024). Results of the EDF 2023 Calls for Proposals. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/funding-opportunities-0/calls-proposals/results-edf-2023-calls-proposals_en



countries and 55 African countries, implementation has been slow⁴⁷. As a result, agreements on migration, trade or infrastructure have yet to be converted into tangible action. In addition, the EU has been accused of hypocrisy due to its double standards. The EU's green carbon tax, CBAM, is a case in point. While the EU initially launched a €300 billion program to support green and digital transition, as well as job-creating development in Africa, the introduction of this carbon tax could cost African governments €25 billion a year⁴⁸. Another example concerns trade. Due to European subsidies in the African agricultural sector, seen as a hidden form of protectionism, Europe is perceived as attempting to restore a kind of “top-down” post-colonial economic relationship with Africa⁴⁹.

The Western Balkans are also a sensitive issue. In response to Russia's growing political influence and China's economic influence (New Belt and Road initiative) in the region, enlargement has become an important issue for the EU. Steps in this direction are important if the 2030 vision of enlargement is to become a reality, as stated by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, in August 2023⁵⁰. Unfortunately, this vision comes with challenges and dissensus. This new geostrategic and geopolitical orientation, part of the EU's response to these threats, has also led the EU to make disproportionate concessions to certain countries, to the detriment of the Union's credibility. The division on the issue of Serbia due to its stance on Russia, its links with China and slow progress on the rule of law and media freedom is a case in point. In addition, the Western Balkans is a region where ethnic issues remain unresolved, as do historical questions and fragile governance infrastructures. This creates tensions within the candidate country, but also with other candidates and some EU countries, leading to internal EU disagreements and bilateral disputes. von der Leyen's work is remarkable, but as the European Parliament and some EU countries have pointed out, it is important not to move too fast, for the reasons mentioned above and because there is still room for improvement with regard to corruption, money laundering, terrorism and illegal immigration.

Finally, despite being the most promising initiative, the EDF, which was initially due to receive 13 billion euros, actually received 5 billion euros less. A considerable cut! In addition, the war in Ukraine has also revealed challenges. The European defence industry remains fragmented, production capacity is limited, there is no clear coordinated planning of equipment

⁴⁷ AEF. (2024). Africa-Europe Foundation Report 2024. Africa Europe Foundation. https://www.africaeuropefoundation.org/uploads/The_Africa_Europe_Foundation_Report_February_2024_ca9c64397f.pdf

⁴⁸ AfDB. (2023). COP28: Africa could lose \$25 billion per year as new EU carbon tax comes into effect, warns African Development Bank's Adesina. African Development Bank Group. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/cop28-africa-could-lose-25-billion-year-new-eu-carbon-tax-comes-effect-warns-african-development-banks-adesina-66739>; Gilder, A., Rumble, O. (2024). The Impact of the CBAM on African Economies and the Role of the AfCFTA. SAIIA. <https://saiaa.org.za/research/the-impact-of-the-cbam-on-african-economies-and-the-role-of-the-afcfta/>

⁴⁹ Martin, E. (2024). The paradoxes of the EU's Africa policy. GIS. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/eu-africa-strategy>

⁵⁰ Council of the European Union. (2023). Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum. Consilium. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>



procurement policies, and investment is insufficient. However, given that defence falls within the competence of the Member States, with the EU playing only a supporting and coordinating role, the 27 countries are primarily responsible for the state of the European defence landscape. In this context, the Commission's work is a positive step towards European strategic autonomy, which must be strengthened and supported by the members of the European Union. It is also in line with the need to improve European defence efforts by increasing EU defence spending at national level, structuring and strengthening the defence industry, improving European integration (for example, by building on the PESCO framework) and intensifying cooperation between the EU and NATO.

Protecting Our European Way of Life

Upholding the rule of law

In order to protect the rule of law, Ursula von der Leyen promised to support an additional mechanism for the rule of law, particularly to protect the EU budget against violations of the rule of law. In 2019, this mechanism has been strengthened by introducing an annual report on the state of the rule of law in all Member States. This report examines positive and negative developments and includes recommendations in four key areas: the judiciary, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances⁵¹. In 2020, Parliament and Council reached agreement on the proposed Regulation protecting the EU budget in the event of failure by Member States to uphold the rule of law, leading the Commission to

suspend or reduce budget allocations from the Multiannual Financial Framework. In March 2021, Poland and Hungary attempted to annul the Regulation, but the Court of Justice of the European Union did not recognise their arguments, making this new legislation even more credible⁵².

Strong borders and a fresh start on migration

In the last few years, migration has been such a hot topic at both European and national level. In November 2019, the Regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, or Frontex, gave the agency the means to act. The aim was to provide more support and assistance at the EU's external borders, to help people whose stay has not been accepted to return to their country and to strengthen cooperation to manage migratory flows more effectively. To achieve this, Ursula von der Leyen has promised to have 10.000 fully trained and operational Frontex standing corps by 2024. However, this target has not been met, as

⁵¹ European Commission. (2024). 2024 Rule of Law Report. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle/2024-rule-law-report_en

⁵² Wahl, T. (2022). CJEU Dismisses Actions against Rule-of-Law Conditionality to Safeguard the EU Budget. Eucrim. <https://eucrim.eu/news/cjeu-dismisses-actions-against-rule-of-law-conditionality-to-safeguard-the-eu-budget/>



they account for 2.500 approximately in 2024, and has therefore been postponed until 2027. After nearly four years of negotiations, the new Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted in May 2024. The new migration and asylum policy is built around four pillars: secure external borders (identification, security and health checks, asylum and migration database, border return procedure, crisis protocols and action against instrumentalisation), swift and efficient procedures (clear asylum rules, guaranteeing people's rights, EU standards for qualifying refugee status, preventing abuse), an effective system of solidarity and responsibility (permanent solidarity framework, operational and financial support, clearer rules on responsibility for asylum applications, prevention of secondary movements), and the integration of migration into international partnerships (prevention of irregular departures, cooperation on readmission, combating the smuggling of migrants, promotion of legal channels for working, studying and training in the EU)⁵³.

To achieve these objectives, a number of legislative dossiers form the backbone of the new pact. The Regulation on Migration and Asylum Management establishes a solidarity-based asylum system that replaces the current Dublin III Regulation. One of the main changes is that all Member States are now involved in the management of asylum applications, either by relocating refugees or by providing support (financial or operational) to Member States facing

migratory pressures. The Regulation on screening introduces a screening process prior to the entry of irregular migrants, covering their identity, state of health and safety. This screening process will take place before arrival on the continent, within seven days outside the EU's borders, or within three days if they are apprehended on EU territory. The Regulation on the Asylum Procedure and the Regulation on the Return Border Procedure respectively establish a method for deciding on an asylum application and a mandatory border procedure for the asylum and return procedure at the EU's external borders. The Eurodac Regulation builds on the existing database to include information on applications and their authors, provided it is at least six years old (i.e. fingerprints, facial image, identity data, copies of travel documents and identity documents). Depending on the type of data, it will be kept for five or ten years. Other legislative texts include the Qualification Regulation, the Directive on Reception Conditions and the Regulation on Situations of Crisis and Force Majeure. The revision of the Directive on Long-Term Residents is currently being negotiated. The creation of humanitarian corridors coordinated at EU level is the subject of considerable disagreement. But the EU countries have managed to find common ground and have agreed on a Regulation on a Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework. However, for this Regulation to be effective, it will depend on the willingness of Member States to create humanitarian corridors to

⁵³ European Commission. (2024). Pact on Migration and Asylum. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en



the EU with international organisations, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Internal security

The European Public Prosecutor's Office was created in 2017 and was operational in 2021. The EPPO can only investigate and prosecute (cross-border) offences affecting the EU's financial interests, such as corruption, VAT fraud or money laundering⁵⁴. Yet, Ursula von der Leyen's intention to give it the power to deal with criminal offences relating to cross-border terrorism never materialised because of the legal complexity involved. Another explanation is that cross-border terrorism remains under the jurisdiction of the Member States, with the help of the cooperation mechanisms of Europol and Eurojust. To strengthen internal security, she has also promised to improve customs controls and risk management. To begin

with, a new Customs Action Plan was presented in September 2020 with the aim of combating fraud and counterfeit goods entering the EU. The plan proposed 17 actions in four areas: risk management, e-commerce management, compliance promotion and collaboration between customs authorities⁵⁵. In 2023, the Commission revised the Union's customs rules, the EU free trade area with a common goods tariff for the 27 countries of the Union, which date back to 2013, and proposed a Regulation establishing a Union Customs Code and an EU Customs Authority. The aim is to modernise and harmonise current procedures by establishing an EU customs data centre that will share data in real time, enable AI monitoring and centralise all customs declarations. This project will be overseen by the new EU customs authority, which will coordinate the work with national customs authorities.

Remarks

In total, vdL has completely fulfilled five of its nine promises and partially fulfilled two others. The President of the Commission has done what she promised to protect the rule of law. Yet the Commission could have done more but decided not to endorse the Parliament's 2016 proposal to introduce a monitoring cycle extending the scope to all EU values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, considered as a major step towards greater transparency. The idea was that this monitoring would be overseen by an EU values working group made up of representatives from the Commission, Parliament and Council, thereby making the whole process more transparent

⁵⁴ European Union. (2024). European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies/european-public-prosecutors-office-eppo_en

⁵⁵ European Commission. (2024). The Customs Action Plan - supporting EU customs to protect revenues, prosperity and security. https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/customs-action-plan-supporting-eu-customs-protect-revenues-prosperity-and-security_en



and credible. But the European Commission did not see this as a priority and chose to discuss it at a later stage.

Concerning her work on migration, it has been fragile and has faced tensions and criticism over human rights violations due to Frontex's actions (e.g. pushbacks, detention of migrants at borders, racial profiling) as well as disagreements over solidarity mechanisms between EU countries. While her new pact on migration and asylum has demonstrated the EU's ability to act on such a sensitive issue, it has also been criticised for focusing too much on deterrence and security rather than tackling the root causes of migration or creating effective legal pathways and humanitarian corridors⁵⁶. What's more, the first ten pieces of migration legislation will not come into force until 2026 due to the two-year transition period. Until then, civil society, activists, NGOs and international organisations are exerting great pressure to ensure that the protection and fundamental rights of people seeking safety will not be compromised by these measures. Some recommendations, as listed by Rescue, a humanitarian non-governmental organisation, are to stop push-backs at European borders, move away from prison-like detention facilities, invest in the reception, inclusion and integration of refugees from day one of their arrival, ensure that the European asylum system is people-centred, or monitor the application process in a fair and transparent way. On the contrary, the digitization of customs procedures is an important step forward, as the Customs Union's forward-looking approach has been very well perceived and is considered to be the most ambitious since 1968. The new legislation, which is better adapted to e-commerce will make customs management easier for the authorities, promote transparency and make supply chains more secure and reliable. It is expected to save up to €2.7 billion a year. However, it is important to note that implementation will take place over the next few years (for example, the e-commerce data centre is scheduled for 2028).

A New Push for European Democracy

A greater say for Europeans

Her promise to organise a Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and to involve citizens in it has been kept. From April 2021 to May 2022, citizens from all over Europe were able to share their ideas in a series of debates and discussions. The conference produced 49 recommendations and over 300 proposals on how to improve the EU⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Woolrych, K. (2024). The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, Explained. HIAS. <https://hias.org/news/eu-pact-migration-and-asylum-explained/>; PICUM. (2024). The EU Migration Pact: a dangerous regime of migrant surveillance. <https://picum.org/blog/the-eu-migration-pact-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance/>

⁵⁷ Council of the European Union. (2024). Conference on the Future of Europe. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>; European Parliament. (2022). Future of Europe: Conference concludes with promise for changes.



Some ideas required treaty change, such as the need to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in certain areas, to have a transnational list for European elections, or to give the Parliament the right of legislative initiative⁵⁸. Despite the rhetorical support of European institutions for these ideas, it has met with resistance from Member States, who are unwilling to transfer more power to Brussels at the expense of their national power and sovereignty.

Special relationship with the European Parliament

Relations between the Commission and Parliament have, to some extent, been strengthened. Although the Commission has not put forward any proposals or binding legal changes to give the Parliament a right of initiative, it has responded to several requests from the EP by drafting proposals on digital legislation with the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act, making considerable progress on the European Green Market and setting up the Next Generation EU. When it comes to briefings and discussions between the EC and the European Parliament (EP), there is clearly room for improvement. For example, during Brexit, the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, made considerable efforts to brief Members of the EP (MEPs) on the ongoing negotiations and obstacles⁵⁹. But

for other events, such as international trade agreements, MEPs expressed disappointment, arguing that they were not kept informed, that it was not easy to access detailed negotiating documents, or their participation in consultations. Nevertheless, the Commission has participated in a number of “question hours”. For example, since 2022, Commissioners have answered MEPs' questions twelve times, once in March 2024, four in 2023 (January, February, April and November), and seven in 2022 (April, May, July, September, October, November and December). However, the main problem is that the effectiveness of this method is limited by the fact that the commissioner's answers are all prepared in advance and by time constraints.

The involvement and presence of Commissioners in EP committee meetings and in the trialogue between Parliament and Council is another promise made by vdL to ensure a more collaborative and transparent legislative process. Factual data constraints make it difficult to assess the extent to which this promise has been kept. One argument in favour of this promise is that some Commissioners have engaged in discussions on high-priority dossiers such as the environment, digital, justice, competition or tax policies. The counter-argument is that these discussions are only superficial, with MEPs expecting Commissioners to engage in critical

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20220506STO29018/future-of-europe-conference-concludes-with-promise-for-changes>

⁵⁸ Youngs, R. (2022). EU Democracy After the Conference on the Future of Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/05/eu-democracy-after-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe?lang=en¢er=europe>

⁵⁹ Gostyńska-Jakubowska, A., von Ondarza, N. (2020). The Barnier method: Lessons learned from the EU's institutional approach to the Brexit negotiations. European Policy Center. https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2020/6_Barnier_method.pdf



debates, and that many meetings, including trilogues, are held behind closed doors, limiting access to information.

Improving the lead candidate system

The European Electoral Law of 1976, which lays down the rules for the election process of members of the European Parliament, has been the subject of several amendments, such as the legal voting age of 16 instead of 18, a common election day across the EU or a gender-balanced list. In 2022, the Parliament proposed to introduce transnational lists for the 2024 European elections and to allow EU citizens to vote for the Commission President as the main candidate (Spitzenkandidaten). While Ursula von der Leyen's Commission expressed its support for the Parliament's initiative on a transnational list, its position on allowing EU citizens to vote directly for the EC President was more nuanced. Not only she, but the Member States are not prepared to relinquish their power over the Commission leadership selection process. In the end, the proposal was not adopted. It can be observed that while vdL supported institutional reforms aimed at improving the EU's democratic accountability, it did not insist on improving the system of leading candidates. There have been no (significant) changes to make the Spitzenkandidaten 2024 (Ursula von der Leyen) more credible, to link the election of the European Parliament with the presidency of the Commission, and to encourage Europeans to see themselves more as citizens of the EU rather than of their home country.

More transparency and scrutiny

In June 2023, the Commission presented its communication on the creation of an inter-institutional ethics body. Later, in 2024, eight EU institutions (the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Court of Justice, the European Central Bank, the European Court of Auditors, the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions) signed the Agreement establishing the inter-institutional Ethics Body. The three main tasks of the ethics body will be to draw up common minimum standards, exchange information on the institutions' internal rules and promote cultural ethics. It will also aim to facilitate understanding of the work and framework of the EU institutions by those outside them. However, it is important to note that it will have no investigative or sanctioning powers, these being devolved to the European Public Prosecutor and the European Anti-Fraud Office.

Protecting our democracy

To protect democracy, vdL promised to present a European Democracy Action Plan, which she did in a communication in December 2020. It is based on three pillars and proposes 30 measures. First, to promote free and fair elections, the Commission has proposed a new Regulation on the funding of European political parties to increase their transparency and financial visibility.



The proposal is currently being discussed in the Council. An initiative called the “European Cooperation Network on Elections” has been launched, with 21 meetings since 2019, bringing together Member State authorities responsible for elections and serving as a platform for the exchange of information and best practices in the areas of e-voting, data protection, cybersecurity, transparency and awareness-raising⁶⁰.

Secondly, to strengthen media freedom, the Commission called for independent national support services (legal advice, refuges, psychological support) to increase protection and online safety for journalists under threat through a Recommendation in 2021. This was supported in 2024 by the Directive on improving the protection of persons engaged in civil matters (e.g. journalists and human rights defenders) from abusive legal proceedings and the Media Freedom Act, which aims to ensure the transparency of media ownership and state advertising on media and online platforms, the protection of journalistic

sources from the use of spyware and the independence of the media.

Thirdly, to combat disinformation and prevent foreign interference in general, the Commission, working with the European External Action Service (EEAS), has supported the strengthening of the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) toolkit, the establishment of the Rapid Alert System and the Information Sharing and Analysis Center. A key to combating disinformation for the Commission was to ensure greater accountability of online platforms as they are able to analyse and filter content on social media. To this end, the new Code of Practice on Disinformation was signed in June 2022 and the Digital Services Act was adopted in October 2022. Both laws aim to protect and strengthen users and their fundamental rights from very large online platforms and search engines such as Zalando, TikTok, Ali Express, Google, Apple or Meta. They also aim to expose disinformation, increase the transparency of political advertising and improve fact-checking in all EU countries.

Remarks

The Commission's overall work to protect European democracy has been divided into two main areas: seeking improvements within the EU and preventing foreign actors from interfering. Regarding the former, it can be said that the creation of an EU ethics body was an important step towards greater transparency in the EU institutions. Other efforts have also been made to strengthen citizen engagement, such as the European Citizens' Initiative and the

⁶⁰ European Commission. (2024). European cooperation network on elections. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/democracy-eu-citizenship-anti-corruption/democracy-and-electoral-rights/european-cooperation-network-elections_en



Conference on the Future of Europe, which enables citizens to meet and discuss key issues with EU decision-makers. Efforts to improve transparency have also been made, such as with the [EU law tracker](#), the new tool to track a legislative act from the moment it is proposed until it is adopted. But concerns remain about transparency, credibility and accountability. Spitzenkandidaten has not been improved (despite vdL being the very first lead candidate to run an election campaign). Despite requests from the European Ombudsman and petitions from the Parliament, vdL did not disclose text messages exchanged with Pfizer's CEO for the purchase of vaccines⁶¹. In 2022, Qataragate also eroded public confidence when senior MEPs were implicated in a corruption scandal.

Much remains to be done to close the transparency gap, address ethical concerns and convince part of the population of the credibility of European institutions. Another issue, despite efforts to tackle it, is the independence of journalism and freedom of expression. In Hungary, a media monopoly has controlled the narrative in favour of Orban's government for over a decade⁶². In Poland, under the Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2015, public broadcasters were taken over by PiS loyalists and turned into government mouthpieces⁶³. More recently, in 2021, a law was proposed to restrict non-European media, such as the American channel Lex TVN. In Italy, the situation is a little more complex, as the influence and concentration of ownership by political powers is questionable (for example, Berlusconi's ownership of Mediaset and Meloni's influence over Rai)⁶⁴. State controls, intimidation methods and legal reforms are also being observed in other EU countries, becoming a major European issue. The work carried out by the Commission over the last few years must continue in the same direction if we are to avoid any democratic backsliding.

Then, regarding the latter, numerous steps have been taken, and legislative files finalised, motivated by the Belarusian interference in EU airspace in 2021, Russia interference in elections and disinformation campaigns, the 2022 Qatargate scandal, the 2022 Chinese interference in Lithuanian politics following Lithuania's decision to deepen ties with taiwan, or the Chinese influence operations to promote pro-China narratives about Huawei's 5G rollout and the Belt and Road Initiative. For the past few years, the Commission clearly worked on

⁶¹ European Ombudsman. (2024). The European Commission's refusal of public access to text messages exchanged between the Commission President and the CEO of a pharmaceutical company on the purchase of a COVID-19 vaccine. <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/case/en/59777>

⁶² Nagy, M. (2024). The rise of KESMA: How Orbán's allies bought up Hungary's media. International Press Institute. <https://ipi.media/the-rise-of-kcsma-how-orbans-allies-bought-up-hungarys-media/>; Bajomi-Lázár, P., Krasztev, P. (2022). Country Report 2022: Hungary. Euromedia Ownership Monitor. <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/hungary/>; HRW. (2024). Hungary: Media Curbs Harm Rule of Law. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/13/hungary-media-curbs-harm-rule-law>

⁶³ Gipson, A. (2022). New report: Poland's public media serve as propaganda tool. International Press Institute. <https://ipi.media/new-report-polands-public-media-serve-as-propaganda-tool-2/>; Public Media Alliance. (2024). Public media in Poland struggles for a reset. <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/public-media-in-poland-struggles-for-a-reset/>

⁶⁴ Stitzlein, M. (2022). Learning From Silvio Berlusconi's Reign Over Media. Democratic Erosion Consortium. <https://democratic-erosion.org/2022/12/21/learning-from-silvio-berlusconis-reign-over-media/>; De Benedetti, F. (2023). Italy: Public broadcaster RAI comes under serious political pressure. International Press Institute. <https://ipi.media/italy-public-broadcaster-rai-comes-under-serious-political-pressure/>

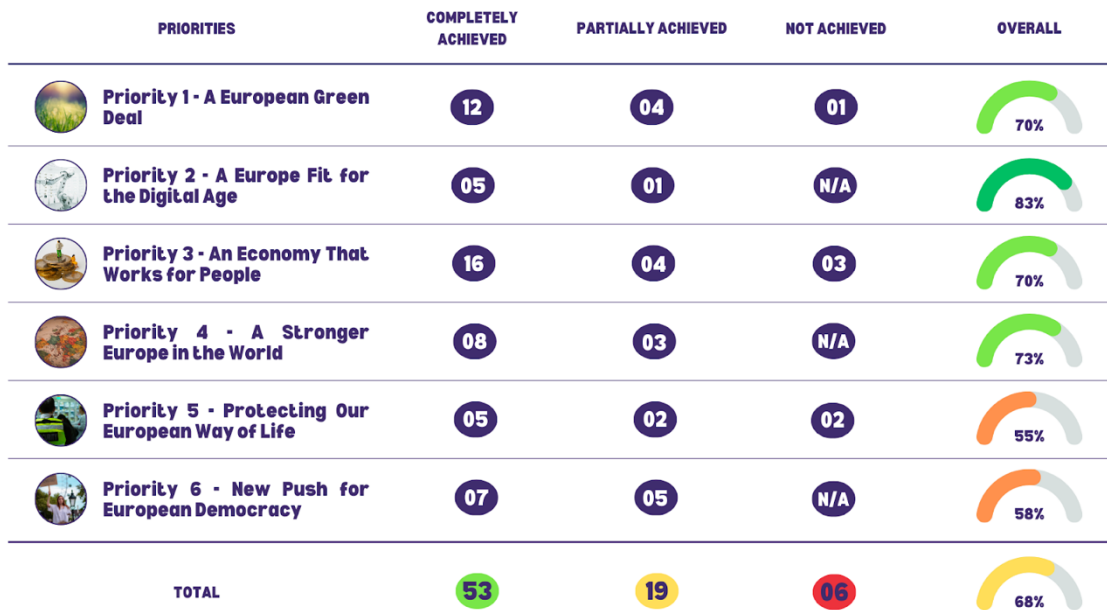


protecting European democracy from foreign actors' interests, such as cyberattacks, financial support of European political parties, or disinformation campaigns. But because it is always possible to do better, one recommendation, as proposed by the [European Partnership for Democracy](#), could be to ensure more transparency on the concrete actions taken, as well as their implications, to empower the EU and Member States. It is also crucial that the work is not taken as granted, and that the EU works towards even more robust and resilient systems, as well as ensuring better enforcement.

