



The priorities of the new European Commission

Anca Gurzu, POLITICO Europe

Summary

- * *The new European Commission has, for the first time ever, a woman at the helm. Ursula von der Leyen, a German conservative, put tackling climate change at the top of her agenda. Her core project, the European Green Deal, promises a sustainable economic transformation—yet challenges are plentiful.*

Background/Challenge

- The new European Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, took office on December 1—one month later than initially scheduled. This delay was caused by the European Parliament's rejection of three original commissioner nominees (from France, Hungary and Romania). After new nominees had been put forward, the 26-member Commission was approved by a clear majority (461 in favour, 157 against, 89 abstentions).
- The new Commission President, who had been approved by the European Parliament in a separate vote in July, is not a familiar face on the Brussels political scene (although she grew up in the Belgian capital and is fluent in French). The former German defence minister, a mother of seven, was selected by EU leaders as a compromise choice after the candidates proposed by the main political families (the *Spitzenkandidaten*) failed to get the necessary support.
- Von der Leyen won the approval of the European Parliament with just nine votes more than what she needed, with many MEPs criticizing the lack of transparency in how she was chosen.
- Since the United Kingdom is still in the EU, it was legally obliged to put forward a commissioner nominee. The U.K. government refused, and the Commission chose to take legal action against it. But von der Leyen was still able to put together a team without a British Commissioner.
- Von der Leyen pledged gender balance in the formation of the college of commissioners. She fell short by just one woman.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◇ The **European Green Deal** is the new Commission's landmark project for its five-year term. It is meant to help the EU achieve climate neutrality and a sustainable economy by mid-century.
- ◇ **Frans Timmermans, a Dutch socialist politician** who had been his party family's candidate for Commission President, is in charge of crafting the deal in his new role as the Commission's First Executive Vice President.
- ◇ Von der Leyen put forward the European Green Deal due to pressure from a **climate ambitious Parliament** and as a result of growing **climate strikes** across the continent.
- ◇ **Politicians and businesses have welcomed the plan** but it is still unclear how exactly it is supposed to function as a whole. Here is what it promises, among others:
 - Higher greenhouse gas emission reduction targets for 2030;
 - The creation of a carbon border tax to protect EU companies against competitors from jurisdictions that do not have a carbon price and operate based on more lax environmental standards;
 - A Just Transition Fund meant to help the bloc's coal intensive regions shift to greener forms of energy production, retrain workers and boost local economies;
 - Transforming the European Investment Bank, the EU's biggest lender, into a climate bank;
 - A zero pollution Europe, by tackling climate and air pollution and promoting a circular economy.

KEY FINDINGS (continued)

- ◇ **Improving the trade relationship with the United States** and avoiding lingering car tariffs will be a priority. After the failure of negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—due to strong public opposition—the two sides are working on smaller side deals meant to boost transatlantic business ties.
- ◇ **The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the trade deal between the EU and Canada**, which is being applied on a provisional basis, is also facing growing resistance across member states, putting its ratification in national parliaments in jeopardy.
- ◇ Negotiating a **new trade relationship with the U.K.** post Brexit will be a huge challenge for both London and Brussels. This needs to be done by the end of 2020 and the two sides have technically only 11 months to get it done if the U.K. leaves the EU on January 31.
- ◇ The **rising power of China** will continue to challenge both the Commission and member states, which have differing views about Chinese investments in key infrastructure projects.
- ◇ Migration will remain a hot topic in Europe, with the new Commission promising to deliver a **new pact on migration and asylum** and to re-launch negotiations for reforming the so-called Dublin system, which defines asylum request rules.
- ◇ Setting **ethical standards for the use of artificial intelligence** is something the new Commission is keen on, as it would make the EU a global leader in this regard with the potential to influence how the world follows suit.
- ◇ There's a growing push for an **EU-wide rule of law monitoring mechanism**, which von der Leyen supports. The goal is to link it to the EU budget, making EU funds directly connected to a solid rule of law assessment from the Commission.
- ◇ The new Commission will also present a **European Gender Strategy**, aimed at equal pay, gender equality and more women in leadership roles.

Policy Implications

- The Spitzenkandidat process, set up by the EU in 2014 in order to choose a new Commission president, was meant to address accusations of a democratic deficit in the bloc. Yet, leaders' decision this year to abandon the process by picking Ursula von der Leyen for the job—a surprise compromise candidate—throws the Union back into nebulous ground. Accusations of backroom deals and lack of transparency will reopen questions about the EU's democratic legitimacy.
- The response to the European Green Deal, the new Commission's ambitious project for tackling climate change and greening the EU economy, has been generally positive. But it is important to remember that the Commission has yet to come out with policy proposals to make the deal real. Furthermore, these are just the first steps—negotiations with the Parliament and Council will prove difficult for many of these proposals, potentially jeopardizing the initial ambition.
- Canada-Europe relations are strong. Canada and the EU can celebrate trading under the framework of the CETA agreement—but the job is not done neither for Brussels nor Ottawa. Growing doubts in Europe's national capitals about the benefits of the deal jeopardize its full ratification. This means von der Leyen's team will have to come out defending CETA and reassuring national politicians. The Canadian government may have to do a bit of the same, in Europe and at home.



Author Information

- ◆ Anca Gurzu, Reporter, POLITICO Europe, Brussels, Belgium
- ◆ Email: anca.gurzu@gmail.com



Contact

- ◆ **Email:** ces@carleton.ca
- ◆ **Phone:** (613) 520-2600, Ext. 1087
- ◆ **Website:** www.carleton.ca/ces



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