Conclusion: What to Think Half-Way Through

Ursula von der Leyen's first term of office (2019-2024) was marked by major upheavals, such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising unemployment, the war between Ukraine and Russia, inflation, and the housing and energy crises. These events not only forced her to manage periods of crisis, but also constantly redefined her agenda, revealing her strengths and weaknesses. She was perceived as a confident leader, capable of managing rapidly changing situations while maintaining a strong vision of the future. In fact, she has managed the EU's response to crises quite impressively over the last five years, filling the void left by uncertainties, questions and doubts at times when clear

answers were needed. Her political agenda was ambitious, with a particular focus on creating a Green Deal, working massively to digitise the continent, enlarging the EU in the decades ahead and reaffirming the EU's role on the world stage. In her manifesto for her first term as Commission President, she made a total of 78 promises, kept 53, achieved partial results on 19 others and left “only” 6 undone. During her five-year term, the Commission has accomplished a considerable amount of work, adopting legislation every four days, for a total of 378 legislative dossiers adopted, 102 under negotiation, 41 about to be adopted and 21 blocked.



Source: [European Parliament](#)

Figure 2 - Progress Scorecard on the Six 2019-2024 Political Priorities of the EU Commission

The European Green Deal is a milestone in European legislation. The ambitious goal of becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 is one of the reasons why she was welcomed. With a total of 138 legislative dossiers submitted and one adopted every 20 days, this is the highest priority. This places the EU in a position of global leadership on climate issues and encourages the international community to do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Yet Green Deal policies have been slow to be adopted or implemented in EU countries. The EU has also been criticised for not doing enough in the agriculture and transport sectors, given their importance to the EU economy. Another criticism, from external partners, concerns the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. Initially intended as a tool to ensure that competitors from non-

European countries with less stringent environmental laws do not underperform European companies, it was seen as a disadvantage by African countries, which could cost them billions of euros in lost trade. At the same time, the EU has announced a €300 billion program to support Africa's digital and ecological transitions. This led considerably to accusations of hypocrisy and a form of economic protectionism reminiscent of post-colonial relations.

The continent's digital transformation was another important topic on his agenda. With 99 legislative dossiers presented in total, 55 of which were adopted, it was the third highest priority. Her approach to technology highlighted how it could contribute to achieving the EU's climate goals. The dual transition (green and digital)



earned it recognition for its avant-gardism and for combining innovation with environmental responsibility. vdL also recognized the urgent need to make it easier for European SMEs to operate on the continent and to avoid many of them leaving for the USA, where the regulatory landscape is more favourable. The Commission has also really focused on striking a balance between the need to harness technology for Europe's benefit and the need to regulate tech giants to promote a fairer digital economy in Europe. However, this has led to two contentious scenarios. Firstly, it is unclear whether Regulation, which is supposed to be directed at these market giants, will not be to the detriment of other European companies, now or in the future. Secondly, taxation and the protection of users' rights have raised tensions with US technology companies.

It became clear that the Commission President was also confronted with other issues such as immigration, defence and respect for the rule of law. One of the arguments put forward is that migration policies focus too much on border control and deterrence, rather than tackling the root causes of migration. There have also been allegations of human rights violations. Furthermore, underfunding of defence prevents the EU from becoming strategically autonomous, which is a problem, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, and at a time of tension and conflict in many parts of the world. Furthermore, violations of the rule of law, such as democratic backsliding, restrictions

on media freedom or judicial reforms in countries like Poland or Hungary, have not been sanctioned rigorously enough, leading to the view that Ursula von der Leyen was too lenient.

But the Commission President has also had to face criticism, which began early on. A few months after taking office in 2020, she was criticised for the slowness of vaccine procurement, for not disclosing the content of contracts between the EU and pharmaceutical companies, and for not publishing her text messages with Pfizer's CEO. Two years later, when Russia began its war in Ukraine, she faced major criticism for the slow and lacking unity of the European response to the Russian invasion. She also faced a difficult period when the imposition of sanctions was delayed and, once adopted, the energy crisis began due to dependence on Russian energy. On the whole, she has succeeded in assuming a strong geopolitical role, strengthening ties with the United States and the African Union, but also opening up the EU to East Asia, with discussions and agreements with Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore. Nevertheless, her “de-risking” approach to China, while endorsed by her Western allies, has also been criticised, with her main supporters arguing that the EU needs to take a firmer stance against Chinese influence, business and market distortions.

Accordingly, several recommendations can be made for her next term of office (2024-2029) as President of the Commission. Now that the legislative landscape has been set, with a total of 567 legislative files proposed



for the six priorities, it will be essential to focus on the implementation phase and prioritise tangible results. Particular attention should also be paid to enforcement, such as trade and green policies, as well as respect for the rule of law. It is important for the EU that Brussels slows down the creation of policies and starts to pursue the goals set over the last five years for the decades to come. The EU should also step up its efforts in the fields of defence industry and coordination, energy security, as well as transparency and accountability. It will also be important for the EU to avoid locking itself into a bubble it has created to protect itself. While strengthening its internal market and protecting its values, the EU must remain open to diverse

perspectives, avoiding the temptation to demonise other narratives in global dialogues and on online platforms and media. This will preserve democratic plurality and strengthen the EU's role as a diplomatic leader on the world stage and a free and democratic society. Finally, the EU is currently facing a number of economic challenges that threaten its overall stability and growth prospects. Issues such as supply chain disruptions caused by ongoing geopolitical conflicts, inflation, low growth rates, competitiveness and innovation, as well as monetary, fiscal and banking policies will be of utmost importance for Ursula von der Leyen's next Commission.



PART 2 – DELIVERING ON PREVIOUS PROMISES (2024-2029)

Introduction

In this second part of our analysis, each of the seven priorities set out in “Europe's choice”, vdL's 2024-2029 political guidelines, will be discussed, examining the relevance of the many promises made and looking for continuities, but also contradictions and inconsistencies with her previous 2019-2024 political program, “A Union that Strives for More”. The aim is to assess the coherence of the objectives of Von der Leyen's successive mandates, and whether her plan will be likely to save Europe from an uncertain future.

The first priority, “A prosperous, competitive and sustainable Europe”, is aimed at promoting investment for the spread of digital technologies and innovation, strengthening SMEs and industrial competitiveness, deepening the Single Market and harmonizing EU laws. The second priority, “A tailor-made European defense and security”, focuses on both the development of the European defense industry and the improvement of cooperation with NATO as well as on migration flows and internal border management. The third priority, “A better European way of life for people”, promotes citizens' rights, such as social fairness, equality, youth

engagement, social cohesion and affordable housing. The fourth priority, “A better quality of life for the people of Europe”,

addresses nature, food safety and water issues, such as water resilience, oceans, the competitiveness of sustainable agriculture or the safety and sustainability of the food supply chain. The fifth priority, “Protecting democracy and European values”, aims to strengthen the rule of law by supporting independent media and involving citizens in decision-making, but also by combating disinformation operations by malicious actors. The sixth priority, “Europe's global leadership: power through partnership”, underlines the greater role the EU should play on the global stage by supporting the reforms of multilateral organizations, deepening trade relations and securing access to key raw materials, as well as promoting stability in the Middle East, Latin America or ASEAN. The seventh and final, “A new budget and reforms for a better future”, argues for a simplified and effective EU budget, focusing on common priorities that are also in line with national and private investment objectives, and supports treaty changes and decision-making reforms for a better Union

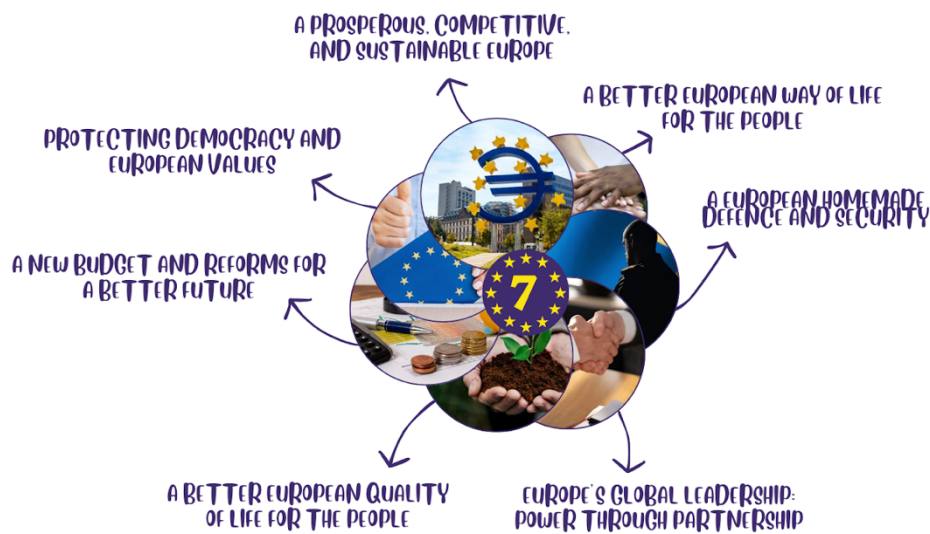


Figure 3 - The seven priorities of the 2024-2029 political guidelines "Europe's Choice"

New Term, New Context, New Goals

Four months ago, on July 18, 2024, von der Leyen was re-elected by the MEPs for a second term as President of the European Commission, putting her at the helm of the EU for another five years. While this gives her the opportunity to defend the work she has accomplished over the past five years, it also comes with new challenges compared to when she first took office in 2019. New global challenges have arisen, particularly in the Middle East, such as the wars in Gaza and Yemen, and tensions between Lebanon, Iran and Israel. China is another major global player that the EU sees as a systemic rival. Tensions with Russia persist, with the war in Ukraine still ongoing and Russian interference operations not only fuelling disagreements and divisions between EU countries, but also altering the trajectory of post-Soviet states towards EU membership

(e.g. Moldova and Georgia). The recent election of Donald Trump as President of the United States also brings challenges for the Union and the strategic autonomy of the "old continent".

The EU also faces internal challenges, such as inflation, energy security, the housing crisis, migration and global competitiveness (i.e. against the US and China). The 27 Member States will need to work together to resolve these challenging crises. The European elections in June 2024 and the right-wing victory in the European Parliament were a blow to the EU, fuelling populist and eurosceptic movements across Europe. What's more, democratic backsliding is threatening the rule of law in Member States such as Poland and Hungary. Therefore, Ursula von der Leyen will have her work cut out to lead the EU



into better times, as many challenges await her and others are yet to come. Her second term will give her the opportunity to improve in areas where she has been criticized, notably by focusing on policy creation rather than policy implementation, particularly in areas such as climate,

migration and digital transformation. Von der Leyen will have to deliver tangible results in line with the ambitious targets set out earlier. Accordingly, she will have to defend the seven priorities she has proposed.

The 7 Priorities of “Europe’s Choice”

A Prosperous, Competitive, Sustainable Europe

Make business easier and deepen the Single Market

As one of the Union's greatest achievements, the Single Market is crucial to the economic, social and geopolitical functioning of the EU, all the more so considering the ambitious goals set in response to unprecedented global challenges (e.g. achieving the fair, green and digital transitions, pursuing EU enlargement to promote a larger, more resilient Europe and enhancing defense capabilities to ensure peace and stability both within European borders and internationally, as well as supporting Ukraine). Although these objectives are of strategic importance to the Union, they require huge financing. For example, more than €200 billion is needed to achieve the goals of the Digital Decade, while between

€342 billion and €620 billion should be invested annually by 2030 to achieve the goals of the European Green Deal⁶⁵. However, this is quite problematic as unlocking the full potential of the Single Market (i.e. the free movement of goods, services, capital and people) in its current configuration is hampered by persisting obstacles such as different national legal frameworks, non-harmonized licensing requirements, lack of harmonized tax systems, fragmented digital integration, non-recognition of professional qualifications or administrative burdens.

Ursula von der Leyen therefore emphasized the need to strengthen the Single Market and tasked Enrico Letta with producing a report on how to achieve this. The report, published in April 2024, outlines concrete steps to remove the key barriers that are essential to ensure the Single Market can fully support the EU's strategic objectives. Enrico Letta focuses strongly on the promotion of knowledge diffusion (i.e.

⁶⁵ Baker, J., (2024). Europe's green future needs more private investment, urgently. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eet/news/europes-green-future-needs-more-private-investment-urgently/>; Pisani-Ferry, J., Tagliapietra, S. (2024). An investment strategy to keep the European Green Deal on track. Bruegel. <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/investment-strategy-keep-european-green-deal-track>; European Commission. (2023). Investment and funding needs for the Digital Decade connectivity targets. European Commission. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/investment-and-funding-needs-digital-decade-connectivity-targets>



bridging innovation gaps, increasing competitiveness, supporting skills development), the enhancement of productivity (i.e. improving labour mobility, promoting high-value industries) and the completion of the Capital Markets Union (i.e. reducing dependence on banks, facilitating cross-border investment, mobilizing investment), which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

One key recommendation in Letta's report is the "Single Market for Consumers", which focuses on empowering consumers by improving access, information and protection of European consumers. Firstly, there is unequal access for consumers in some Member States who are prevented from accessing goods and services available in other Member States or who face barriers when purchasing products and services from other Member States. One example is Apple, which was warned by the European Commission in November 2024 because its services, including the App Store and iTunes Store, restricted payment options and prevented certain consumers from downloading apps offered in other EU/EEA countries, depending on the country in which they had registered their account⁶⁶. Such restrictive practices also exist in other sectors (e.g. manufacturing, transport, digital services, agri-food). To address this, the EU adopted different legislation, such as the Geo-Blocking Regulation in 2018, the Directive on unfair trading practices in agri-food business-to-business

relationships in 2019, and the DMA in 2022. However, their effectiveness remains questionable as, with the exception of the DMA, there is no formal procedure for dealing with cross-border cases, which prevents national authorities from taking action. Nevertheless, the scope of the DMA is sector-specific and only applies to the largest digital platforms that meet certain thresholds for turnover, market capitalization and user base. This means that smaller companies offering digital services or other companies outside the digital platform economy that engage in anti-competitive practices do not fall within the scope of the DMA.

To solve this problem, the EU should develop a formal procedure for cross-border cases that is standardized for all Member States. Secondly, there is an information asymmetry in product descriptions between the seller, who generally knows exactly the product, and the consumer, who has to take the commercial information provided by the seller for granted. In addition, there is often a lack of clear and accurate information about the origin, quality and environmental impact of products, whilst companies often exaggerate their sustainability claims. The current ESPR and the Green Transition Empowerment Directive, both adopted in 2024, are a good step towards providing consumers with reliable and clear information about the durability, reparability and recyclability of goods at the point of sale. However, more information

⁶⁶ Weatherbed, J. (2024). Apple receives EU warning to end 'discriminatory' geo-blocking practices. The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com/2024/11/12/24294554/apple-eu-warning-geo-blocking-practices-app-store>



should be provided on sustainable mobility, food waste prevention and sustainable waste management. It is therefore crucial to impose EU-wide information obligations on sellers, e.g. through harmonized labelling and standardized information (e.g. geographical indicators, ecological footprint, allergens), so that labels are reliable, comparable and verifiable across the EU and consumers can make an informed choice before buying products.

To this end, vdL should push for the Green Claims Directive proposed for 2023 to be adopted as soon as possible. And to prevent the already overloaded product packaging from being overloaded with additional information, one solution could be to use the Digital Product Passport, which provides access to extensive information by simply scanning a data tag. Thirdly, consumers are often exposed to unfair practices (e.g. hidden fees, price discrimination based on information collected on the internet, fake countdown timers, unfair contract terms, pre-setting of options, misleading advertising) and are vulnerable to harmful products (e.g. counterfeit or malfunctioning products). To address these problems, national consumer protection authorities and/or the Consumer Protection Cooperation could enter into a dialog with the companies using these techniques to put an end to such unfair practices. As regards the proliferation of harmful products, it is essential to complete the current legal framework (e.g. EU General Product Safety Regulation,

Toys Directive, Low Voltage Directive, Pressure Equipment Directive). Letta proposes that the Commission takes the lead and coordinates Member States in the development of common artificial intelligence tools for inspections to detect and flag dangerous non-food products in the EU rapid alert system “Safety Gate”.

Ursula von der Leyen also announced the EU's Better Regulation Agenda, which aims to simplify legislation to support SMEs, strengthen accountability through better enforcement and implementation, and streamline legislative procedures between the EU institutions.

Firstly, the Union urgently needs to make it easier for European SMEs to operate on the continent and prevent many of them from relocating to the US, where the reason for this move is a more favorable regulatory environment. In fact, the EU's risk-averse regulatory approach has led to an excessive amount of overlapping regulations that hinder the dynamism and efficiency of the Single Market. In fact, 55% of SMEs in the EU cited regulatory barriers and the administrative burden caused by regulation as the biggest obstacle to investment⁶⁷. To unlock the full potential of the Single Market, it is therefore crucial to improve the implementation of existing rules for goods and services. By overcoming obstacles such as red tape, significant additional compliance costs or legal uncertainty, several hundred billion euros can be freed

⁶⁷ European Investment Bank. (2024). Investment barriers in the European Union 2023. https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20230330_investment_barriers_in_the_eu_2023_en.pdf



up by 2030, a considerable amount that is urgently needed for the European Union.

Several objectives were put forward by von der Leyen in this respect, based on Enrico Letta's recommendations. For example, she has promised to present proposals to simplify, consolidate and codify legislation, and to eliminate overlaps and contradictions. For this to be effective, Letta proposes a "two-tier" approach to simplification programs. On the one side, technical simplification, which should address obsolete, overlapping and unnecessary legislation (e.g. provisions superseded by newer regulations, divergent national technical standards, duplicative reporting requirements), could be implemented through omnibus legislation, a single legal act that consolidates several amendments or repeals. On the other side, political simplification, which should address fundamental and controversial reforms (e.g. VAT rates, labor law, climate policies), could be achieved through in-depth dialogue with governments, business, civil society and EU institutions, balancing their divergent interests. As envisioned by Letta, all these simplifications and harmonizations of business regulation could be consolidated in a European Code of Business Law, a comprehensive and unified legal framework covering company law, contract law, consumer protection, insolvency law and labor law. In a broader perspective, such initiatives would be part of the ambition to introduce a new legal status, the 28th regime, one of vdL's objectives. Under the 28th regime, an optional EU-wide framework, SMEs and innovative companies would be able to

choose whether to comply with the different national laws of the 27 Member States, as they currently do, or to operate under this single set of rules. For businesses, the 28th regime would simplify the administrative burden and compliance costs (e.g. different licenses, multiple tax requirements), allow them to scale up across the Single Market and ensure that they compete on a level playing field in all Member States. At EU level, the 28th regime would play a key role in completing the Single Market by removing many of the existing barriers to cross-border trade and business activity and leading to a single regulatory environment. Ultimately, this would make the EU more attractive to businesses, which would boost innovation, investment, job creation and competitiveness.

Speaking of the competitiveness of SMEs, Ursula von der Leyen promises to introduce a new approach to competition policy that would better align with EU priorities (e.g. green and digital transitions), ensuring that SMEs can compete in emerging markets, and providing exemptions or simplifying procedures for mergers, acquisitions or applications for state aid. At the same time, she intends to propose a new SME and competitiveness check, which would assess the potential effects of proposed regulations on SME activities, costs and performance. This assessment would serve as a starting point for proposing simplifications or exemptions for SMEs where possible, in order to reduce compliance costs and administrative burdens. She also envisages creating a separate category for small and medium-sized enterprises, which is currently set at



over 250 employees or €50 million in sales, in order to help them become larger companies. At the moment, neither the specific details of this new category nor the possible simplification measures have been defined.

Secondly, better enforcement and implementation (i.e. fewer differences in the application of laws across Member States) would ensure that laws deliver the intended benefits, e.g. consumer protection, economic growth, digital transformation or environmental protection. Ultimately, this would advance the objectives of wider priorities, ensure effective allocation of resources and encourage accountability and reform among Member States. Thus, Ursula von der Leyen promised to call on the Commission to produce annual reports for the EP and the Council on the enforcement and implementation of EU legislation. Such annual assessments would make it possible to better track progress and hold the responsible actors accountable for delays or failures in the implementation of legislation.

Letta goes further in his analysis, acknowledging that remedial mechanisms such as SOLVIT, the national administration service responsible for resolving disputes relating to the misapplication of EU rules, need to be strengthened. For example, SOLVIT's effectiveness is hampered by inadequate staffing levels, lack of control and different procedural standards (e.g. delays in decisions, loss of the possibility of appealing administrative decisions). He recommends establishing a legal framework for SOLVIT,

replacing the Commission's Recommendation on the principles governing SOLVIT with a legally binding European Regulation. Such a transition would facilitate greater consistency in the interpretation of EU law and uniform application of procedures across all SOLVIT centers. To further consolidate such enforcement instruments, he also stresses that they should be complemented by the creation of “National Single Market Offices” (NSMOs) in each Member State and a “EU Single Market Office” (EUSMO) at the EU level. NSMOs would monitor the application of EU Single Market legislation, identify systemic issues, and act as a single point of contact for SMEs needing to navigate cross-border regulatory issues. Though some countries have already taken steps to create NSMOs, such as the Danish Business Authority, not all Member States have done so. There are also wide variations in the tasks, capacities and effectiveness of these national offices. The EUSMO, which would be a new entity as it does not currently exist, would identify cross-border trends and systemic barriers in the Single Market by aggregating and analyzing data from the National Coordination Points, advise the European Commission on improving regulation based on systemic issues identified by the National Coordination Points and SOLVIT, and provide an additional escalation level for unresolved SOLVIT cases.

Thirdly, vdL promised to renew the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Lawmaking. The agreement, which was first adopted in 2003 and updated in 2016, regulates cooperation between the EP, EC

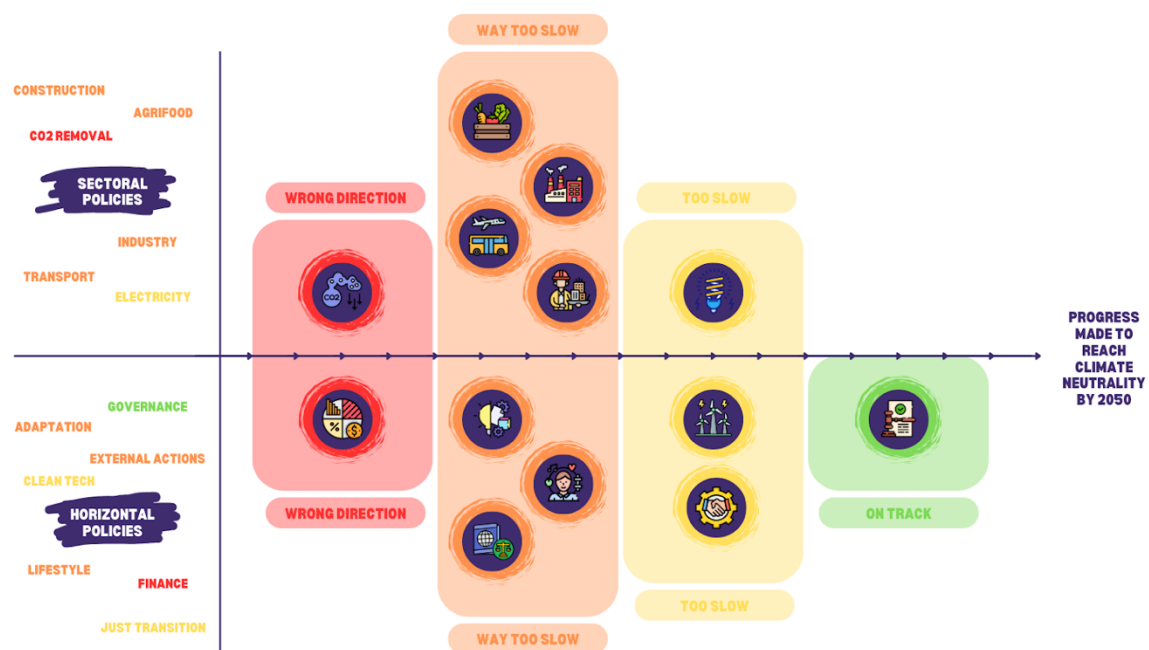


and Council in the legislative process. Its renewal would and should strengthen cooperation between the EU institutions in order to reduce delays and improve coherence in the legislative process and make legislative procedures more accessible to stakeholders, businesses and citizens.

Build a Clean Industrial Deal to decarbonise and bring down energy prices

After launching the European Green Deal in 2019, von der Leyen will focus on implementing the existing legal framework of the European Green Deal over the next five years. During her previous term of

office, a list of regulations and directives aimed at combating climate change, promoting sustainability and ensuring the transition to a green economy was produced. Central to this is the 'Fit for 55' package, which aligns EU policies with the 2030 climate target set out in the European Climate Act. Now the time has come to translate these ambitious targets and plans into tangible action and to ensure that Member States meet their obligations under the agreement. If the EU fails to meet the interim targets for 2030, which is likely, there is a good chance that this will derail the long-term ambitions of the Green Deal⁶⁸.



Source: [European Climate Neutrality Observatory](#)

Figure 4 - Sectoral Progress Towards Climate Neutrality by 2050

⁶⁸ Climate Action Tracker. (2024). EU: Country Summary. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/eu/>; Gros, M., Coi, G. (2025). 5 green targets EU countries will (mostly) miss in 2025. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-green-targets-environmental-protection-pollution-greenhouse-gas-nature-biodiversity/>



To turn things around, the President of the Commission is committed to focusing her efforts on strong enforcement mechanisms, financial support and a shared commitment from all Member States. She is looking to introduce an interim target for 2040 of a 90% reduction in emissions and enshrine this in EU law to ensure the long-term continuity of the policy regardless of political changes. This is important because without this interim target, there is a risk of losing momentum if the 2030 targets are met, or motivation if they are not. This is complemented by maintaining the EU's leadership role in climate diplomacy. Ursula von der Leyen wants to ensure that the EU is able to shape international agreements by bringing ambitious climate action, with a particular focus on the upcoming COP30 (in 2025) in Brazil. It will be key for the EU to advocate for alignment with the 1.5 degree target of the Paris Agreement while strengthening partnerships with climate vulnerable regions outside the EU, such as Small Island Developing States.

Another important part of her vision concerns the decarbonisation of European industry, an important pillar to drive the net-zero industrial pace and at the same time position itself as a world leader in clean technologies. In her first 100 days in office, she will present a New Clean Industrial Deal and later a new Clean Technology Trade and Investment Partnership. Together they aim to secure access to raw materials (e.g. lithium, cobalt, nickel) and expand trade in clean energy and technologies (e.g. solar

cells, battery systems, wind turbines). Indeed, it is important for the Union to secure access to raw materials that power clean technologies such as wind turbines, batteries, solar cells and electrical wiring. As the EU is highly dependent on importing them, any disruption to supply chains could jeopardize the EU's energy transition, as in the case of the semiconductor shortage during COVID-19. The New Clean Industrial Deal will also aim to streamline approval procedures for clean energy and industrial projects and use existing EU programmes such as InvestEU and the RRF to financially support such projects. The two upcoming laws will be accompanied by the Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act, which is intended to help energy-intensive industries to introduce clean technologies more quickly. The most important measure of this Act will be to create financial incentives (e.g. grants, low-interest loans, tax relief) and to channel investment into infrastructure and industry⁶⁹. To this end, an Industrial Decarbonisation Fund could be established, which may also support research, development and deployment and promote clean industrial clusters and innovation hubs.

In response to the significant rise in energy prices in the EU due to COVID-19 and the Russian war in Ukraine, von der Leyen made it clear that reducing energy costs for companies and households is at the heart of her agenda. This is all the more true as the EU has a significant competitive

⁶⁹ Makaroff, N., et al. (2024). High expectations for the first 100 days of the new Commission. Strategic Perspectives. <https://strategicperspectives.eu/high-expectations-for-the-first-100-days-of-the-new-commission/>



disadvantage in the energy sector compared to major global players such as the United States and China. Around 60% of companies in the EU say that energy costs are a barrier to investment, compared to 38% in the US⁷⁰. In terms of traditional energy resources, the EU is highly dependent on oil, gas and coal imports, which makes it very vulnerable to global price fluctuations and geopolitical disruptions. This is mainly due to the fact that Europe's domestic reserves of fossil fuels are limited. In terms of green energy technologies, the EU is experiencing delays in the construction of renewable energy infrastructure (e.g. wind and solar farms), mainly due to resistance from local communities and complex approval procedures. To address that, she proposes activating and expanding the aggregate demand mechanism, leveraging the principle of “economies of scale”. Put simply, the idea is to use collective buyer power by pooling the energy demand of several stakeholders (e.g. Member States, companies) in order to negotiate better prices, terms and conditions for energy procurement from suppliers. This would leverage the collective purchasing power of the EU to secure lower energy prices and more stable supply contracts. Mario Draghi, who has been tasked with drafting a report on improving European competitiveness, supports this idea. In his report, he proposes using the EU Energy Platform, which

currently acts as an intermediary tool that matches aggregated demand with available supply on the market, to go a step further and enable the joint procurement of gas as well as other energy commodities such as electricity or hydrogen.

To support sustainable transport, vdL will propose a Single Booking and Ticketing Regulation to improve the accessibility and attractiveness of rail travel in the EU. This is urgently needed as the rail sector is currently facing fragmentation in terms of booking systems, fare structures and poor train connections. For example, the new Regulation will introduce a single ticketing system that will allow passengers to purchase a single ticket for cross-border train journeys, including journeys with multiple operators⁷¹. In parallel, interoperable platforms for booking such tickets must be developed and access to reliable information on fares, timetables, delays and train cancellations must be improved. European high-speed rail networks that better connect European capitals will also be supported, requiring increased investment in rail infrastructure and network maintenance by the EU-27⁷². This will not only benefit passengers (e.g. cost savings, improved travel experience or convenience) and rail operators (e.g. more passengers and increased revenue, improved efficiency), but also the EU's sustainability objectives. Given the EU's

⁷⁰ European Investment Bank. (2023). 2023 Investment Survey. https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20230285_econ_eibis_2023_eu_en.pdf

⁷¹ Auclair, D., Thévenet, V. (2024). Single ticketing is not enough to get business travellers onto trains. Euractiv. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eet/opinion/single-ticketing-is-not-enough-to-get-business-travellers-onto-trains/>

⁷² Marsden, J. (2024). What would a single-ticket booking system mean for your next European train adventure? Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2024/11/12/what-would-a-single-ticket-booking-system-mean-for-your-next-european-train-adventure>



objective to reduce transport emissions and the fact that rail is one of the most environmentally friendly modes of transport (i.e. less than 1% of total transport emissions), the Regulation could encourage a modal shift from car and air to rail and thus contribute to the EU's Green Deal objectives by reducing emissions and congestion.

However, as the BEUC (“Bureau Européen Des Unions De Consommateurs”) emphasizes in its recommendations, the Commission should not only focus on the technical aspects of making it easier to issue and book tickets for rail travel. It is equally important to strengthen rail passengers' rights, as they are currently hampered by shortcomings in the implementation and enforcement of passenger rights legislation. This is because the 2021 Rail Passengers' Rights Regulation provides for the possibility for Member States to be exempted from certain provisions. As a result, around 64% of train services in the EU are covered by such exemptions, which means that only a small proportion of rail passengers actually benefit from the protections and rights provided for in the Rail Passengers' Rights Regulation. In Sweden, for example, passengers on rail services travelling less than 150 km are not entitled to the usual compensation or assistance for delays or cancellations (Chapter IV). In Ireland, passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility may face accessibility and assistance restrictions on domestic rail services (Chapter V). Such national exceptions should be completely abolished. It is also important to establish common legal definitions for the liability of

railroad undertakings, infrastructure managers and third party platforms, agreeing compensation mechanisms and automatic reimbursements between the parties involved, providing national authorities with investigative and sanctioning powers and imposing severe penalties for non-compliance with the Regulation.

A more circular and resilient economy

As explained in the previous part, the EU has already adopted several measures to promote the circular economy as part of the EU Circular Economy Action Plan, which is part of the EU Green Deal. However, the action plan itself is not clearly linked to the slight increase in circular economy activities and the targets set out in the CEAP will be difficult to achieve. This is mainly because much of the effort is focused on improving waste management and setting recycling targets rather than addressing the market gap in demand for secondary materials. Accordingly, vdL promised to put forward a New Circular Economy Act that would create market demand for recycled and reused materials (e.g. through bans or restrictions on non-recyclable materials, carbon pricing, subsidies for recycled materials) and establish a Single Market for waste.

This is in line with Letta's recommendation to embed circular economy principles into the single brand by creating a Single Market for circular economy that not only supports environmental sustainability but also boosts economic growth by promoting innovative business models and consumer behavior.



The new Circular Economy Act would initially aim to stimulate demand for high-quality recycled materials. In order for the EU to improve access to circular materials, it is important to set mandatory requirements for the minimum content of recycled materials in products in particularly sensitive sectors, as demonstrated by the new Battery Regulation or the revision of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive. It will therefore be crucial for the Commission to focus on the careful implementation of the ESPR in order to establish sustainable products throughout the European market. The new Act would then gradually create a Single Market for waste, as recommended by Letta, to harmonize waste standards (e.g. definitions, classifications and quality requirements for recycled materials), simplify cross-border waste trade and introduce EU-wide digital systems to track waste streams in order to reduce illegal waste shipments.

Promoting the security, sustainability and resilience of the EU healthcare system is another of von der Leyen's priorities.

Firstly, she promised to present a new Chemicals Industry Package to simplify REACH and provide clarity on “forever chemicals” (PFAS), since these are highly correlated with environmental sustainability as they contaminate soils, water and ecosystems and dangerously affect public health. REACH is the EU

chemicals regulation that ensures the safe use of chemicals and at the same time promotes innovation in the chemical industry⁷³. For example, it registers and assesses the safety of chemicals that companies manufacture or import and restricts or gradually bans the use of substances with unacceptable risks. The simplification of REACH is very important as the regulation leads to a high administrative burden for SMEs as multiple levels of compliance and overlapping regulations create inefficiencies⁷⁴.

In terms of reporting and transparency requirements, both the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive require companies to disclose sustainability-related risks, which leads to duplication in reporting. The ESPR, with its product-specific transparency requirements, overlap with the CSRD and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards Regulation, which provide for disclosures at company level. In terms of product sustainability standards, both the ESPR and the Regulation on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures (CLP) emphasize transparency in the environmental and safety labeling of products. As the CLP Regulation focuses on the labeling of hazardous substances and the ESPR requires product labels to disclose environmental impacts (e.g. energy consumption, recyclability), this again leads to duplication of effort. A significant part of

⁷³ European Commission. (2024). REACH Regulation. European Commission. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/chemicals/reach-regulation_en

⁷⁴ Verband der Chemischen Industrie. (2024). New Commission, New Approach: Designing the New Chemicals Industry Package. <https://www.vci.de/ergaenzende-downloads/vci-position-chemicals-industry-package.pdf>



the new chemicals package addresses PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), man-made chemicals that are used in products such as cookware, textiles, firefighting foams and packaging due to their water and grease repellent properties. The problem is that they are highly persistent, which has earned them the nickname "forever chemicals", and cause health problems associated with cancer, hormonal disruption, immune system damage and developmental disorders. It is therefore crucial that the new legislation defines and establishes clear guidelines for the identification of PFAS, bans their non-essential use when safer alternatives are available, sets deadlines for the elimination of these substances in highly affected sectors (e.g. textiles, packaging), improves monitoring of contamination of water, soil and food, and establishes remediation programs for contaminated sites and products. This objective of lowering exposure to PFAS aligns with the broader strategies on preventive health. von der Leyen intends to address health challenges, including the side effects of remote working, cardiovascular diseases, degenerative illnesses, and autism, building on the success of the Beating Cancer Plan as it successfully demonstrated the impact of prevention-focused strategies. Therefore, her preventive health approach should promote early detection, healthier lifestyles, and access to innovative treatments.

Secondly, similar to the EU Chips Act, vdl plans to present a Critical Medicines Act, which would reduce the EU's dependence on non-EU countries for ingredients for critical medicines, particularly China⁷⁵. It is crucial to secure active pharmaceutical ingredients to ensure the self-sufficiency of the chemical industry, which is central to the EU's strategic autonomy. The Act is expected to boost EU manufacturing capacity by providing incentives and funding from the next MFF, diversify supply chains by building partnerships with reliable global suppliers while reducing over-reliance on single regions, and build up safety stocks to ensure availability even in times of crisis⁷⁶.

Thirdly, in her first 100 days, she will propose a European Cybersecurity Action Plan for Healthcare to better protect hospitals and healthcare providers from cyber-attacks that threaten patient safety, data integrity and business continuity. Key actions under the Cybersecurity Action Plan could include the acceleration of the modernization of hospitals' and healthcare providers' IT systems and support them in implementing modern cybersecurity solutions, the creation of a central EU framework for cyber-attack detection, response and recovery, and the introduction of EU-wide standards for cybersecurity in healthcare (e.g. data encryption, secure communication

⁷⁵ Pharmaceutical Technology. (2024). EU Critical Medicines Act: closer to ending overreliance on Asian manufacturers. <https://www.crowell.com/en/insights/client-alerts/preparing-for-the-eus-new-approach-to-critical-medicines-and-medicine-shortages-a-new-critical-medicines-act>

⁷⁶ Roos, K., Navin-Jones, M. (2024). Preparing for the EU's New Approach to Critical Medicines and Medicine Shortages: A New 'Critical Medicines Act'? Crowell. <https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/analyst-comment/eu-critical-medicines-act-overreliance-asian-manufacturers/?cf-view&cf-closed>



protocols, network security)⁷⁷. As von der Leyen has focused on creating standards for cyber regulation in her first term, such as with the updated Network and Information Security Directive (NIS2), the Cyber Resilience Act, the requirements under the Medical Device Regulation, the In Vitro Diagnostic Regulation, the Digital Operational Resilience Act and the AI Act, it is now time to focus on their effective implementation. For example, guidelines for the implementation of the NIS2 Directive in the healthcare sector could be developed and disseminated via ENISA's toolkits⁷⁸. The European Cybersecurity Action Plan for Healthcare should also promote best practices for digital resilience, such as ICT risk management measures (i.e. strategies to identify, assess and mitigate risks in all IT systems), regular resilience testing and third-party risk management to address vulnerabilities throughout the supply chain⁷⁹.

Boost productivity with digital tech diffusion

As von der Leyen argues, productivity can be boosted and the diffusion of digital technologies promoted by focusing first on the implementation of the digital laws passed during her first term in office. More specifically, she wants to focus on the implementation and enforcement of the DSA and the DMA, laws promoting a fair,

transparent and innovative digital ecosystem. For example, the DMA tackles anti-competitive practices by “gatekeepers”, and the DSA mandates greater transparency in algorithmic processes and advertising practices. Together, these provisions reduce barriers to entry, allowing more SMEs to access markets, and promote the integration and diffusion of cutting-edge technologies, increasing productivity and tech diffusion across all industries.

However, driving innovation and increasing productivity remains difficult in the current complex legal landscape of data protection and data security. The fragmentation of data laws makes it difficult for companies to manage multiple types of data. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets high data protection standards for personal data, the Data Act clarifies the handling of non-personal data and the Data Governance Act (DGA) promotes data altruism (i.e. trustful data sharing between companies and the public sector in strategic sectors such as health, energy or transport). The recent AI Act creates even more regulatory burden as AI companies must adhere to ethical standards and the safe use of data. To mitigate this, vdL intends to propose a European Data Union Strategy that focuses on simplifying and harmonizing the framework for data sharing while maintaining high data

⁷⁷ MedTechEurope. (2024). COCIR and MedTech Europe Vision for Strengthening Cybersecurity in Europe's Future Healthcare Systems. <https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/eu-commission-healthcare-cyber-plan/>

⁷⁸ Poireault, K. (2024). New EU Commission to Unveil Healthcare Cybersecurity Plan in First 100 Days. Infosecurity Magazine. <https://www.medtecheurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/20241118-cocir-medtech-europe-european-action-plan-on-cybersecurity-of-health.pdf>

⁷⁹ Violante, G., Di Felice, A. (2024). Strengthening healthcare cybersecurity: Focus on implementation, not new legislation. Digitaleurope. https://cdn.digitaleurope.org/uploads/2024/12/DIGITALEUROPE_Strengtheninghealthcarecybersecurity-1.pdf



protection and security standards. Therefore, the strategy would aim to unlock the potential of data sharing by aligning the requirements of the GDPR, the Data Act and the DGA, and to support SMEs by providing financial incentives and technical guidance for the use of data spaces and standardized data sharing protocols.

Building on the implementation of existing laws to enable technological innovation and diffusion, the next step is to strengthen technological capabilities and increase investment in transformative technologies, with a particular focus on AI. In her first 100 days, the Commission President promised to launch an “AI Factory Initiative” to create centers of excellence to develop, test and scale AI applications (e.g. predictive maintenance, automation, supply chain optimization) for different sectors such as health, manufacturing, climate or finance. Such hubs, which bring together universities, companies and governments to jointly develop AI solutions, make use of the supercomputing capacity of European supercomputers. After the EuroHPC selected seven consortia to set up the first AI factories across Europe in December 2024 (Barcelona, Spain; Bissen, Luxembourg; Bologna, Italy; Stuttgart, Germany; Mimer, Sweden; Kajaani, Finland; and Athens, Greece), the AI factories are expected to be operational by April 2025⁸⁰. In parallel to the establishment of the AI factories, the Commission will develop an “

Apply AI strategy” in cooperation with Member States and civil society to promote the industrial use of AI and improve the delivery of public services. The focus will be on the ethical use of AI at scale to better support the integration of AI in industry and public services (e.g. smart city management, personalized education, healthcare). Although the EU has strong research capacities, Ursula von der Leyen proposed the establishment of a European AI Research Council to further advance AI innovation. This would make it possible to pool resources and coordinate AI research efforts in the Member States.

As AI requires huge investments that no European company or country can afford on its own (i.e. between €30 billion and €35 billion over three years), pooling resources through the European AI Research Council is a good alternative to position the EU as a global leader in the research and development of advanced, general-purpose AI⁸¹. It would follow the example of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) as a means of avoiding duplication, promoting knowledge sharing and awarding uniform grants and funding⁸². In fact, the association of 23 European Member States, 11 non-European Associated Member States and 4 Observers allowed countries to pool their resources to support investments in high-energy physics research that a single European country could not have supported over such a long period of time. This led to fundamental

⁸⁰ European Commission. (2024). AI Factories. European Commission. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/ai-factories>

⁸¹ Reddel, M. (2024). Op-ed: Why EU's AI development needs a CERN moment. The Parliament Magazine. <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/oped-why-europes-ai-development-needs-a-cern-moment>

⁸² Ivanova, I. (2024). Viewpoint: Time to strengthen Europe's leadership through AI in science. Science Business. <https://sciencebusiness.net/viewpoint/ai/viewpoint-time-strengthen-europes-leadership-through-ai-science>



innovative research such as the World Wide Web, superconductivity, magnets, electronics, vacuum, AI, radio frequency, software or precision mechanics. Her objectives, which aim to improve the EU's global leadership position and close the gap with other global competitors, are not limited to AI, however, but also to other disruptive technologies, as she plans to increase investment in supercomputing, semiconductors, IoT, genomics, quantum computing and space technology. There is still a lot to be done in this area to close the EU's competitiveness gap. In space, a Single Market should be created, as proposed by Draghi and Letta, while efforts should be made to improve access to finance to support innovation and the scaling up of European companies. In the area of semiconductors, the European Chips Act should be revised to establish an EU budget for semiconductors and allow Member States to jointly invest in the procurement of chips to be defined in a New Semiconductor Strategy. For quantum technologies, quantum labs connected to all HPC centers in the EU should be established and an EU Quantum Chips Plan should be developed to coordinate the European approach and avoid duplication of investment. Finally, it is crucial to intensify cooperation between the EU and the US to ensure access to the “digital transatlantic marketplace” with low barriers, promote common standards for procurement and guarantee supply chain security.

Putting research and innovation at the hearth of the economy

As explained by Draghi in his report, despite the EU producing almost one-fifth of the world's scientific publications (18%), ranking ahead of the US (13%) and second only to China (27%), its innovation capacity and presence in innovative markets lags behind that of the US due to a slower pace of technology adoption and issues for new European tech start-ups to scale up⁸³. There are different root causes to this problem. One of them concerns private R&D spending, i.e. private companies' investments, where the EU spent 2.24% of its GDP on R&D in 2022, compared to 3.5% for the US, 3.3% for Japan, and 2.4% for China⁸⁴. In addition, public R&D spending, which comes from national budgets and is complemented by a smaller amount of EU funding (i.e. mainly Horizon Europe, but also the Structural and Cohesion Funds and the European Defense Fund), is highly fragmented and not always aligned with EU-wide priorities. This lack of coordination between national public spending and EU objectives directly hampers EU excellence, negatively impacts cooperation between public and private entities on innovative projects and weakens the bargaining power of Member States when negotiating procurement contracts. In fact, cooperation networks rarely extend across national/regional borders, with only 13% of shared partnerships submitted each year involving organizations based in two

⁸³ European Commission. (2024). DG RTD. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/srip/2024/ec_rtd_srip-report-2024-chap-03.pdf

⁸⁴ Eurostat. (2024). R&D expenditure. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=R&D_expenditure&oldid=645219



different European countries (compared to almost 30% in the US).

Moreover, innovation clusters in the EU are still underdeveloped and focus mainly on traditional industries, such as the Paris cluster, which specializes in the automotive (PSA Automobiles), aviation (Safran Aircraft Engines) and chemical (L'Oréal) industries. In contrast, the largest international clusters (e.g. Tokyo-Yokohama, Seoul, San Francisco, Beijing or Shenzhen-Hong Kong-Guangzhou) specialize in digital communication, computer and audiovisual technology and are built around universities or research and technology organizations with strong research programs. In this area too, i.e. academic excellence, the Union is struggling. Although the EU has an excellent university system on average, there is a significant gap in world-leading research universities, particularly in the natural and health sciences. This can be explained by the fact that the management of such institutions is burdened by heavy bureaucratic constraints and that it is difficult to create sufficiently attractive conditions to retain and attract the most talented researchers in Europe and around the world (e.g. less attractive remuneration packages, no guarantee of promotion for top researchers, lower salaries). Yet, universities play a central role in innovation ecosystems by producing a highly skilled workforce, conducting pioneering research and supporting the conversion of research into practical innovation.

Ursula von der Leyen has promised several measures to boost Research and Innovation (R&I). At the top of her agenda is the strengthening of European University Alliances (EUAs). The 60 EUAs, which are cross-border partnerships between European universities supporting excellence in education and R&I, while promoting cross-border mobility and inclusion, aim to create a European education area that is connected, innovative and globally competitive. Strengthening this network of European universities is essential to enhancing the EU's global reputation as a leader in education and innovation. Draghi, for example, stresses the importance of increasing the funding of 10 million euros a year for each alliance (i.e. 600 million euros a year in total), provided by Erasmus+, to unlock their potential. Some experts even call for the internationalization of the EUAs, and in particular for greater collaboration with African universities, which would increase student and staff mobility and improve cultural understanding and language skills⁸⁵. Mario Draghi also supports the idea of a European Degree, which is gradually becoming a reality after the Commission presented a proposal for a European Degree in March 2024. Such a degree could be provided for Bachelor's, Master's or doctoral programs which are jointly designed and delivered by universities from different EU countries. It would be based on the criteria agreed at EU level to ensure recognition in the 27 EU Member States, participation of

⁸⁵ Cino Pagliarello, M. (2024). Internationalisation of European Universities Alliances: The New Frontiers. EU Green. <https://eugreenalliance.eu/internationalisation-of-european-universities-alliances-the-new-frontiers/>



higher education institutions, and the uniform standards and excellence of the participating universities. The League of European Research Universities has highlighted some prerequisites for the success of the initiative, such as using the existing tools of the Bologna Process to avoid duplication and/or contradictory processes, reducing bureaucracy in the introduction of joint degrees and joint programs with the aim of reducing the administrative burden on universities, and aligning it with regional and national qualifications frameworks⁸⁶.

A European Biotech Act will be developed as part of a broader Strategy for European Life Sciences with the aim of positioning the EU as a world leader in biotechnology and life sciences. Simplifying and clarifying the rules for the evaluation of clinical trials for biotech-derived medicines (1), establishing an EU Biotech Hub to provide advice, support and coordination on regulatory issues (2), promoting the use of generative AI in personalized medicine, drug development and protein pioneering (3), increasing bio-manufacturing capacities, including addressing the shortage of qualified workers in biotechnology (4), revising the [Bioeconomy Strategy](#) by the end of 2025 to include biotechnology in the work program of the European Innovation Council with a particular focus on the

protection of intellectual property and the promotion of the benefits of biotech innovation (5), and increasing funding and investment building on successful public-private partnerships such as the Circular Bio-Based Europe Joint Undertaking (6) will be the six main pillars of the Act⁸⁷. Points 5 and 6 reflect her commitment to expand the European Research Council (ERC) and European Innovation Council (EIC), as well as to support public-private partnerships (PPPs) to provide more resources (e.g. larger budgets, innovative laboratories)⁸⁸.

But the President of the Commission plans to do more with regard to these objectives, in line with the recommendations of the Draghi report. With a budget of over €16 billion under Horizon Europe, the ERC focuses on scientific excellence, awarding grants primarily to support early-stage research. Draghi has called for ERC funding to be doubled to support a greater number of projects, as well as the introduction of a competitive program to develop leading research institutions. The EIC focuses on disruptive innovation, supporting high-risk, high-return projects through grants and equity investments, with a budget of €10.1 billion until 2027. Draghi calls for its transformation into an ARPA-type agency, as it currently lacks the scale and skill set to make strategic decisions in highly specialized fields, as well as a reinforced

⁸⁶ LERU. (2024). Maximizing the impact of European Universities alliances. https://www.leru.org/files/European-Universities-alliances_LERU-Paper.pdf

⁸⁷ Scitodate. (2024). More Future Biotech Opportunities in Europe: 2025 EU Biotech Act. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/more-future-biotech-opportunities-europe-2025-eu-act-scitodate-olate/>; European Commission. (2024). Press Release: Commission takes action to boost biotechnology and biomanufacturing in the EU. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1570

⁸⁸ EuropaBio. (2024). The Future of Biotech: The Role of Legislation on Investment for Innovation – Recommendations. https://www.europabio.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final_merged-1.pdf



budget. Increased funding for the ERC and EIC seems realistic, as von der Leyen has promised to increase research spending. There are also calls to double the Horizon Europe budget to €200 billion in the next MFF and to better align the next EU Framework Program for Research and Innovation with EU competitiveness priorities⁸⁹. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) should also be expanded to increase the mobility of researchers, promote knowledge exchange and prevent brain drain⁹⁰. According to Draghi, this should be one of the most urgent priorities. However, the MSCA seems to have been ignored as vdL's focus is on strengthening the ERC and the EIC.

While the proposed initiatives are comprehensive, they are not enough to tackle the scale and complexity of the challenges facing the EU. Ursula von der Leyen needs to be even more ambitious and should take up Enrico Letta's recommendation to create a fifth dimension of the Single Market, namely the free movement of knowledge. By extending the four Single Market principles (i.e. goods, services, capital and people) to the unrestricted flow of knowledge, ideas and innovation between Member States, this would allow the EU to radically reshape its research and innovation ecosystem and create a truly integrated European Research

Area. By harmonizing the Intellectual Property framework, allowing researchers to move freely across the EU and benefit from the same qualifications, tax rules and employment regulations, and developing EU-wide standards for data sharing and open science, all researchers, institutions and companies across the Union will be able to access each other's knowledge, infrastructure and know-how. The creation of a central digital platform providing access to publicly funded research, datasets and educational resources, or a European Knowledge Commons, would be central to this strategy⁹¹. Publicly funded research would then become freely accessible to all researchers in the EU, including universities and their students, as well as research institutions.

The Commission should also support the development of European data spaces while working towards the harmonization of mechanisms for cross-border data flows, in particular with regard to data protection, transfer and interoperability. However, the main problem is that the current data sharing policy is too restrictive. For example, the Data Act, which gives device manufacturers exclusive control over the data generated by their devices, restricts users' and third parties' access to this data due to restrictive licensing and pricing⁹². The other major piece of legislation is the

⁸⁹ Greenacre, M., Francica, E. (2024). Von der Leyen vows to increase EU research spending in new term. Science Business. <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/horizon-europe/von-der-leyen-vows-increase-eu-research-spending-new-term>; Palmowski, J. (2024). Recasting of Commission roles puts research centre stage. The Guild. <https://www.the-guild.eu/blog/recasting-of-commission-roles-puts-research-centre-stage.html>

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Brent, T., Francica, E. (2024). High-profile report urges EU to create a 'fifth freedom' of research and innovation. Science Business. <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/horizon-europe/high-profile-report-urges-eu-create-fifth-freedom-research-and-innovation>

⁹² Martens, B. (2024). Research, innovation and data: a fifth freedom in the EU single market? Bruegel. https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/research-innovation-and-data-fifth-freedom-eu-single-market#footnote5_teoeIha



EU Data Governance Act, which focuses on improving access to public and sensitive data, but excludes private platforms that generate significant innovation from data, leading to missed opportunities to create value from data pools⁹³. Overcoming this would better integrate data sharing platforms, fostering closer collaboration between universities, research institutions and private companies. In such an ecosystem, knowledge diffusion would drive economic vitality as well as societal progress and cultural enlightenment.

Turbo charging environment

In order to advance the EU's ambitious goals, a “turbo charging environment” must be created in which sufficient financial resources are available to support targeted initiatives and SMEs. The first transformative element promised by von der Leyen concerns investment and capital mobilization. De-risking private investments, one of vdL's promises, is a key prerequisite for commercial banks, investors and venture capitalists to be able to finance fast-growing companies with confidence. Indeed, private investors often see green projects as risky, as they have to deal with complex regulations, long payback periods and uncertain returns. To address that, the Net Zero Industry Act was adopted in June 2024, which aims at enhancing European manufacturing capacity for net-zero technologies and their key components (e.g. grid, nuclear fission energy, hydropower, solar thermal, carbon

capture, or wind propulsion technologies)⁹⁴. While this is a positive step, the Commission needs to focus on its proper implementation. She also promised to develop further initiatives in cooperation with the European Investment Bank. For example, Mario Draghi proposes the introduction of a dedicated European Green Guarantee as part of an EU-wide guarantee scheme to support bank loans for green investment projects and companies.

Maximizing public investment and mobilizing private capital are also key to meet the massive financing needs, especially for green technologies. In order to maximize public investment, the combination of public funds with private capital offers considerable advantages including better project profitability and the absorption of initial risks. To make this a reality, as recommended by Draghi, the Commission should encourage the development of strong public-private partnerships that strike a balance between affordability for taxpayers and profitability for investors. Such PPPs should also encourage the introduction of risk-absorbing instruments such as concessions (i.e. an agreement between the government and a private company to build, operate or manage a public service or infrastructure for a certain period of time) and licenses (i.e. an official authorization granted by the government that allows a company to use public resources or provide certain services), which ultimately promote stable and predictable revenue streams for investors

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ European Commission. (2024). The Net-Zero Industry Act: Accelerating the transition to climate neutrality. European Commission. https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/industry/sustainability/net-zero-industry-act_en



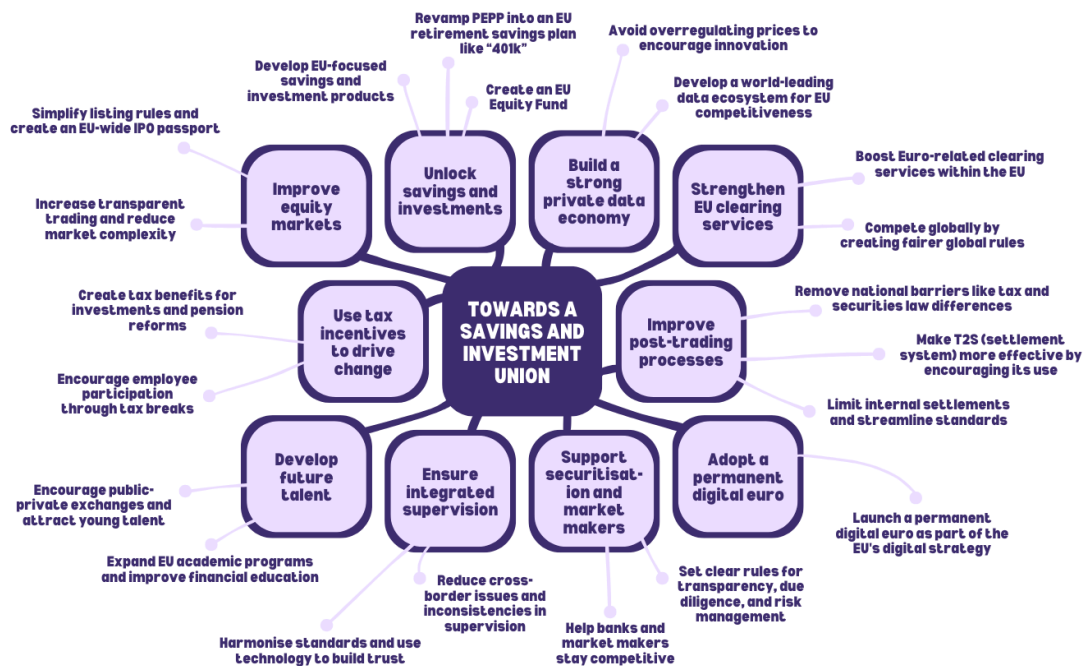
while ensuring that the projects serve public interest objectives. Going one step further, the creation of a public-private fund would prove valuable in supporting SMEs going public through IPOs, as it would lower the barriers by sharing the costs and risks. A public-private fund for IPOs would also strengthen the Capital Markets Union by increasing activity on European stock exchanges and attracting investors.

In order to mobilize more private capital, the completion of the Capital Markets Union is essential. Currently, the CMU, which aims to facilitate access to finance for SMEs from investors across the EU regardless of national borders, is still highly fragmented. The differences between Member States in terms of regulations, welfare systems, tax regimes and regulatory frameworks restrict the free flow of capital, and there is a high dependency on bank loans, which makes the EU economy very vulnerable to banking crises⁹⁵. While the measures taken in 2015 have not led to the

expected results, von der Leyen's previous Commission work (e.g. new CMU action plan, ELTIF, ESAP) will not take effect until several years from now. Recognizing these shortcomings, she promised to take action by proposing a European Savings and Investment Union (SIU), building on the Letta report and rebranding the Capital Markets Union. The SIU would focus on combining the EU's huge pool of private savings (among the highest in the world) with strategic investment, with the issue of national pension reforms at its heart. For example, Letta proposes to simplify the Pan-European Personal Pension Product by creating a new long-term EU Savings Product that makes saving easier and more automatic for individuals. Also, in contrast to the pay-as-you-go pension systems prevalent in other EU countries, funded pension systems would be favored, as they not only strengthen capital markets but also improve fiscal sustainability, as in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark⁹⁶.

⁹⁵ Deutsche Börse Group. (2024). Towards an EU Savings and Investments Union. <https://www.deutsche-boerse.com/resource/blob/4195814/fla44160d0ab7623cf9c61813a4eb0d3/data/Towards%20an%20EU%20Savings%20and%20Investments%20Union.pdf>

⁹⁶ Lannoo, K. Et al. (2024). From a Capital Markets Union towards a robust Savings and Investment Union. CEPS. <https://www.ceps.eu/from-a-capital-markets-union-towards-a-robust-savings-and-investment-union/>



Source: [Deutsche Börse Group](#)

Figure 5 - Policy Priorities for a European Savings and Investment Union

All in all, these should provide the necessary financial leverage to achieve her second transformative measure of supporting strategic projects, or Important Projects of Common Interest (IPCEIs), which are large-scale projects involving several EU Member States to address common challenges. As with batteries (e.g. EuBatIn in 2021), hydrogen (e.g. Hy2Tech and Hy2Use in 2022, Hy2Infra and Hy2Move in 2024) and microelectronics (e.g. ME/CT in 2023), a first set of new IPCEIs is planned for early 2025, which will likely continue to focus on microelectronics, hydrogen technologies and health and pharmaceuticals⁹⁷. However, the current procedures for accessing EU

funds or state aid for such projects can take up to several months due to complex bureaucratic and financial obstacles. Therefore, the Commission President promised to simplify funding mechanisms (e.g. by introducing a central EU approval process for the assessment and approval of IPCEIs and/or combining public funding from EU programs with national and private sector contributions) and speed up implementation (e.g. by developing pre-approved frameworks and clear performance indicators for the planning, approval and implementation of IPCEIs). To further support IPCEIs financially, vdL intends to set up a dedicated European

⁹⁷ European Commission. (2024). Approved integrated Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI). European Commission. https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid/ipcei/approved-ipceis_en; Fusion Industry Association. (2024). New EU Commission Wants to Increase Investment for Cleantech and Further Promote Research and Innovation. <https://www.fusionindustryassociation.org/new-eu-commission-wants-to-increase-investment-for-cleantech-and-further-promote-research-and-innovation/>



Competitiveness Fund, which would increase the budget in the next MFF with the aim of ensuring that funds are allocated to meet the EU's strategic objectives in order to remain competitive.

She also plans to revise the Public Procurement Directive, which regulates how public authorities purchase goods, works and services. The revision is urgently needed as the 2014 reforms have proved insufficient to simplify processes, encourage SME participation and align procurement more closely with strategic objectives⁹⁸. Figuratively speaking, competition for public contracts in the EU internal market has decreased over the last ten years (2011-2021), with the duration of procurement increasing over the last ten years (i.e. from an average of 62.5 days in 2011 to 96.4 days in 2021). One of the main problems is that most public contracts are awarded to the lowest bidder, often disregarding qualitative evaluation. This is a major problem as it often leads to social fraud, non-compliance, very low quality works/services and unfair competition, ultimately driving up costs significantly both during the execution of the contract and after its completion⁹⁹. In his report, Letta emphasizes the importance of implementing the recommendations from the European Court of Auditors' report, such as improving the quality and accessibility of procurement data by

merging European and national procurement datasets, aligning clearer and measurable public procurement targets with EU priorities (e.g. twin transitions, promoting social value, improving social capital) and updating the Commission's tools for monitoring competition in public procurement (e.g. incorporating data analytics and AI) while promoting a more competitive, transparent and fairer procurement environment by evaluating tenders based on non-price criteria (e.g. environmental and social performance). Although the Commission has just launched a call for evidence and a public consultation to assess the Public Procurement Directives in December 2024¹⁰⁰, a proper reform proposal is not expected before 2026, with the reform unlikely to enter into force before the end of the decade due to negotiations in the European Parliament and Council and the subsequent two-year transposition into national law.

Tackle the skills and labour gap

To support the EU's ambitious targets, it is crucial to address the insufficient supply of skilled labor in the Union. The digital transformation (i.e. the introduction of AI, big data, robotics and IoT) has increased the demand for specialists such as software developers, cyber experts or data analysts in all sectors. However, the population in

⁹⁸ Lappe, M., Nicoli, F. (2024). European Union public procurement reform: a difficult but essential balancing act. Bruegel. <https://www.bruegel.org/first-glance/european-union-public-procurement-reform-difficult-essential-balancing-act>

⁹⁹ European Federation of Building and Woodworkers. (2024). Revision of the public procurement Directives must support fair competition and quality jobs in construction. EFBWW. <https://www.efbww.eu/news/revision-of-the-public-procurement-directives-must-support-fair/4257-a>

¹⁰⁰ European Commission. (2024). Commission launches call for evidence and public consultation on the evaluation of the Public Procurement Directives. European Commission. https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-launches-call-evidence-and-public-consultation-evaluation-public-procurement-directives-2024-12-13_en



Europe is aging and there are not enough skilled workers in STEM fields, mainly due to a mismatch between the skills of the workforce and the needs of the market, which is shrinking the labor pool. In addition, cutting-edge sectors such as machine learning, semiconductors or quantum computing are advancing rapidly and require niche experts. This gap is affecting the EU's competitiveness as competitors such as the US and China have more robust talent pipelines. It also slows technological innovation and adoption, delaying the transition to the twins. To counteract this, von der Leyen has proposed taking measures that align with Draghi's recommendations. One of her promises is to propose a STEM Education Strategic Plan to encourage students, from primary school to university and vocational training, to pursue STEM education. As highlighted in the Draghi report, the plan must drive a curriculum review that involves as many stakeholders as possible (e.g. teachers, education providers, social partners, businesses) and targets the skills most needed in the EU labor market (e.g. green technologies, data science). However, it is currently difficult to meet the new skills requirements in a targeted manner. On the one side, the formal education system lacks precise information on the qualifications required by companies, and on the other, companies may not have the incentive to offer employees further training opportunities. To remedy this, vdL wants to propose a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training that promotes lifelong learning (e.g. learning formats with online and hybrid options tailored to

students, workers and people from disadvantaged backgrounds). In addition, Draghi emphasizes the need to incentivize participation in vocational training, whether through tax breaks for employers when they offer vocational training to their employees or by providing scholarships and grants for students and low-income families. It is equally important to promote worker mobility and labor market flexibility within the Single Market by enabling workers to transfer their qualifications seamlessly across borders. To this end, she wants to propose an Skills Portability Initiative to ensure that a qualification acquired in one country is recognized in another. Specifically, Draghi advocates the introduction of a common system for the certification of skills in all EU Member States that deviates from the current formal and rigid educational degrees. This could be achieved by standardizing vocational qualifications within the European Qualifications Framework or by promoting the recognition of micro-certificates and digital badges as qualifications. Such credentials could, for example, be accessed online by employers and other employees thanks to an EU-wide Digital Skills Passport, since it would record an individual's qualifications, certifications and skills in a standardized format. As she also pledged to increase funding for skills and focus on sectors critical to the twin transitions, it could be expected that the STEM Plan would leverage existing funding mechanisms such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and the ESF+ to support STEM education programs as well as opportunities for students to gain practical experience in



STEM fields (e.g. internships, apprenticeships). The several promises made by Ursula von der Leyen and the various recommendations made by Mario Draghi would fall under a comprehensive and unifying framework that she wants to create: a Union of Skills. This umbrella initiative would serve as a basis for the development, retention and recognition of skills across the EU, coordinating the various efforts to address skills and labor shortages, promote lifelong learning and ensure a resilient workforce.

European Homemade Defence and Security

Bringing the European Defence Union into life

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a shock for the EU, exposing its weaknesses in the defense sector, such as highly fragmented defense procurement, insufficient stockpiles, slow decision-making and heavy reliance on external supply chains¹⁰¹. In the air sector, for example, there is currently strong industrial consolidation in the production of military transport aircraft (e.g. Airbus, A400M) and modern fighter jets (e.g. Dassault Rafale, Eurofighter Typhoon), with European manufacturers such as Airbus and Leonardo being major players in the global market¹⁰².

This process of pooling the expertise and resources of several national manufacturers into fewer, larger entities was a deliberate decision mainly driven by France, Germany, and the UK, but also Spain and Italy, which began in the 1960s and reached important milestones in the 1990s. However, there is also a significant gap in integrated air and defense missile systems, as there is no EU equivalent to the US Patriot or THAAD systems. In the naval sector, France, Italy, Germany and Spain form the leading bloc in the development of frigates, submarines and aircraft carriers¹⁰³. However, they all have their own procurement policies and independent shipbuilding industries, which leads to duplication in production. In contrast, South Korean shipbuilders such as Hyundai and Samsung Heavy Industries can offer more attractive deals as their domestic industry benefits from a coordinated procurement policy, lower labor costs, technological leadership (e.g. modular design), government subsidies and greater production volume.

Going back to the EU, the fragmentation is the highest in the land sector¹⁰⁴ due to low entry barriers (e.g. no need for highly sophisticated equipment or expertise, lower initial investment), which leads to smaller Member States developing niche solutions. Examples include light tactical vehicles tailored for high-mobility operations in rough terrain, with the Spanish URO

¹⁰¹ Momtaz, R. (2024). Taking the Pulse: Is Having a European Commissioner for Defense a Mistake? Carnegie. <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/09/taking-the-pulse-is-having-a-european-commissioner-for-defense-a-mistake?lang=en>; Clapp, S. (2024). Reinforcing Europe's defence industry. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/749805/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)749805_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/749805/EPRS_BRI(2023)749805_EN.pdf)

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Olsson, P. (2021). The European Defence Market – Unevenly Fragmented. FOI. <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%207730>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.



VAMTAC and the Italian IVECO LMV having different design philosophies, anti-tank systems, with the Polish Spike and the French MILAN having different launchers and targeting systems, or small arms with the same operational purpose, with the Czech CZ BREN 2 and the German HK416 having different calibers. In addition, most of this equipment and vehicles need to be modernized to counter new threats such as drones that can provide real-time intelligence, deliver precision strikes and penetrate conventional defenses, as well as electronic warfare that can disrupt or even disable communications systems and GPS. This obsolete equipment stems mainly from

systems developed decades ago, when today's threats were not as present and evolving so rapidly. Finally, although the EU has significant space capabilities (e.g. Copernicus, Galileo, EGNOS), Member States are pursuing their own space initiatives (e.g. Italy's COSMO-SkyMed, Luxembourg's GovSat-1 or Germany's Heinrich Hertz), which dilutes the collective resources. Consequently, the EU-27 is losing its competitive edge to other players such as the US, China and even private companies such as SpaceX due to a lack of innovation and cost-efficiency in space launch systems.

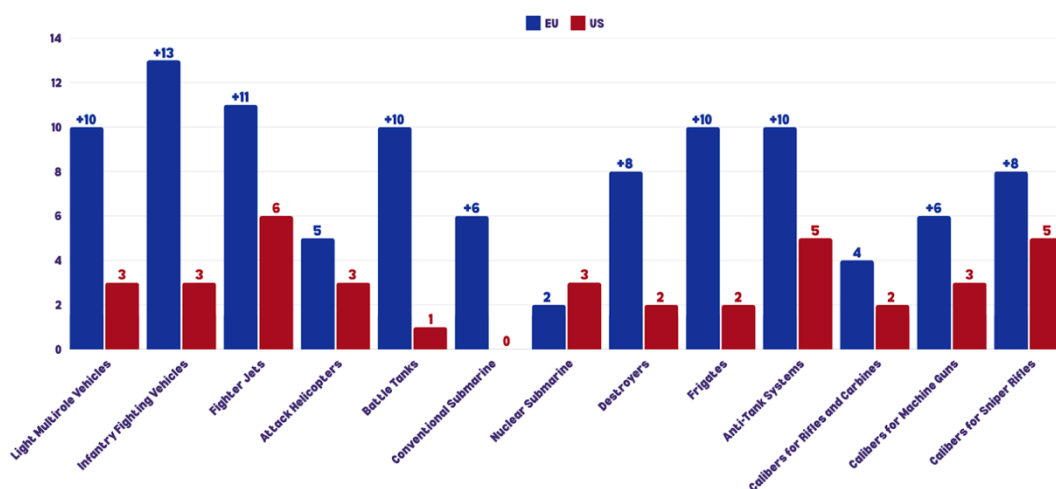


Figure 6 - EU vs. US Capability Gaps in Key Defence Assets

The EU has taken several steps to respond to some of these challenges, such as the European defence industry reinforcement through common procurement Act (EDIRPA), which aims to promote joint

procurement to improve defence industry capabilities, or the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), which aims to ensure the timely delivery of



munitions and missiles¹⁰⁵. However, more needs to be done by the Union to address the EU's critical capability gaps. Aware of this, Ursula von der Leyen has moved the European Defence Union up the political agenda. At the heart of this priority is institutional leadership, with the appointment of the first ever Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius, who will present a White Paper on the future of European defence in the coming weeks. At the operational level, it will be important to ensure the correct implementation of EDIS and the adoption of EDIP. The Commission must ensure that capacity building focuses on key investments such as strengthening the EDF to match the EDIP, so that it adequately targets the EU's most critical shortcomings (i.e. maritime, land and air combat capabilities, space systems, early warning technologies, integrated air and missile defence).

With these initiatives in mind, vdL intends to prioritize the creation of a Single Market for defence equipment and services, which would remove current barriers and allow Member States and industry to align defence procurement, production and trade. As Letta and Draghi advocate in their reports, such a move would lead to a better integration between industrial capabilities and defense policy. By better matching supply and demand, European defense manufacturers will benefit from a better insight into current and future market needs, which will improve access to finance and promote cross-border cooperation. This would also help Member States to align

their national policies and ultimately maximize public spending through better coordination, support SMEs and innovation thanks to the harmonization of regulatory frameworks and promote “Made in EU” defence procurement. Although aiming to increase the EU's strategic autonomy (EU-SA) in the defence sector, Ursula von der Leyen made it clear that these steps are not aimed at replacing NATO, but at strengthening cooperation with the organization, as she wants to extend the EU-NATO partnership to emerging threats in the cyber, hybrid and space domains. For example, NATO forces would benefit from the standardization of equipment and systems, which would optimize joint operations in the air, land, sea, space and cyber domains (i.e. efficiency, interoperability and capabilities).

A preparedness Union

In addition to facing critical gaps in the land, aid, naval and Spanish domains, the EU's approach to cybersecurity challenges is also fragmented and under-resourced. For example, national cyber efforts to counter hybrid threats are still too weak to effectively counter large-scale cyber operations targeting them. In general, the EU lacks cutting-edge capabilities, such as insufficient AI integration into threat detection systems, preventing it from processing large amounts of data in real time. Furthermore, the nature and response time of cyber threats is not uniform across the EU, as Member States have developed their own solutions due to varying levels of

¹⁰⁵ Koenig, N., Schütte, L. (2023). Procurement Process: Spending Together, Transforming European Militaries in Times of War. <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/sonderausgaben/defense-sitters/procurement-processes/>



capacity and cooperation. For example, national Computer Emergency Response Teams often do not align on threat-sharing speed or protocols. There are also differences in the development of tools (for example, Germany focused on its Digital Defense Cloud to protect critical infrastructure, which is not compatible with other EU systems) or threat perception (for example, the Netherlands focuses on fighting ransomware attacks, while Italy and Spain focus on phishing schemes to counter financial cybercrime). Hence, von der Leyen is committed to ensuring that the EU can respond effectively to new challenges, especially by promising to coordinate national cyber efforts.

Building on Sauli Niinistö's [report](#), the Commission will present an EU strategy on preparedness, which will serve as a roadmap for coordinated action. Following the report published on October 30, few priorities and themes can be expected in the strategy. One key aim is to address the design of the current sectoral framework, which overlooks interconnected risks and cross-border dimensions, leading to limitations in the speed of decision-making and effectiveness of crisis management. To address this, Niinistö recommends creating EU-wide early warning systems that integrate real-time data from Member States, establishing a centralized operational crisis center based on the Emergency Response Coordination Centre, and developing a risk assessment of all risks. Another recommendation is to improve the framework and strengthen the dual-use infrastructure (i.e. civil-military cooperation) to ensure that responses to

hybrid threats and armed aggression can serve both civilian and military needs. Ursula von der Leyen also announced that cyber resilience and deterrence tools will be essential to secure critical infrastructures and improve sanctions against cyber and hybrid attacks, and that a new strategy to improve chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) security will be presented. Despite previous efforts to improve resilience to public security threats, such as the [EU CBRN Action Plan](#), the [European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority](#) (HERA) or the [EU Security Union Strategy](#), there are still gaps in preparedness, cross-border coordination, advanced technological integration and a heavy bureaucracy for crisis management actors.

A safer and more secure Europe

While the Commission has taken positive steps over the last five years, challenges remain. Examples include Europol's limited operational capacity and dependence on Member States for enforcement (e.g. dependence on the US FBI to carry out arrests during Operation Trojan Shield in 2021, reliance on national authorities to seize servers and arrest suspects during the dismantling of the Emotet malware network in 2021), European Arrest Warrant's procedural shortcomings and legal inconsistencies directly affecting its effectiveness (e.g. arrests for minor offenses such as theft of property, possible human rights violations in the event of extradition, delays in judicial proceedings), or the exploitation of vulnerabilities in European ports by drug trafficking networks (e.g.



personnel bribery and coercion, infiltration of IT systems). As a result, vdL wants to build on the progress made so far while tackling these limitations by proposing a new European Internal Security Strategy to provide a comprehensive framework for tackling emerging threats. Von der Leyen also promised to make Europol a truly operational police force by doubling its staff and improving its ability to support national law enforcement agencies, as well as modernizing the European Arrest Warrant to ensure faster and more consistent cross-border prosecutions. In the fight against cross-border crime, she wants to extend the mandate of EPPO and introduce a new European Action Plan against drug trafficking as part of a broader EU ports strategy, building on the European Ports Alliance and aiming at security, competitiveness and economic independence. The President will also push the Commission to develop a new counter-terrorism agenda and establish a European Critical Communication System that will enable authorities to better coordinate responses to terrorism and organized crime in real time.

Stronger common borders

Despite the EU's ambitious goals and efforts to improve border capacities, the previous target of reaching 10,000 permanent corps by 2024 was not achieved as only 2,500 were operational, resulting in a postponement to 2027. Given von der Leyen's next goal of tripling the number of European border and coast guards to 30,000 by 2029, it seems

very difficult to increase Frontex's capacity by 20,000 in the space of just two years. While she stresses the importance of equipping Frontex with state-of-the-art surveillance and situational awareness technology to improve seamless border management through enhanced screening procedures and the Eurodac database, she has not provided detailed plans on how to address the challenges associated with rapidly increasing the agency's capacity (e.g. recruitment challenges, budgetary constraints and coordination with Member States)¹⁰⁶. Complementing these efforts, a new EU visa policy strategy will be developed to strike a balance between secure borders and accessible entry routes, while preserving the EU's internal cohesion under external pressure and the fundamental principle of free movement within the Schengen area. Based on a document of the Hungarian Presidency, the main changes concern the improvement of the Entry/Exit System and the European Travel Information and Authorization System through digital tools to abolish physical entry/exit stamps, to track the entry, exit and overstay of both visa-free travelers and Schengen visa holders using biometric data, and to screen applicants against EU security databases to detect potential threats (e.g. criminal links, overstaying). (e.g. criminal links, overstaying). The role of eu-LISA, the EU agency for large-scale IT systems, will be strengthened to compile comprehensive statistics on the use and misuse of visas and the possibility of applying personal visa

¹⁰⁶ Vohra, A. (2024). Rights groups criticize EU plans to strengthen Frontex. DW. <https://www.dw.com/en/rights-groups-criticize-eu-plans-to-strengthen-frontex/a-70138773>



sanctions (e.g. temporary entry bans, higher visa fees, shorter visa validity periods) will be examined.

Standing fair and firm on migration

With the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum in May 2024, the objective for the next five years is to focus on the implementation of all parts of the Pact, complemented by efforts to address unresolved issues. For example, the Commission will develop a European Migration and Asylum Strategy to create a long-term vision. In addition, legal migration pathways will be aligned with the skills needs of European economies and regions to address both demographic challenges and labor shortages. A new common approach to return is also proposed to address fragmentation and inefficiencies in refugee resettlement and return procedures. In addition, the EU will strengthen partnerships with the Global Alliance to fight migrant smuggling and take decisive action against shadow economies that exploit vulnerable migrants, such as labor exploitation (e.g. lack of proper contracts and legal protection or unfair wages) or illegal activities (e.g. counterfeit goods, human trafficking, smuggling, drug trafficking). To support these future efforts and strengthen the objectives of the previous mandate, which focused on readmission agreements, the prevention of irregular departures and the fight against smuggling networks, Ursula von der Leyen emphasized the importance of maintaining and developing strategic

relationships with non-EU countries in the area of migration and security. A new Pact for the Mediterranean will also be introduced, based on two pillars: the promotion of regional cooperation between European companies and regional players and the creation of humanitarian corridors through strategic partnership agreements with countries in North Africa, but also in countries across the Mediterranean¹⁰⁷.

A Better European Way of Life for the People

Social fairness in the modern economy

Although the Commission does not have direct competence to adopt on social issues, a number of initiatives to strengthen social rights, social protection and the fight against poverty and social exclusion have been adopted, such as the Adequate Minimum Wage Directive, the European Guarantee for Children and the Work-Life Balance Directive, which came into force during the first mandate of von der Leyen, and other initiatives such as the Skills Pact or the Platform Work Directive that have been adopted. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and its 20 principles also played a key role in von der Leyen's social policy, although it met limited success as it depends on Member States' commitments. That is why vdL has promised to present a new action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which is likely to intensify cooperation with the social partners and civil society

¹⁰⁷ Martin, I. Appointment of the New European Commission I: What Mediterranean for the European Union? Policy Center. <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/appointment-new-european-commission-i-what-mediterranean-european-union>



organisations such as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), BusinessEurope, Caritas Europa or the European Women's Lobby (EWL).

In order to better coordinate policies to promote fair wages, good working conditions, training and a fair transition to employment, vdL plans to present a roadmap for quality jobs for both workers and freelancers. In line with this idea, she will propose a new Pact for European Social Dialogue in early 2025, in cooperation with European trade unions and employers. It will aim to promote cooperation in policy-making between trade unions (e.g. ETUC, UNI Europa, EPSU), workers (e.g. Fair Wear Foundation, EWL, FEANTSA), and employers (e.g. SMEunited, BusinessEurope), through social dialogue. A process called “tripartite dialogue”. This serves a variety of purposes, such as fostering trust between stakeholders, promoting more inclusive labour markets, strengthening the institutional framework and better adapting to new labour market challenges (e.g. digitalisation, green transition, automation, skills development). Such a pact could pave the way for the creation of formalised platforms for tripartite sectoral discussions, as well as introduce regular progress reviews and reports on the implementation of decisions

taken, in order to improve transparency and accountability in the social dialogue process¹⁰⁸. To have a greater impact, she proposed to increase funding to support a fair transition in the next MFF and to ensure that regional disparities do not remain while transitioning to a sustainable economy.

Particular attention will be paid to combating poverty and social exclusion, as 21% of the EU population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, most of whom are children, single-parent families, migrants and people with disabilities¹⁰⁹. It is also recognized that there is an urgent need to tackle demographic change (e.g. migration and ageing) and regional disparities (e.g. public services, private sector activity, skills development, transport, job opportunities, digital connectivity). She is therefore committed to developing the first EU Anti-Poverty Strategy aimed at tackling the root causes of poverty and social exclusion in all Member States. This is in response to criticism voiced against the Commission, which viewed poverty as a socio-economic and individual problem, disregarding its multidimensional aspects¹¹⁰. The new strategy, which aims to reduce poverty by 50% by 2030, will strengthen the European Child Guarantee, an initiative that provides free healthcare, early childhood education, adequate housing and adequate nutrition to every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social

¹⁰⁸ EuroHealthNet. (2024). The European Pillar of Social Rights at the core of the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029. https://eurohealthnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/publications/2024/2024_02-eurohealthnet-input-towards-la-hulpe-declaration-on-the-future-of-social-europe.pdf

¹⁰⁹ Eurostat. (2024). Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_poverty_and_social_exclusion

¹¹⁰ EAPN. (2024). EAPN Roadmap Towards an EU-Anti-Poverty Strategy. European Anti-Poverty Network. <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/eapn-EAPNs-roadmap-towards-an-EU-Anti-Poverty-Strategy-5991.pdf>



exclusion¹¹¹. It will be crucial to complement this with a strategy that addresses the systemic and structural causes of poverty, promotes the participation of those affected by poverty in the policy development process and connects the dots with other key EU policies (e.g. digital rights, migration and asylum, climate policy, tax rules, housing plans)¹¹². Such a strategy could advocate for a greater allocation of funding (e.g. through ESF+) to ensure the smooth implementation of the Child Guarantee in all Member States, call on Member States to develop national action plans against poverty aligned with the EU strategy, or encourage Member States to prioritise poverty reduction in their recovery and resilience plans¹¹³.

Ursula von der Leyen also wants to specifically target the housing sector to reduce homelessness and ensure decent living conditions, particularly given the housing crisis across the Union. Between 2015 and 2023, house prices in the EU increased by an average of 48%, with Hungary registering the largest increase (+173%), followed by Czechia (+111%), Lithuania (+114%), and Portugal (+104%), while between 2010 and 2022, rents in the EU increased by an average of 18%. Resulting from this housing affordability problem, 20% of adults aged between 30

and 34 in the EU still live with their parents, a figure that rises to 42% for those aged between 25 and 29¹¹⁴. Compared to ten years ago, the average age of young people leaving their parental home has increased in 14 countries, such as in Croatia (+1.8 years), Greece (+1.7) and Spain (+1.6)¹¹⁵.

To address that, vdL made housing a priority in Dan Jørgensen's agenda to address housing issues (e.g. affordability, urban development and climate resilience) and to integrate housing into broader EU strategies. For example, the inclusion of housing projects in the RRF, which allocates €723.8 billion in grants and loans to support Member States' reconstruction efforts, would provide more funding for affordable housing construction, renovation and infrastructure improvements. Regarding the integration of housing with the Green Deal, this would be useful to accelerate the transition to energy efficient housing. As housing is responsible for around 40% of the EU's energy consumption and 36% of its greenhouse gas emissions, it would make a significant contribution to achieving the EU's 2050 climate neutrality targets. Accordingly, the Commission will present the first EU Affordable Housing Strategy, which would set EU-wide benchmarks for housing affordability and quality standards and define clear targets and funding

¹¹¹ Council of the European Union. European Child Guarantee: How the EU Protects Children. Consilium. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/european-child-guarantee>

¹¹² EAPN. (2024). EAPN Roadmap Towards an EU-Anti-Poverty Strategy. European Anti-Poverty Network. <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/eapn-EAPNs-roadmap-towards-an-EU-Anti-Poverty-Strategy-5991.pdf>

¹¹³ EuroHealthNet. (2024). The European Pillar of Social Rights at the core of the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029. https://eurohealthnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/publications/2024/2024_02-eurohealthnet-input-towards-la-hulpe-declaration-on-the-future-of-social-europe.pdf

¹¹⁴ European Parliament. (2024). Rising housing costs in the EU: the facts (infographics). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20241014STO24542/rising-housing-costs-in-the-eu-the-facts-infographics>

¹¹⁵ Eurostat. (2023). When do young Europeans leave their parental home? European Commission <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230904-1>



mechanisms to increase the stock of affordable housing. By tackling rising housing costs, which disproportionately affect low-income households, the President of the Commission wants to ensure that access to safe, quality and affordable housing becomes a right for every European. To complement the support to low-income households, von der Leyen will launch the Social Climate Fund, which will be used to renovate homes to improve energy efficiency and reduce utility costs.

Another of her goals is to extend the New European Bauhaus to housing design that respects the principles of sustainability, inclusivity and affordability. Specifically, she would encourage creativity and innovation in solving housing problems by fostering cross-sectoral collaboration between designers, architects and urban planners, as well as promoting innovative architectural and urban design solutions that integrate green technologies¹¹⁶. Concretely, this refers to the inclusion of urban greening (e.g. rooftop vegetation, urban gardens), green materials (e.g. recycled, bio-based or carbon-neutral components), passive/zero-energy buildings (e.g. solar panels, heat pumps, rainwater harvesting), community-oriented buildings (e.g. common areas, shared housing), accessibility (e.g. for the elderly, people with disabilities) or mixed-use developments (e.g. residential, commercial and recreational areas). In the shorter term, she plans to simplify funding allocation processes and inject liquidity into the market so that Member States can double

their cohesion policy investment in affordable housing to address urgent needs. However, an increase in funding alone could prove useless if Member States and regions do not have sufficient capacity or face administrative obstacles to use EU funds effectively. This was already the case in the past, for example, when Bulgaria and Romania struggled with low absorption rates during the 2007-2013 programming period, leaving billions of euros unspent instead of being used for development. During the same period, Romania also experienced significant mismanagement problems and irregularities in public procurement, which led to payment suspensions and clawbacks, further delaying project implementation. Another example is Calabria in Italy, where local authorities have difficulties in meeting the administrative requirements for EU funds (e.g. required audits, detailed project proposals), which affects the efficiency in the implementation of (large-scale) projects.

So, it is important that this financial package is accompanied by technical assistance to Member States in order to improve the management of funds and the implementation of projects, while ensuring a fair distribution of funds between regions. In addition, the Commission will also need to make adjustments to the existing framework, such as simplifying procedures, revising legislation, strengthening monitoring and improving capacity building. She clearly expresses her intention to revise state aid rules by adapting them to

¹¹⁶ European Union. (2024). New European Bauhaus. European Union. https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en



allow public funding of energy-efficient and social housing projects without breaching EU competition law. She also wants to work more closely with the EIB to create a pan-European Investment Platform to leverage sufficient public and private investment to address funding gaps to finance large-scale housing initiatives, including the development and renewal of affordable housing, as EIB-backed projects would provide guarantees or risk-sharing mechanisms to attract private investors. However, there are other adjustments that are necessary to avoid inefficiencies, delays and mismanagement that are not mentioned. For example, it is important to address budgetary constraints, such as national allocation frameworks, which currently allocate funds on the basis of multi-annual frameworks and pre-determined national quotas, and co-financing rules, which place a burden on national budgets. Another important adjustment concerns technical assistance to local and regional authorities, which is currently limited due to weaker administrative capacity in project preparation, management and reporting. This leads to project delays, inefficiencies and even unintentional misuse of funds. To address this problem, standardized project proposal templates and pre-approved project pipelines could be promoted and EU funding programs such as Twinning or the Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) could be expanded to address their current shortcomings (i.e. modest funding and project scopes prevent the support of large infrastructure projects or the coverage of urgent liquidity needs, lengthy and

administratively burdensome application procedures, designed as external policy instruments to promote institutional cooperation and capacity building between EU Member States and non-EU countries rather than to promote intra-EU cooperation, or lack of integration with other EU instruments such as the TSI).

Reuniting societies, supporting young people

To support youth, von der Leyen aims to strengthen the bond between young Europeans and the EU institutions, while addressing the pressing issues arising from the ubiquitous role of technology in everyday life. This starts with embedding intergenerational fairness as a core principle of EU governance, ensuring a fair distribution of opportunities, resources and responsibilities between younger and older generations. This will be the role of Commissioner Glenn Micallef, who will need to ensure that young people's concerns, such as education, employment and digital rights, are heard and included in decision-making. The President of the Commission has promised to organise the first annual Youth Policy Dialogue with the Commissioners within her first 100 days. This annual forum serves as a platform to directly engage young Europeans and EU Commissioners in the debate on youth-related policies such as education, employment, digital rights and climate action, with the aim of strengthening democratic input and ensuring that EU policies reflect the priorities of the younger generation. However, trust and engagement between youth and the



institutions can only work if youth have a formal voice in EU policy-making. vdL has therefore pledged to set up a President's Youth Advisory Board, a standing committee made up of youth representatives from across the EU, which will directly provide feedback and ideas to the President of the European Commission. An effective way to engage young people and encourage their participation in EU policies is through social media promotion. Sharing stories of young people participating in European Youth Events via quizzes, challenges, polls and videos on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, as well as working with youth ambassadors and influencers, could resonate with young audiences who would feel empowered, informed and inspired to get involved in European democracy.

Supporting young people also means giving them more and better opportunities. As Erasmus+ is the most successful and well-known programme supporting education, and training initiatives across Europe, promoting mobility, cultural exchange and lifelong learning, von der Leyen logically wants to strengthen it to make it even more effective. The programme's budget for 2021-2027 was €26.2 billion, almost double the previous budget for 2014-2020 (€14.7 billion). Allocating more resources to enable greater participation and expand mobility and learning opportunities could be achieved either by supporting additional increases in funding to support new initiatives or by improving access. For

example, the programme could be extended to secondary school students (e.g. Erasmus High School Initiative) and non-traditional participants such as adult learners and trainees and disadvantaged groups or regions (e.g. Erasmus for All). More opportunities could similarly be made available for apprentices, teachers and youth workers. As recommended by Draghi, the scope of the programme could also be improved and focus on building skills and competences relevant for the EU in the 21st century. Thus, Erasmus+ projects should increasingly, but not exclusively, focus on digital literacy, green technologies or climate resilience. However, in September 2024, concerns were raised about a possible reduction of €295 million in the Erasmus+ budget for the period 2025-2027, part of a broader proposal to cut EUR 1.52 billion from the EU's flagship programs, as more funds for defense and economic recovery need to be allocated and some member states are pushing for a “more prudent budget” to avoid increasing debt financing costs, given their alarming economic situation¹¹⁷. Yet, these cuts are not in line with the EU's commitment to education, inclusion and skills development, especially at a time when the programme is expected to support major changes that the EU (and the youth!) need more than ever.

Another objective of von der Leyen is to improve the well-being of society addressing the negative impacts of social media. Ursula von der Leyen's plan revolves around three main initiatives. She proposes

¹¹⁷ Lazarevski, B. (2024). Cutting the Erasmus+ budget would be a disaster for Europe's future. Emerging Europe. <https://emerging-europe.com/opinion/cutting-the-erasmus-budget-would-be-a-disaster-for-europes-future/>; Sacco, C. (2024). Erasmus' funding slashed in EU's 2025 budget plans. The Journal MT. <https://thejournal.mt/erasmus-funding-slashed-in-eus-2025-budget-plans/>



to launch a Europe-wide investigation to assess how social media affects mental health, privacy and social cohesion in different age groups, by examining issues such as misinformation, concerns about physical appearance and the impact of screen time. These evidence-based findings will ultimately serve as the basis for the development of an Anti-Cyberbullying Action Plan that would hold platforms accountable for removing harmful content, provide more resources for schools, parents and youth organisations to educate young people about digital safety, and address addictive design of online services by promoting transparency and ethical design practices by technology companies to limit the use of addictive design elements (e.g. "clickbait", endless scrolling, dopamine triggering) to protect children and adolescents from harmful digital behaviours and mental health risks.

A Union of equality

Building on the efforts of the previous mandate, she proposed initiatives to further advance gender equality, anti-discrimination policies and inclusiveness. For example, she wants to address the persistent discrimination and legal protection gaps in the EU by revising and extending the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy. Similarly, the EU Action Plan against Racism, which expires in 2025, needs to be renewed, as racial discrimination remains a significant problem in many Member States (e.g. in policing, housing, employment and

education). However, the Commission will face challenges given that anti-feminist movements have gained traction in Europe. There will also be resistance from Member States due to the different cultural and political perspectives of EU countries and resistance from some Member States regarding EU's advocacy in LGBTIQ rights or anti-racism reforms¹¹⁸.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy, which also expires in 2025, is also on von der Leyen's agenda as it needs to be expanded and significantly strengthened. Indeed, persistent challenges (e.g. unequal pay, under-representation in leadership positions and gender-based violence) point to the need to strengthen women's protection from violence, including online harassment and domestic violence, to promote women's representation in decision-making positions and economic participation, as well as to close the gender pay gap. In order to better structure the promotion of women's rights, von der Leyen intends to present a comprehensive plan outlining the EU's priorities and actions, to be presented on International Women's Day on 8 March 2025. However, even this task will not be easy, as some Member States are opposed to the EU getting involved in national criminal laws, especially when it comes to defining violence against women, reflecting online anti-gender movements

¹¹⁸ Batura, J. (2024). A Union of Equality? Verfassungsblog. <https://verfassungsblog.de/a-union-of-equality/>; Hubert, A. (2024). The 'union of equality' requires leadership. Social Europe. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-union-of-equality-requires-leadership>



taking place across Europe¹¹⁹. Another example of resistance is the challenges faced by Ursula von der Leyen in achieving gender balance in the new College of Commissioners in 2024. Despite her request that each Member State nominate both a man and a woman for the post of Commissioner, most of them did not comply with her request, as the majority of them submitted only one nomination, mostly male candidates¹²⁰. As a result, only seven women were nominated. After exerting some pressure, the total number of women was 11, compared to 12 four years earlier, decreasing female representation from 44.4% (2019) to 40.7% (2024)¹²¹.

A Better European Quality of Life for the People

Food security, water, and nature

European farmers have been at the center of the discussion recently, blaming the EU for making their lives more difficult. Concerned about market saturation and the resulting fall in prices caused by the entry of Ukrainian agricultural products on the EU market, which could be exacerbated by a possible trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur, about the jeopardizing of their productivity by EU environmental policies on pesticide and emission cuts, and

about the pressure on their profit margins due to increased production costs, European farmers have taken to the streets in various EU countries demanding action from the Union. These issues highlight the need for the Commission to take a forward-looking posture to balance the protection of EU farmers with the sustainability, competitiveness and resilience of the sector. Accordingly, von der Leyen pledged to present a vision for the agri-food sector in her first 100 days, setting out a long-term strategy aligned with the EU's wider priorities such as the Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategy.

The Commission President also promised to support an EU income policy for farmers that would protect farmers across the EU from market volatility and external shocks through stable and fair incomes. This policy, which is likely to build on the CAP as it already provides direct payments and subsidies to farmers, could introduce new mechanisms to address price fluctuations and ensure fair pricing in the supply chain. Given her attention to environmentally friendly practices, such a policy could also provide incentives to compensate for environmental protection (e.g. organic farming, agroforestry or regenerative agriculture). She also intends to simplify administrative processes and reduce red tape for farmers, using digital tools and

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; Dell'Aquila, M. (2024). A 'nearly' gender-balanced Commission isn't good enough. It's actually an ominous omen for advancing gender equality in the EU. CEPS. <https://www.ceps.eu/a-nearly-gender-balanced-commission-isnt-good-enough-its-actually-an-ominous-omen-for-advancing-gender-equality-in-the-eu/>

¹²⁰ Rankin, J. (2024). Von der Leyen set to miss gender-balance target for EU top jobs. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/26/von-der-leyen-set-to-miss-gender-balance-target-for-eu-top-jobs>

¹²¹ Coi, G., Cokelaere, H. (2024). Von der Leyen's new Commission: Male and slightly less stale. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyens-new-commission-male-gender-balance-young/>; European Commission. (2024). Press statement by President von der Leyen on the next College of Commissioners. European Commission. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-next-college-commissioners-2024-09-17_en



technologies to simplify reporting and compliance or by streamlining application procedures for CAP payments and environmental programs. Investing in infrastructure along the entire agricultural supply chain to increase productivity, efficiency and market access is another key element of vdL's program. For example, subsidies could be provided for precision agriculture (i.e. the introduction of digital tools and data-driven farming methods), food processing technologies (i.e. alternative proteins, plant-based foods) or supply chain digitization (i.e. platforms to improve traceability, transparency and efficiency).

With the appointment of Costas Kadis as Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans and her promise to develop a European Oceans Pact, the protection of Europe's marine resources is also on the agenda. Kadis will have to develop a centralized and coherent strategy to tackle the challenges of the maritime sector. He will oversee the implementation of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy and ensure sustainable fishing practices, fair quotas and the protection of marine biodiversity. Other key tasks include strengthening the EU's voice at global level, e.g. in negotiations on biodiversity on the high seas (BBNJ agreement) and combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, as well as supporting the development of the blue economy (i.e. promoting sustainability in sectors such as aquaculture, offshore

renewable energy and shipping). His role will be very important given the many challenges facing the EU, such as marine pollution (e.g. plastic waste, chemical pollution), sustainable fish stocks in the Mediterranean, the ineffectiveness of marine protected areas or fisheries agreements with non-EU countries (e.g. with Senegal), which current regulatory tools are failing to resolve¹²².

Climate adaptation, preparedness and solidarity

Ursula von der Leyen takes note of the growing threat of climate change and natural disasters and is committed to ensuring that EU Member States are able to respond to these new challenges. She wants to develop several proposals such as the European Civil Defense Mechanism, the European Climate Adaptation Plan and the European Water Resilience Strategy, which fit into the broader framework of the Preparedness Union built on the recommendations of the Niinistö report. First, the European Civil Defence Mechanism aims to improve civil protection in the event of disasters. It is a response to the more frequent and severe forest fires, floods and droughts that occur in the EU and which Member States are often unable to deal with on their own. Currently, the EU relies on the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), which is complemented by rescEU. In his report, Niinistö recommends transforming the

¹²² Banchereau, M. (2024). The EU says it won't renew a fishing agreement with Senegal criticized by many in the country. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/senegal-european-union-fishing-agreement-59a1ffab970df93c8ad8267e8a32fe22>; European Court of Auditors. (2020). EU protection of marine environment is shallow. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/INSR20_26/INSR_Marine_environment_EN.pdf



UCPM into a comprehensive European Civil Defence Mechanism that integrates both civilian and military capacities to deal with hybrid and large-scale disasters, where a central crisis center is responsible for the coordination of civil-military forces, supported by public and private actors. In order to improve solidarity and defense mechanisms, the mutual assistance clauses, i.e. Article 42(7) and Article 222 TFEU, must also be strengthened. Second, the objective of the European Climate Adaptation Plan is to improve preparedness and resilience in all key sectors (e.g. energy, food systems, water, land use). Indeed, the EU has taken action in various policy areas, but lacks a unified, cross-sectoral strategy for climate change adaptation. This leads to gaps in climate change preparedness in key areas which directly threatens public safety and economic stability. Therefore, the proposed European Climate Adaptation Plan must address these critical sectoral gaps by, for example, developing a comprehensive risk assessment framework to identify and map risks and provide efficient early warnings.

Niinistö also recommends that all critical infrastructure is upgraded to withstand extreme weather conditions and crisis cascades, and public-private partnerships should be encouraged to fund and implement such adaptive infrastructure projects. Third, the European Water Resilience Strategy, which aims to ensure sustainable and equitable access to water resources by addressing the key challenges of water scarcity, quality and management, should be in line with the Critical Entities Resilience Directive. Due to pollution, increasing droughts and excessive water

abstraction, the availability of clean water is declining in many parts of Europe, affecting not only citizens but also agriculture, industry, energy production and biodiversity, with negative consequences for the economy and the environment. Combining both would therefore lead, for example, to comprehensive risk assessments, as the Water Strategy requires regular assessments of risks to water resources, covering both natural and man-made threats, as required by the CER Directive. Regarding the use of technology (e.g. satellites, smart meters, automatic controls), the Water Strategy encourages the deployment of digital solutions to monitor water resources, predict disasters and improve water efficiency (e.g. water recycling, desalination), while the CER Directive sets mandatory cybersecurity requirements for critical facilities, including water systems.

Protecting Democracy and European Values

Protecting our democracy

Given the growing prominence of hybrid threats (e.g. cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns) and their impact on European elections, policy making and public debate, it is crucial for the Union to address them in order to safeguard its democratic processes. As explained in the first part, the EU has already implemented a number of tools such as the FIMI toolkit, FIMI ISAC, RAS or DSA, as well as the European Democratic Action Plan or EUvsDisinfo. Although these mechanisms form a 'democracy shield',



there is no such formal designation, so there is no coherent and robust framework to coordinate other EU efforts. Moreover, despite the tools available, problems remain, such as the reactive rather than proactive nature of the EU response, the imbalance in resources within the EU and between the EU and its adversaries, or the failure to address the role of platform design, algorithmic amplification and micro-targeted advertising in disseminating disinformation and integrating it into legislation¹²³. To address these challenges, Ursula von der Leyen pledged to propose a "new" European Democracy Shield to fight foreign information manipulation and interference online, revolving around six main pillars: increasing digital and media literacy, enhancing prevention through pre-bombing, creating a European network of fact-checkers and making it available in all languages, improving digital enforcement to ensure misinformation is detected, tackling deep fake news, and preserving and promoting freedom of expression. She specifically mentioned that the Democracy Shield builds on the examples of France's Viginum and Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency, both of which represent innovative and tailored approaches to countering information manipulation and

psychological warfare. For example, Viginum focuses on educating citizens and public authorities about digital manipulation tactics and uses advanced technology to monitor and analyse disinformation campaigns on digital platforms, while the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency enhances the population's ability to identify and counter manipulative narratives and coordinates countermeasures to disinformation campaigns. This would allow the creation of proactive strategies that offer flexible solutions addressing both technical and psychological vulnerabilities.

However, she must be very careful, as excessive disinformation can have the opposite effect¹²⁴. A focus on fact-checking and content removal may raise concerns about censorship and the violation of fundamental freedoms (e.g. expression, press, access information). On January 9, 2025, for example, Elon Musk, owner of the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), hosted Alice Weidel, the German AfD candidate for chancellor, for a live interview that sparked controversy and debate across Europe. During the 74-minute conversation, the two discussed migration and energy policy, and space exploration¹²⁵.

¹²³ Allegri, M. R. (2024). The Impact of Disinformation on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 11(1 S1), 99, 100. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n1s116>; Bradshaw, S., & Centre for International Governance Innovation. (2020). Influence Operations and Disinformation on Social Media. In *Modern Conflict and Artificial Intelligence*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. 44, 45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27510.9>; Franco, M. (2021). Russian Grand Strategy and how to handle it. Egmont Institute. 8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28885>; Benková, L. (2018). The Rise of Russian Disinformation in Europe. Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik. 1, 3. https://www.aies.at/download/2018/AIES-Fokus_2018-03.pdf

¹²⁴ Allegri, M. R. (2024). The Impact of Disinformation on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 11(1 S1), 99, 100. <https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv11n1s116>; Benková, L. (2018). The Rise of Russian Disinformation in Europe. Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik. 1, 3. https://www.aies.at/download/2018/AIES-Fokus_2018-03.pdf

¹²⁵ Marsh, S., Escritt, T. (2025). Musk hosts German far-right leader on X, stirs angst about election meddling. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/musk-host-german-far-right-leader-x-stirs-angst-about-election-meddling-2025-01-09/>



The problem here is that the AfD is classified by German security authorities as an anti-immigration, anti-Islamic and far-right party because the AfD is associated with neo-Nazi organizations and symbols, and their parliamentary Chairman, Björn Höcke, was convicted twice for using a Nazi slogan at a rally¹²⁶. Allowing the AfD to spread its ideas therefore raised concerns about the spread of misinformation on a global digital platform¹²⁷. On the one hand, Weidel and Musk argue that freedom of speech should not be selective and that everyone should enjoy this right. On the other hand, current German Chancellor Olaf Scholz responded that he does not support freedom of expression when it is used to promote far-right views¹²⁸. In response, the Commission stated that Musk had the right to express his opinion, but that it should never be aimed at spreading hate speech or influencing elections, according to the DSA¹²⁹. This underlines the fragile balance between safeguarding the individual right to freedom of expression and preventing the dissemination of harmful and/or false content to protect democratic processes.

Strengthening the rule of law

As a fundamental value of the EU, it is essential to defend the rule of law, which is what vdL is committed to. Currently, the Rule of Law report focuses on the four areas mentioned in the first part, and she would like to include an assessment of the impact of rule of law deficiencies on the Single Market. By presenting rule of law issues not only as a matter of principle, but also as an essential element of economic stability and fairness, Member States could be encouraged to remedy these deficiencies, as the economic consequences have greater resonance. Then, to really strengthen the rule of law, von der Leyen would like to allocate European funds specifically to national measures aimed at combating corruption and protecting the EU's financial interests. These funds could, for example, support anti-corruption bodies and law enforcement capabilities, develop digital tools for fraud detection and cross-border investigations, or improve whistleblower protection. She also calls for preserving the independence, transparency and pluralism of the media throughout the Union, by focusing on the implementation

¹²⁶ Marsh, S., Escritt, T. (2025). Musk hosts German far-right leader on X, stirs angst about election meddling. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/musk-host-german-far-right-leader-x-stirs-angst-about-election-meddling-2025-01-09/>; Gera, V. (2025). Musk uses X livestream to amplify German far-right leader's views ahead of an election. APNEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/germany-elon-musk-afd-alice-weidel-521a8fb77250ee0f354fa4e76c1ce63d>; Paternoster, T. (2025). Germany's far-right AfD chief pushes back on Nazi claims in chat with Elon Musk on X. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/09/elon-musk-and-germanys-far-right-chief-host-online-chat-the-eu-warns-could-be-illegal>; Gilbert, D. (2025). Elon Musk and Far-Right German Leader Agree 'Hitler Was a Communist'. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-far-right-german-leader-weidel-hitler-communist/>

¹²⁷ Marsh, S., Escritt, T. (2025). Musk hosts German far-right leader on X, stirs angst about election meddling. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/musk-host-german-far-right-leader-x-stirs-angst-about-election-meddling-2025-01-09/>

¹²⁸ More, R. (2025). Germany's Scholz responds to Musk, saying freedom of speech must not back extreme-right. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/germanys-scholz-responds-musk-saying-freedom-speech-must-not-back-extreme-right-2025-01-21>

¹²⁹ Gera, V. (2025). Musk uses X livestream to amplify German far-right leader's views ahead of an election. APNEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/germany-elon-musk-afd-alice-weidel-521a8fb77250ee0f354fa4e76c1ce63d>; Paternoster, T. (2025). Germany's far-right AfD chief pushes back on Nazi claims in chat with Elon Musk on X. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/09/elon-musk-and-germanys-far-right-chief-host-online-chat-the-eu-warns-could-be-illegal>



of the European Act on Media Freedom, and by providing greater financial and institutional support for journalists and the media. The latter could involve financial support for training programs for journalists in investigative journalism, cybersecurity and legal protection, or strengthening the Rapid Reaction Mechanism for Media Freedom, which provides emergency assistance to journalists under threat. Particular attention should be paid to Hungary, Poland or Italy, where the independent press is struggling due to the increased use of government measures such as strategic lawsuits against public participation.

Yet, despite ambitious policies, enforcement remains a problem as the EU expects Member States to implement and enforce such rules. Ursula von der Leyen should therefore focus on robust enforcement mechanisms so that the EU can act decisively in the event of non-compliance. One such effort could be the empowerment of the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism, a mechanism complementary to Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (i.e. the suspension of certain rights of Member States for serious breaches of EU values), in case a breach of the rule of law or a threat directly affecting the EU's financial interests. Yet, it has traditionally been rarely used because its activation may exacerbate intra-EU disagreements, it may be difficult to establish a causal link between a breach of the rule of law and a direct impact on the EU's financial interests, or there is ambiguity because it overlaps with existing budgetary supervision (e.g. OLAF, Court of

Auditors). Another challenge relates to media ownership, where a balance must be struck regarding politically appropriate media ownership to avoid excessive restrictions on freedoms (e.g. freedom of expression and freedom of the press). When a few individuals (e.g. billionaires, political actors) or corporations control the media, diversity of viewpoints can be compromised and reporting can become biased, undermining journalistic independence and ultimately disproportionately influencing public opinion.

Putting citizens at the heart of democracy

The initiatives proposed by Ursula von der Leyen, i.e. annual citizen participation (e.g. panels and dialogues), civil society engagement (e.g. consultation mechanisms, partnerships), and empowerment for local governance (e.g. decentralised decision-making, expansion of the network of Local EU Councillors), aim to operationalize the democratic ideals expressed in the CoFoE. She wants to institutionalize citizen participation by incorporating the recommendations of the European Citizens' Panels directly into the EU policy-making process. To further improve citizen engagement and representation at local level, she wants to ensure that EU policies are aligned with the needs of local communities by working more closely with the European Committee of the Regions and involving Council members to improve governance at local level. She also calls for better cooperation between civil society organizations and the EU, recognizing the crucial role they play in promoting environmental justice, equality and freedom



of expression, protecting marginalized groups and monitoring members of government to improve governance at the local level.

Europe's Global Leadership: Power Through Partnership

Enlargement as a geopolitical imperative

Enlargement will be an important aspect of vdL's next mandate, reflecting the strategic goal of increasing the EU's influence as a geopolitical actor in neighboring regions and countering the growing presence of other powers, such as Russia. The expansion or integration of new countries would also allow the EU to narrow its income gap with the US, as enlargement would grow the Single Market, boost trade and investment and ultimately provide significant economic growth for the new members and new opportunities for existing members¹³⁰. The integration of several countries of the Western Balkans (e.g. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia) and the Eastern Partnership (e.g. Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova) by 2030 would be a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity, but would also pose major challenges¹³¹. In addition to concerns and skepticism regarding economic competition (e.g. budgetary and agricultural policy), migration and cultural integration, enlargement could also

complicate EU decision-making, as the balance of power in the EU (i.e. between big and small, east and west, rich and poor, state believers and market economists) could change, and bilateral conflicts between the member states could increase¹³². Marta Kos, the new Commissioner for Enlargement, will focus on preparing candidate countries for EU membership and ensuring that they meet the required standards in the areas of governance, rule of law, democratic reforms and EU values and policies. Thus, the EU's recognition of enlargement as a geopolitical imperative will require careful consideration by EU actors. With the securitization of enlargement policy that has emerged in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is crucial that speed is not prioritized over substance and security is not prioritized over values, lest the long-term goal of enlargement and the proper functioning of the Union be overshadowed.

A more strategic approach to neighbourhood

In the Mediterranean, economic, energy, migration and security challenges are growing ever more complex. Dubravka Suica's role will be to tackle these issues. For example, pressure will be put on to manage migratory flows from and through the Mediterranean region in order to ease tensions between regional actors, but also to tackle the root causes of instability that

¹³⁰ Khan, M. (2024). EU 'must expand or integrate' to close income gap with America. The Times. <https://www.thetimes.com/business-money/economics/article/eu-must-expand-or-integrate-to-close-income-gap-with-america-q5bbg6l8t>

¹³¹ Stanicek, B., et al. (2023). Enlargement policy: Reforms and challenges ahead. European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/757575/EPRS_BRI%282023%29757575_EN.pdf

¹³² Ibid.; Buras, P., Morina, E. (2023). Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu>



fuel migration (e.g. economic inequality, poor governance, regional conflicts) by promoting trade, investment and development that stimulate economic growth and job creation. Another key aspect of the EU's regionalized approach to diplomacy is the development of an EU-Middle East strategy. The main priority is to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the EU supporting a two-state solution by engaging with influential regional players such as Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to encourage reform and peace-building efforts. It is imperative to guarantee the security of Israelis and Palestinians, while tackling the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. However, it is challenging to reach an agreement with the regional players (e.g. Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia) due to differing interests. For example, Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah makes peace efforts more difficult. The Palestinian community itself is also fragmented between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which makes meaningful negotiations difficult as they hold different views. Added to this is the disunity among EU member states, which prevents the EU from calling for effective talks, restraint and ceasefires. Beyond conflict resolution, vdL stresses the importance of tackling wider regional challenges such as youth unemployment, economic diversification and climate resilience as part of the EU-Middle East strategy.

A new economic foreign policy

The European Commission will adopt an ambitious economic foreign policy plan,

revolving around three pillars: economic prosperity, trade, and investment in partnership. To achieve economic prosperity and security, vdL proposed different actions such as protecting the economy from key technology leakage by strategic competitors and systemic rivals (i.e. China), developing economic standards for key supply chains with like-minded partners, investing innovation as well as developing economic statecraft tools to boost EU's competitiveness, and adopting the principle of "de-risking, not decoupling" to maintain economic engagement with rivals (i.e. China) while reducing vulnerabilities. This balance of de-risking with ongoing economic ties will be a delicate task given EU's dependency on Chinese critical raw materials and pressure from American President Donald Trump to impose tariffs. von der Leyen also proposed actions to deepen trade, such as developing new partnerships for Clean Trade and Investment and strengthening FTAs to ensure access to essential minerals and raw materials, as well as improving rules-based trade under the WTO and using trade defense instruments if necessary.

Finally, to promote joint investment, she proposed expanding the Global Gateway to provide macroeconomic support targeting sectors such as energy, transport, digital connectivity and clean technologies as a way of countering initiatives such as China's Belt and Road. Launched in 2021, the Global Gateway is the EU's contribution to closing the global investment gap (i.e. up to EUR 300 billion in investments by 2027), aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda and



its SDGs¹³³. Examples of projects include Bio2Watt in South Africa, Mozambique and Uganda (i.e. energy plants using animal waste and other waste sources to reduce biogas), dune restoration and sand replenishment projects in Togo or solar energy and hydrogen production in Trinidad and Tobago¹³⁴. Given that cooperation between the EU and other important actors (e.g. Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean) is also one of von der Leyen's objectives (e.g. for trade diversification, access to raw materials, social and development programs, and cooperation on climate change), the EU should intensify its collaboration with the AU on common priorities in preparation for a successful EU-AU summit in 2025. For example, the EU should step up logistical support for African-led peacekeeping missions through the African Peace Facility (APF), focus on development projects to create jobs and improve living standards through the European Trust Fund for Africa, or increase financial and technical assistance for climate change adaptation projects.

However, expanding the scope of the Gateway will require stronger and more effective coordination with Member States, private investors and international financial institutions, an area in which the EU is known to struggle. In addition, the Global Gateway builds on existing EU investment commitments, such as the €150 billion package for Africa, for which the EU has

often been criticized for slow disbursements and conditionalities compared to China's more immediate financial assistance. The EU plans to build these new partnerships with what it considers to be its economic and geopolitical allies. As a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, relaunching FTA negotiations and deepening ties with India are essential if the EU is to diversify its trade, secure its supply chains, meet global challenges and counterbalance China's influence. As a hub of economic growth and innovation in the Asia-Pacific region, the EU is also keen to strengthen its economic, trade and security relations with Japan and New Zealand, and explore opportunities for collaboration with ASEAN + Korea and Australia in the fields of maritime security, cyber threats, clean trade and renewable energies.

Reshaping multilateralism for today's world

Building on her goal of reforming the WTO, she now aims to reform the international system, promoting EU values and ideas to revitalize multilateral cooperation so that the international community can better address pressing global challenges. Yet global economic and political power dynamics are shifting away from the EU, and emerging economies and regional blocs are increasingly challenging the legitimacy and dominance of Western-led global institutions. The success of the BRICS has

¹³³ European Commission. (2024). Global Gateway. European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

¹³⁴ European Commission. (2024). Global Gateway in Sub-Saharan Africa. European Commission. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/initiatives-sub-saharan-africa_en; European Commission. (2024). Global Gateway in Latin America and the Caribbean. European Commission. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/initiatives-latin-america-and-caribbean_en?page=2



created a counterweight, fostering a “the West against the rest” narrative, where the Global South perceives the international system (e.g. the UN system, the IMF, the World Bank) as clinging to outdated notions of superiority stemming from the historically colonial and dominant post-World War II position¹³⁵. As a result, the EU's approach to promoting a rules-based order needs to evolve to adapt to the realities of a diverse, multipolar world, distancing itself from a seemingly paternalistic method of imposing values. With more humility, the EU must listen to demands for rebalancing governance and redistributing global power, which also means that the EU will have to do a lot more to make a significant impact¹³⁶. For example, the EU should support reforms to make voting rights (e.g. in the UN Security Council) and resource allocation more equitable, as well as improving the representation of emerging economies in decision-making processes, or promoting democracy and human rights while recognizing and correcting perceptions of double standards on the part of the EU. Only through such efforts can the EU retain its relevance and credibility in a world where its values and leadership are increasingly being called into question.

A New Budget and Reforms for a Better Europe

A new budget fit for our ambitions

Ursula von der Leyen's proposal on the EU budget aims to reshape the allocation of the Union's financial resources and better align them with the Union's long-term priorities and objectives. First, she advocates a shift from traditional program-based budgets to policy-based budgets. The shift from predefined programs (e.g. Horizon Europe, Erasmus +, ESF+, Digital Europe Program) to broader EU priorities (e.g. green transition, digital transformation, defense, and security) will allow for greater flexibility and adaptability. Second, she seeks simplification and better integration of budgets, reducing bureaucratic complexity and aligning Member States' reforms and investment programs with EU priorities. However, vdL could face political resistance, as it could be seen as a violation of national sovereignty, particularly in sensitive areas such as the rule of law, social policies or defense. Third, she wants to maximize the financial impact of the budget by being able to mobilize more investment from the public and private sectors. However, it will be very important to make sure that this budget does not prioritize only sectors with higher returns on investment (ROI), which could undermine traditional cohesion policies by increasing disparities between Member States and regions.

An ambitious reform agenda for Europe

The President of the Commission stressed that she was committed to continuing to work on the 49 recommendations made by

¹³⁵ Gattolin, A., Véron, E. (2024). The BRICS, a geopolitical challenge overlooked by the European Union. Schuman Papers n°736. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/736-the-brics-a-geopolitical-challenge-overlooked-by-the-european-union>

¹³⁶ Ibid.; Lehne, S. (2024). The EU and the Global Battle of Narratives. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-eu-and-the-global-battle-of-narratives?lang=en¢er=europe>



CoFoE in 2022, turning them into tangible policy reforms and supporting treaty change where necessary. However, her past actions to strengthen democratic accountability and encourage institutional reform have been less clear-cut, reflecting a gap between ambitious rhetoric and practical implementation. She has also promised to present, within the first 100 days of her mandate, a review of pre-enlargement policies to ensure that the new Member States are institutionally and politically ready. These measures will be complemented by proposals to strengthen the EU's capacity for action by reforming decision-making processes (i.e. moving away from unanimity in certain areas), particularly with a view to eventual EU enlargement. However, this task will be extremely difficult, as it is unlikely that Member States will agree to cede power, especially given the influence of the far right in many EU countries.

Delivering together with the European Parliament

Despite vdL's reluctance to propose binding changes to give Parliament a formal right of initiative during its first term, she still stressed the importance of strengthening the EP's role in proposing legislation. As such, the most likely scenario is for the Commission to draft legislative proposals in response to Parliament's requests, as in the case of the DMA and DSA. She also wants to strengthen Commissioners' engagement with parliamentary committees, through "question hours" and committee dialogues, responding to criticism of superficial dialogues based on Commissioners' pre-prepared answers. To this end, she intends to revise the framework agreement governing relations between the Commission and Parliament, in order to enhance the European Parliament's oversight role and ensure more regular and substantive dialogues. Although ambitious, her review of the last five years shows once again that progress in translating previous similar objectives into concrete changes has been limited.

Conclusion: Balancing Ambition and Contradiction

In two words: "Invest Europe". This is the new motto for von der Leyen's second mandate. Preparing the Union for the challenges of the coming decade (e.g. long-term competitiveness, geopolitical pressure, internal reforms) must be achieved through targeted investment to strengthen Europe's economic, strategic and geopolitical foundations. In one number: €800 billion (per year!). This is the amount Mario Draghi

says is needed to boost investment. Yet, this simplicity conceals many of the complex problems of the EU-27. As Draghi argues, there are so many internal problems to solve, which were caused by austerity and regulatory policies in Europe, that it will require far too much effort to focus on secondary objectives. They are not secondary because they are "less important", but because the European

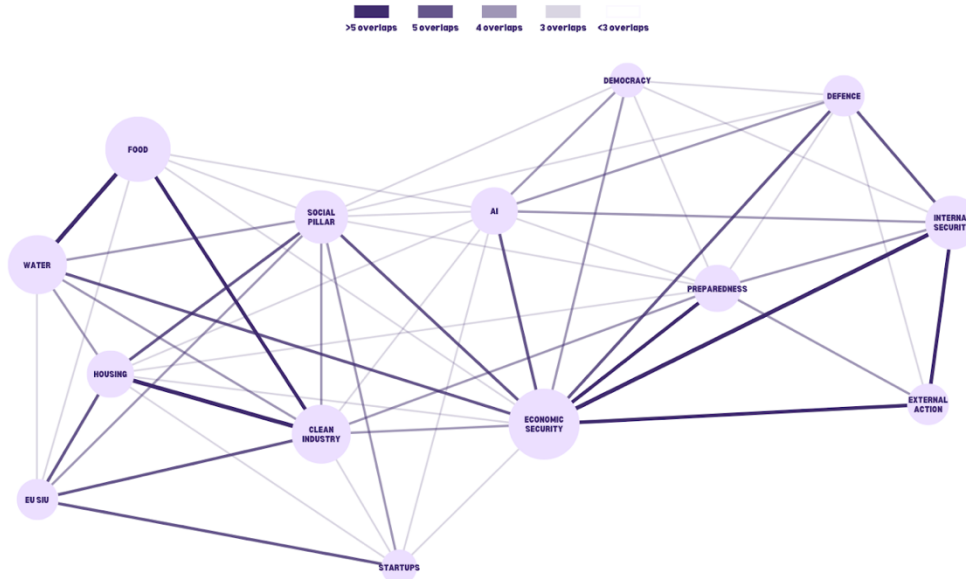


Union lacks the administrative, financial and political capacity to focus effectively on all fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, economic stability (e.g. inflation, public debt, energy prices), migration (e.g. migration flows, asylum rules, human rights), social issues (e.g. unemployment, housing crisis, inequalities), the rule of law (e.g. democratic backsliding), and security (defence, foreign interference) will be seen as primary objectives. Achieving these goals will require a considerable amount of bureaucracy, consume a sizable portion of an already tight budget, and require agreement in an already politically divided Union confronted with the growing influence of populist governments. On the other hand, secondary objectives include climate neutrality (e.g. economic pressure versus Green Deal objectives), enlargement (e.g. underperformance of the EU versus smooth enlargement) and foreign policy priorities (e.g. the Russian threat versus engagement in Africa, the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East).

So, while trade-offs between 'primary' and 'secondary' objectives are inevitable, it is important not to neglect these “secondary” objectives, as this would derail the Union's long-term vision and weaken its global role (and therefore influence). To address this challenge, von der Leyen should embrace a shift in strategy, one that focuses on the ends rather than the means. A goal-oriented approach that focuses on impactful results would allow the EU to adapt to a changing

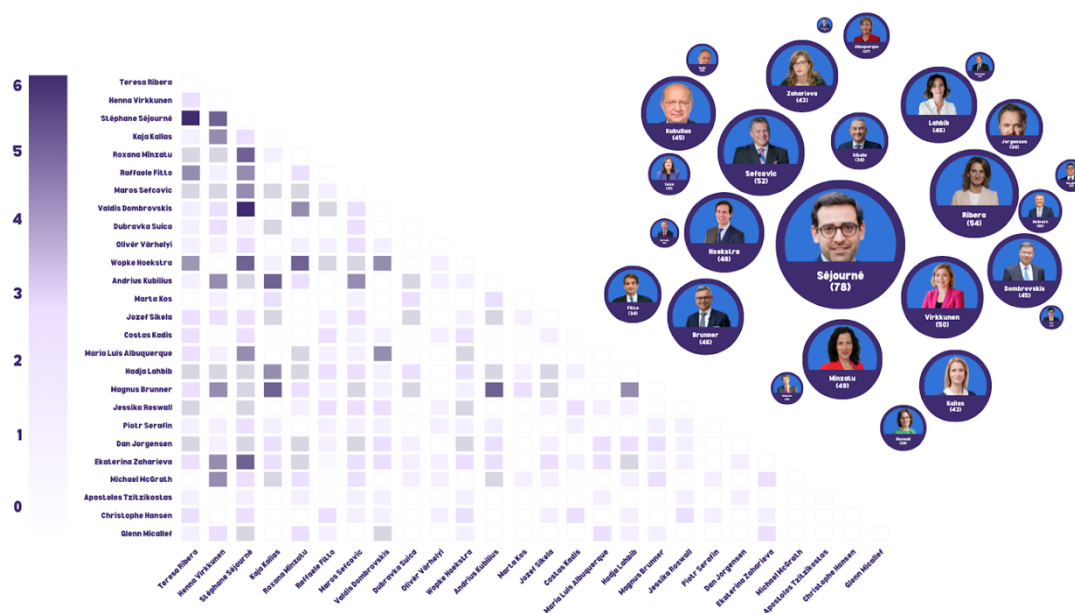
environment (e.g. economic downturn, geopolitical pressures, crises) and thus increase flexibility, efficiency and credibility. Taking the priority of climate neutrality as an example: energy crises and economic pressures make it difficult to achieve the ambitious targets of the Green Deal. Instead of focusing solely on meeting timelines and percentages, the focus should be on implementing the most effective measures (e.g. investing in green technologies, decarbonizing key sectors), even if this means adjusting interim targets. Another example is enlargement, where progress is currently slow because it is blocked by Member States' bilateral disputes with candidate countries and stalled by institutional reforms. Instead of waiting for full institutional reforms, candidate countries could gain access to key EU framework programs (e.g. Single Market, Green Agenda, Erasmus programs) or be granted “observer status” in the EU institutions as a gradual path to membership. Such a shift also requires that the Commission no longer works in silos, i.e. that Directorates-General and Commissioners focus narrowly on their individual mandates without sufficient coordination or consideration of broader EU priorities. With the recent creation of the Commission's fourteen project groups, there is an opportunity to improve interconnectedness and closer cooperation between Commissioners and their portfolios¹³⁷. Indeed, each group will focus on a specific policy area (thematic focus),

¹³⁷ European Commission. (2025). President von der Leyen establishes fourteen Project Groups to deliver on political priorities. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_221; Portala, J. (2025). Project groups point to new power structures within the Commission. Science Business. <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/research-and-innovation-gap/project-groups-point-new-power-structures-within-commission>



Source: [European Commission](#)

Figure 8 - Project Groups Overlaps



Source: [European Commission](#)

Figure 9 - Commissioners Interactions Network

This will prove particularly relevant and important given the inevitable contradictions between the key priorities

and their competing objectives, which require compromises. First, increasing defense spending to strengthen the EU's



strategic autonomy and security is at odds with the objectives of the Green Deal. Investments in energy-intensive industries and technologies (e.g. tanks, fighter planes, submarines) will increase greenhouse gas emissions, underlining the need to balance military needs and environmental commitments. Second, investments in digital transformation (e.g. big data, automation, artificial intelligence) will improve efficiency, but could also increase social inequalities by exacerbating the digital divide and displacing low-skilled workers through job losses in traditional sectors. Third, the pursuit of economic growth means expanding industries to increase GDP, which could undermine sustainability efforts and delay progress towards the Green Deal. Fourth, the idea of the EU as a global leader is undermined by

internal divisions between member states and disagreements over foreign policy approaches (e.g. relations with China, the US and Russia). Fifth, the pursuit of technological innovation in data-driven industries and the promotion of AI adoption may clash with the EU's strict data protection rules to protect citizens' rights. This could lead to tensions between innovation and the protection of privacy rights.

All in all, von der Leyen will have to lead a Union that must do more with less. And the success of her decade will depend on her ability to rise above internal divisions and external pressures while going beyond symbolic measures in order to achieve tangible, impactful results that can appeal to citizens and politicians alike.



ANNEX



Priority 1 - A European Green Deal

Objective 1 - Climate neutral

- ✓ Propose a European green deal in her first 100 days (including the first European Climate Law with 2050 climate-neutrality target)
- ⚠ Extend the Emissions Trading System to maritime, traffic and construction sectors
- ⚠ Introduce a Carbon Border Tax
- ✗ Review the Energy Taxation Directive

Objective 2 - A Just transition

- ✓ Put forward a New Industrial Strategy based on circular economy to decarbonise energy-intensive industries
- ✓ A New Just Transition Fund to support regions and rural areas
- ✓ Propose a European Climate Pact

Objective 3 - A Sustainable Europe Investment Plan

- ✓ Present a strategy for green financing
- ✓ Present a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan aimed at supporting €1 trillion of investment over the next decade



- ✓ Propose to turn parts of the European Investment Bank to Europe's Climate Bank

Objective 4 - More ambitious targets for 2030

- ✓ Lead negotiations to increase the level of ambition of other major emitters by 2021
- ✓ Put forward a comprehensive plan to increase the EU's target for 2030 towards 55%

Objective 5 - Preserving Europe's natural environment

- ✓ Present a Biodiversity Strategy for 2030
- ⚠ Put forward a "Farm to Fork" Strategy on sustainable food to support EU farmers
- ✓ Put forward a strategy to protect citizens health from environmental degradation and pollution
- ✓ Lead the issue on single-use plastics
- ⚠ Propose a new Circular Economy Action Plan focusing on sustainable resource use in resource-intensive and high-impact sectors



Priority 2 - A Europe Fit for the Digital Age

Objective 1 - Digital age within safe and ethical boundaries

- ✓ Put forward legislation for a coordinated European approach on the human and ethical implications of AI (first 100 days)
- ✓ Create a new Digital Services Act to upgrade liability and safety rules for digital platforms, services and products
- ✓ Prioritise investments in AI through MFF and public-private partnerships
- ✓ Drive the full digitalisation of the Commission

Objective 2 - Empowering people through education and skills

- ✓ Update the Digital Education Action Plan
- ⚠ Triple the Erasmus+ budget as part of the next MFF



Priority 3 - An Economy that Works for People

Objective 1 - Supporting small businesses

- ✓ Put forward an SME Strategy
- ✗ Complete the Capital markets Union by creating a private-public fund and specialising in initial public offering of SMEs

Objective 2 - Deepening the Economic and Monetary Union

- ✓ Prioritise the deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union by delivering a Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness for the euro area to support Member States' growth reforms and investments
- ⚠ Make full use of the Stability and Growth Pact to achieve a more growth-friendly fiscal stance in the euro area
- ⚠ Complete the Banking Union (including a common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund and the introduction of a European Deposit Insurance Scheme)
- ✓ Refocus the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the UN Development Goals
- ⚠ Strengthen the international role of the euro
- ⚠ Empower the European parliament when it comes to the economic governance of the Union



Objective 3 - Europe's Social Pillar

- ✓ Put forward an Action Plan to fully implement the European Pillar of Social Right
- ✓ Propose a legal instrument to ensure that every worker in the Union has a fair minimum wage (first 100 days)
- ✗ Propose a European Unemployment Benefit Reinsurance Scheme to protect citizens and reduce the pressure on public finances during external shocks
- ✓ Create the European Child Guarantee to ensure every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic rights
- ✓ Fully implement the work-life balance Directive to encourage better sharing of responsibilities between women and men and back it up with investment from the European Social Fund +
- ✓ Turn the Youth Guarantee into a permanent instrument to fight youth unemployment
- ✓ Put forward a European plan to fight cancer

Objective 4 - A Union of Equality

- ✓ Propose a new anti-discrimination legislation and a new European Gender Strategy
- ✓ Introduce binding pay-transparency measures
- ✓ Set quotas as for gender-balance on company boards
- ✓ Ensure equality at all levels of Commission management by June 2024
- ✗ Add violence against women to the list of EU crimes defined in the Istanbul Convention



Objective 5 - Fair taxation

- ✓ Ensure fair taxation of big tech companies
- ✓ Support the common consolidated corporate tax base to improve the business taxation environment in the Single Market
- ✓ Support the fight against tax fraud






Priority 4 - A Stronger Europe in the World

Objective 1 - Free and fair trade

-  Conclude negotiations with Australia and new Zealand
-  Strengthen trading partnership with the United States
-  Ensure that trade agreements are transparent, including the involvement of the European parliament and access to information by the civil society
-  Ensure that trade agreements have a dedicated sustainable-development chapter, the highest standards of climate, environmental and labour protection with a zero tolerance policy on child labour
-  Appoint a Chief Trade Enforcement Officer to improve the compliance and enforcement of trade agreements
-  Lead the efforts on updating and reforming the World Trade Organisation

Objective 2 - A more active role

-  Establish a comprehensive strategy on Africa
-  Reaffirm the European perspective on the Western Balkans
-  Increase EU spending to +30% on external-action investment in the next MFF



Support the withdrawal agreement as it stands

Objective 3 - Defending Europe



Strengthening European Defence Fund to support research and capability development



Priority 5 - Protecting Our European Way of Life

Objective 1 - Upholding the rule of law

- ⚠️ Support an additional comprehensive European rule of law mechanism
- ✅ Support the proposal to make the rule of law an integral part of the next MFF

Objective 2 - Strong borders and a fresh start on migration

- ✅ Propose new Pact on Migration and Asylum, including the relaunch of the Dublin Reforms of asylum rules
- ✅ Support a common European asylum system
- ✅ Reinforce Frontex
- ❌ Reach 10.000 Frontex standing corps by 2024
- ⚠️ Support the establishment of humanitarian corridors

Objective 3 - Internal Security

- ❌ Empower the European Public Prosecutor Office to be able to investigate and prosecute cross-border terrorism
- ✅ Propose a package to reinforce customs risk management and support effective controls by the Member-States



Priority 6 - A new Push for European Democracy

Objective 1 - A greater say for Europeans

- ✓ Include citizens in a conference on the future of Europe in 2020
- ✓ Open to treaty change

Objective 2 - Special relationship with the Parliament

- ✓ Strengthen the partnership between the Commission and the Parliament
- ⚠ Support a right of initiative for the European Parliament
- ⚠ Ensure Commissioners brief the European parliament at all stages of all International negotiations
- ⚠ Ensure more appearances in Committee meetings and Commissioners presence in trilogue discussions between the Parliament and the Council
- ✓ Ensure a permanent dialogue between the Commission and the Parliament through the tradition of a “Question Hour”

Objective 3 - Improving the lead candidate system

- ⚠ Support the European Parliament in amending the electoral law



Objective 4 - More transparency and scrutiny



Support the creation of an independent ethics body common to all EU institutions



Work to let citizens know who serve them by meeting and discussing with them what positions are defended in the legislative process

Objective 5 - Protecting our democracy



Develop a joint approach and common standards to tackle issues such as disinformation and online hate messages



Put forward a European democracy action plan to address the threats of external intervention in EU elections and to set clearer rules on the financial of European political parties



Priority 1 - A Prosperous, Competitive, and Sustainable Europe

Objective 1 - Make business easier and deepen the Single Market

- New momentum to complete the Single Market
- New approach to competition policy
- Put forward proposals to simplify, consolidate, and codify legislation and eliminate overlaps and contradictions
- Introduce new legal status (28th regime) to help innovative companies grow by benefitting from a simpler, harmonised set of rules
- Introduce a new category of small midcaps
- Put forward a new SME and competitiveness check
- Renew inter-institutional agreement on simplification and better law making
- Request Commission to prepare annual report for their respective European Parliament Council formation on enforcement and implementation

Objective 2 - Build a Clean Industrial Deal to decarbonise and bring down energy prices



- Focus on the implementation of existing European Green Deal legal framework for 2023
- Propose a new Clean Industrial Deal in her first 100 days that support companies by simplifying, investing and ensuring access to cheap, sustainable, and secure energy supplies and raw materials
- Put forward an Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act
- Enshrine target for 2024 to 90% emission-reduction in the European Climate Law
- Bring down energy bills for companies and households
- Propose to activate and extent the aggregate demand mechanism
- Develop a new Clean Trade Investment Partnership to secure supply of raw materials, clean energy and clean tech
- Maintain EU leadership in international climate negotiations, prepare global climate and energy visions ahead of COP30 in Brazil and improve EU green diplomacy by engaging more with non-EU countries
- Propose a Single Booking and Ticketing Regulation to simplify cross-border train travel

Objective 3 - A more circular and resilient economy

- Put forward a new Circular Economy Act to create market demand for secondary materials and a single market for waste
- Put forward a new chemicals industry package to simplify REACH and provide clarity on “forever chemicals” (PFAS)
- Propose critical Medicines Act to reduce dependencies relating to critical medicines and ingredients



- Built on the beating Cancer Plan, other plans on preventive health will be developed (remote working, cardiovascular diseases, degenerative illnesses, autism)
- Propose a European Action Plan on the cybersecurity of hospitals and healthcare providers in her first 100 days

Objective 4 - Boost productivity with digital tech diffusion

- Focus on the implementation and enforcement of the digital laws adopted during the previous mandate, with a particular focus on the DSA and DMA
- Step up investment in technologies (supercomputing, semiconductors, IoT, genomics, quantum computing, space tech)
- Propose AI Factories Initiatives in her first 100 days to help the EU become a global leader in AI innovation
- Develop an Apply AI Strategy with member States and civil society to boost new industrial uses of AI and improve the delivery of a variety of public services
- Propose to set up a European AI Research Council to pool resources, similar to the approach taken with CERN
- Put forward a European Data Union Strategy to simplify / make clear and coherent the existing legal framework for businesses and administrations to share data while respecting high privacy and security standards

Objective 5 - Putting research and innovation at the heart of the economy

- Expand the European Research Council and European Innovation Council, and increase the research spending



- Propose a new European Biotech Act in 2025, part of a broader Strategy for European Life Sciences
- Support public-private partnerships, such as joint undertakings to provide infrastructure and innovative laboratories to researchers
- Strengthening University Alliances

Objective 6 - A turbo charging environment

- Maximise public investment, leverage and de-risk private capital, working closely with the EIB
- Put forward risk absorbing measures to make it easier for commercial banks, investors and venture capital to finance fast-growing companies
- Propose a European Savings and Investments union, built on the Enrico Letta report
- Revise the Public Procurement Directive
- Put forward a new European Competitiveness Fund to reinforce the budget in the next MFF
- Support important Projects of Common Interest (IPCEIs) by making them simpler and faster to get financed and off the ground

Objective 7 - Tackle the skills and labour gap

- Establish a Union of Skills focusing on investment, lifelong learning into education and careers, skills retention and the recognition of different types of training
- Propose a STEM Education Strategic Plan



- Propose a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training
- Boost and refocus skills funding on sectors crucial for the twin transition
- Put forward a Skills Portability Initiative to ensure a skill acquired in one country is recognised in another



Priority 2 - A European Homemade Defence and Security

Objective 1 - Bringing the European Defense Union into life

- Appoint the first-ever Commissioner for Defense who will work closely with the High Representative
- Present a white paper on the future of European Defense in her first 100 days
- Strengthen partnership with NATO and extend cooperation to cover all threats, including new ones such as cyber, hybrid or space
- Build up the European Defense Fund to focus on critical areas (naval, ground, air, combat, space-based, early warning and cyber)
- Reinforce the European Defense Industry Programme to address the EU's most critical capability gaps
- Create a Single Market for Defence products and services
- Propose Defence Projects of Commission European Interest starting with a European Air Shield and cyber defence and work with EIB to help finance it

Objective 2 - A preparedness Union

- Develop a Preparedness Union Strategy built on the report of Sauli Niinistö



- Coordinating national cyber efforts and securing critical infrastructures
- Present a new strategy to support medical countermeasures against public health threats, such as those linked to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) security
- Improve integrated defense by strengthening approach to sanctions against cyberattacks and hybrid attacks

Objective 3 - A safer and more secure Europe

- Propose a new European Internal Security Strategy
- Strengthening the European Arrest Warrant
- Empower Europol's mandate and oversight to make it a truly operational police agency, better at supporting national law enforcement agencies and doubling its staff over time
- Empower the EPPO regarding cross-border crimes, particularly corruption cases that impacts Union funds
- Put forward a new European Action Plan against drug trafficking, part of a wider EU Port Strategy that focuses on security, competitiveness, and economic independence (building on the European Ports Alliance)
- Develop a new Counter-terrorism Agenda to address new and emerging threats
- Develop a new European Critical Communication System by public authorities against terrorism, crime and in saving lives in emergency situations



Objective 4 - Stronger common borders

- Make functional the European digital border management
- Strengthen Frontex by equipping it with state-of-the-art technology for surveillance and situational awareness
- Triple the number of European Border and Coast Guard to 30,000
- Develop an EU Visa Policy Strategy
- Ensure the free movement in the Schengen Area

Objective 5 - Standing fair and firm on migration

- Focus on the implementation of all parts of the Pact on Migration and Asylum
- Develop a European Migration and Asylum Strategy to frame the long-term vision
- Develop a new common approach on returns to speed up and simplify the process and ensure that returns take place safely
- Maintain and develop strategic relations on migration and security with non-EU countries
- Develop a new Pact for the Mediterranean
- Fight migrant smugglers and people traffickers by working with the Global Alliance to counter migrant smuggling and taking firm action against Europe's shadow economy
- Support Member States and companies with legal migration based on the skills needs of European economies and regions



Priority 3 - A Better European Way of Life for the People

Objective 1 - Social fairness in the modern economy

- Put forward a new Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
- Put forward a Quality Jobs Roadmap supporting fair wages, good working conditions, training and fair job transition for workers and self-employed people
- Increase funding for a just transition across the next MFF
- Propose a new Pact for European Social Dialogue in early 2024 in collaboration with European trade unions and employers
- Develop the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy that will strengthen the Child Guarantee to prevent and fight social exclusion through essential public services
- Put forward the first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan
- Include housing as one of the topic in the agenda of a Commissioner
- Work with the EIB to attract more private and public investment (i.e., a pan-European Investment platform for affordable and sustainable housing)
- Inject liquidity into the market by allowing Member States to double the planned cohesion policy investments in affordable housing



- Revise State aid rules to enable housing support measures, in particular regarding affordable energy-efficient and social housing
- Launch the Social Climate Fund to help renovations and access to affordable and energy-efficient housing
- Enlarge the European Bauhaus
- Tackle the root causes of demographic change
- Strengthen cohesion and growth policy to address regional and social disparities and improve public services, private activities, education and skills, transport and digital connectivity

Objective 2 - Reuniting societies, supporting young people

- Include inter-generational fairness as one of the topic in the agenda of a Commissioner
- Strengthen Erasmus +
- Organise the first annual Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioners in her first 100 days
- Set up a President's Youth Advisory Board to give young people the opportunity to give their opinions on ideas developed by the Commission
- Launch an EU-wide inquiry on the broader impacts of social media on well-being
- Launch an EU-wide inquiry on the broader impacts of social media on well-being
- Tackle addictive design of online services



- Develop an Action Plan against cyber-bullying

Objective 3 - A Union of equality

- Task a Commission to update the strategy on LGBTIQ and develop a new anti-racism strategy for post-2025
- Propose a new Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025
- Support the idea of a Roadmap for Women's Rights (presented in the next International Women's Day)



Priority 4 - A Better European Quality of Life for the People

Objective 1 - Food security, water, and nature

- Present in her first 100 days a Vision for Agriculture and Food, building on the recommendations that will look at ensuring the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of the farming sector
- Support an EU income policy for Europe's farmers
- Support farmers who work on their land with no excessive bureaucracy and reward farmers working with nature
- Support the competitiveness of the entire food value chain through investment and innovation on farms
- Appoint a Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans
- Develop a European Oceans Pact
- Include housing as one of the topic in the agenda of a Commissioner
- Work with the EIB to attract more private and public investment (i.e., a pan-European Investment platform for affordable and sustainable housing)

Objective 2 - Climate adaptation, preparedness and solidarity

- Develop a European Civil Defense Mechanism



- Develop a European Climate Adaptation Plan which maps the risks and preparedness needs for infrastructure, energy, water, food, and land in cities and rural areas, as well as the needs for data and early warning systems
- Develop a new European Water Resilience Strategy



Priority 5 - Protecting Democracy and European Values

Objective 1 - Protecting our democracy

- Propose a new European Democracy Shield to counter foreign information manipulation and interference online:
 - Increase digital and media literacy
 - Boost prevention through pre-bunking
 - Create a European network of fact-checkers and make it available in all languages
 - Improve digital enforcement to ensure the detection of misinformation
 - Address deepfakes
 - Preserve and promote free speech

Objective 2 - Strengthen the rule of law

- Add the Single Market dimension to the report to address rule of law issues
- Propose to include EU funding for national measures aimed at fighting corruption and protection the EU financial interests
- Focus on the implementation of the European Media Freedom Act
- Increase support for protection of independent media and journalists

Objective 3 - Putting citizens at the heart of democracy



- Annually consider policy areas and proposals where recommendations from European Citizens' Panel have greatest value
- Better engage with civil society in defending specific societal issues and upholding human rights
- Strengthen the network of local Councillors jointly with the European Committee of the Regions



Priority 6 - Europe's Global Leadership: Power Through Partnership

Objective 1 - Enlargement as a geopolitical imperative

- Appoint a Commissioner for Enlargement to prepare candidate countries

Objective 2 - A more strategic approach to neighbourhood

- Appoint a Commissioner for the Mediterranean to focus on investment, economic stability, job creation, energy, security, and migration
- Develop an EU-Middle East Strategy and continue to take part in diplomatic efforts to ensure a just and comprehensive resolution to the ongoing conflict in Gaza (promoting a two-state solution and strengthening partnership with key regional stakeholders)

Objective 3 - A new economic foreign policy

- Deepen cooperation between the EU and Latin America, and the Caribbean
- Propose a new Strategic EU-India Agenda
- Strengthen cooperation with ASEAN, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and Australia



- Develop a new economic foreign policy based on three pillars: economic prosperity, trade, and investment partnership
 - Advance Europe's economic security and economic statecraft by boosting competitiveness at home and investing in research capacity
 - Protect the economy from key technology leakage and security concerns based on a “de-risking” approach, particularly against strategic competitors and systemic rivals
 - Develop economic standards for key supply chains with G7 and other like-minded partners
 - Deepen free trade and trade links with partners around the world to ensure access to critical minerals and new materials
 - Develop a new range of Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships
 - Improve rules-based trade (including WTO)
 - Take the Global Gateway to the next level, promoting joint investment in infrastructure projects worldwide, trade, and macro-economic support
- Give a boost to the EU-AU cooperation ahead of the EU-AU Summit in 2025

Objective 4 - Reshaping multilateralism for today's world

- Make Europe a leader in reforming the international system, starting with the upcoming UN Summit for the Future



Priority 7 - A New Budget and Reforms for a Better Future

Objective 1 - A new budget fit for our ambitions

- Propose a new approach for a modern and reinforced EU budget that will be:
 - More focused to align with the EU priorities and objectives, namely a policy-based budget rather than a programme-based budget
 - Simpler in the way it works, focusing on joint priorities to link Member States' key reforms and investment programmes
 - More impactful; capable of leveraging further national, private and institutional funding

Objective 2 - An ambitious reform agenda for Europe

- Continue to follow up on the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe
- Support Treaty change where it can improve the Union
- Present pre-enlargement policy review in her first 100 days
- Put forward proposals to enhance Europe's capacity to act (new formats and decision-making processes, including for larger Union)

Objective 3 - Delivering together with the EP

- Continue supporting the right of initiative of the European Parliament



- Ask Commissioners to take part in dialogues with Parliamentary committees
- Revise the Framework Agreement



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence	ECA	European Court of Auditors
ATAD	Anti-Tax Avoidance Directive	EDIP	European Defence Industry Programme
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	EDIS	European Deposit Insurance Scheme
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism	EDIS	European Defence Industrial Strategy
CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear	EIB	European Investment Bank
CEAP	Circular Economy Action Plan	EIC	European Innovation Council
CERN	European Organization for Nuclear Research	EP	European Parliament
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union	EPPO	European Public Prosecutor's Office
CLP	Classification, Labelling and Packaging Regulation	EPSU	European Federation of Public Service Unions
CMU	Capital Markets Union	ERC	European Research Council
CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe	ESF	European Social Fund
CSRD	Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive	ESPR	Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation
CTEO	Chief Trade Enforcement Officer	ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
DAC	Directive on Administrative Cooperation	EU	European Union
DEAP	Digital Education Action Plan	EU ETS	EU Emissions Trading System
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index	EUSMO	EU Single Market Office
DGA	Data Governance Act	EWL	European Women's Lobby
DSA	Digital Services Act	FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
DMA	Digital Markets Act	FTA	Free Trade Agreement
EC	European Commission	GDP	Gross Domestic Product



GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	R&I	Research and Innovation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology	REACH	Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals
IoT	Internet of Things	RRF	Resilience and Recovery Facility
IPCEIs	Important Projects of Common European Interest	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
IPO	Initial Public Offering	SIU	Savings and Investments Union
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament	SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
MFF	Multi-Annual Financial Framework	SOLVIT	EU problem-solving network for single-market issues
MSCA	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions	STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Origination	TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
NIS2	Network and Information Security Directive 2	TSI	Technical Support Instrument
NSMO	National Single Market Office	TTC	Trade and Technology Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	UPSM	Union Civil Protection Mechanism
OLAF	European Anti-Fraud Office	US	United States
PFAS	Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances	VAT	Value-Added Tax
PPPs	Public-Private Partnerships	vdL	Von der Leyen
R&D	Research and Development	WTO	World Trade Organisation



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