

**Political Restart in Brussels – The Growing Challenges
for the New European Commission in Uncertain Times**

Politikai újramezdés Brüsszelben – Növekvő kihívások
bizonytalan időkben az új Európai Bizottság előtt

**NIKOLETT GARAI, ATTILA KOVÁCS,
TAMÁS LEVENTE MOLNÁR,
BENEDEK PÁL, BARNABÁS SZABÓ**



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Reviewer:

Tamás Levente Molnár

Typesetting:

Tamás Lévárt

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: + 36 1 279-5700

Fax: + 36 1 279-5701

E-mail: info@ifat.hu

<http://kki.hu>

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Tamás Levente Molnár, Benedek Pál, Barnabás Szabó, 2019

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Abstract: The new European Commission is taking office in politically challenging times. Ursula von der Leyen was elected by the European Parliament as the new President of the Commission with a narrow majority, therefore she has sought to involve the three largest political groups (EPP, S&D, RE) equally in the Commission's top positions. The new Commission, which, unlike von der Leyen, was elected by a large majority, is structured in a way that the Commissioners rely on each other heavily and are thus forced to make constant compromises. The new President has set ambitious goals, and the expectations of the Commission are accordingly high. Compared to the Jean-Claude Juncker Commission, von der Leyen wants to put more emphasis on environmental and digital policies and plans to lead a "geopolitical" Commission instead of the former "political" one. The success of the new President's efforts will depend on, inter alia, her ability to lower the level of tension among the Member States and resolve mutual blockages between the EU institutions.

Összefoglalás: Az új Európai Bizottság politikailag nehéz időkben kezdi meg hivatali idejét. Ursula von der Leyent csak igen kis többséggel választotta meg az Európai Parlament a Bizottság új elnökévé, ebből kifolyólag igyekezett a három legnagyobb politikai csoportot – EPP, S&D, RE – egyenlő mértékben bevonni a Bizottság csúcspozícióiba. Az új Bizottság, melyet von der Leyennel ellentétben nagy többséggel választott meg a Parlament, szervezeti struktúrája úgy lett kialakítva, hogy a biztosok nagy mértékben egymásra legyenek utalva, ebből kifolyólag folyamatos kompromisszumokra kényszerüljenek. A Bizottság új elnöke rendkívül ambiciózus célokat fogalmazott meg, a testülettel szembeni elvárások ennek megfelelően magasak. A Jean-Claude Juncker által vezetett Bizottsághoz képest von der Leyen nagyobb hangsúlyt szeretne fektetni a környezetvédelemre és a digitális fejlesztésre, a korábbi „politikai” helyett pedig „geopolitikai” Bizottságot tervez vezetni. Az új elnök erőfeszítéseinek sikere többek között azon múlik, mennyire lesz képes feloldani a tagállamok közötti feszültségeket és az uniós intézmények közötti kölcsönös blokkolásokat.

INTRODUCTION

After some politically intense months following Ursula von der Leyen's election to President of the European Commission (EC) in July, the European Parliament (EP) finally gave green light for her Commission on 27 November. The new EC takes office in uncertain times, with many internal and external challenges for the Union. As a result of the EP elections in May, the European political landscape is more fragmented than ever, making it difficult to come up with workable compromises. Furthermore, the level of conflict between some Member States (MSs) in various policy areas has reached a high level over the last years.

The new President has tried to follow a conciliatory approach by the political restart of the Commission. Although she can moderate, even diffuse some of these conflicts, she will not be able to end these conflicts on her own. Without doubt Brexit is the biggest external challenge of the new Commission for the time being—with the extended deadline of 31 January, 2020.

This analysis assesses the structural recalibration of the EC as well as its political priorities and gives a critical evaluation of von der Leyen's promise of creating a "geopolitical Commission". Furthermore, reflecting on the political developments of the last few months, we intend to estimate the new President's political room for manoeuvre as well as the current level of the power struggle between the three main European institutions: EC, EP and the European Council. Finally, regarding the existing tensions between MSs, we will evaluate the chance of success for von der Leyen's conciliatory approach by the new institutional set-up.

STRUCTURE AND PRIORITIES OF THE VON DER LEYEN COMMISSION

The redesigned portfolios of Ursula von der Leyen's new EC have been tailored to address the most important policy challenges of the European Union (EU) and to reflect the priorities of her vision for Europe. The president of the EC can determine the official titles, content, hierarchy, and institutional architecture of the 26 portfolios. (Under Prime Minister Boris Johnson's leadership, the United Kingdom refused to nominate a British Commissioner due to the complexities of Brexit; therefore, only 26 portfolios were allocated in the new EC among MSs.) Consequently, the structure of the next EC and the division of the tasks of individual Commissioners have undergone major changes compared to the previous Juncker Commission, according to the new political agenda introduced by von der Leyen following her election as the president of the EC.

One of the most significant changes regarding the new EC is the creation of new portfolios by von der Leyen based on the six major priorities she outlined in the "[Political Guidelines for the Next Commission 2019-2024](#)". The "European Green Deal", the "Economy that Works for People", the "Europe fit for Digital Age", the "Promoting the European Way of Life", "A Stronger Europe in the World", or the "Values and Transparency" portfolios are the outcomes of her major restructuring efforts to focus on selected policy areas with greater visibility, coherence, and effectiveness. These priorities are [reflections](#) on the alarming societal tendencies in MSs in the past couple of years. The spread of populist and antidemocratic sentiments, a high level of youth unemployment, and a growing demand for a clear-cut climate and migration policy proved to be challenges that the Juncker Commission was not able to resolve. President Jean-Claude Juncker set very ambitious goals for his "political" Commission at the beginning of his term, which is also apparent in the case of von der Leyen's "geopolitical" Commission.



The von der Leyen Commission follows a three-tier structure: the new College will consist of three executive vice-presidents, five vice-presidents, and twenty “regular” commissioners. The consequences of the selection of three [executive vice-presidents](#) for the “European Green Deal”, the “Economy that Works for People”, and the “Europe fit for Digital Age” portfolios are twofold. First, it shows the increasing issue salience of climate policy, sustainability, digitization, and the European social market economy. Second, the [nomination](#) of two former *Spitzenkandidaten* as executive vice-presidents – the Dutch Frans Timmermans (EC lead candidate of the Socialists and Democrats [S&D] group) for the “European Green Deal” portfolio and the Danish Margrethe Vestager (EC lead candidate of the former ALDE group) for the “A Europe fit for the digital Age” portfolio – can be seen as a symbolic act. It aims to ease the political tensions between the European Council and the EP that emerged after the decision of the European Council to nominate von der Leyen to the EC presidential position. The third executive vice-president nominee is Valdis Dombrovskis from Latvia, who will be responsible for the coordination of tasks that are connected to the “Economy that Works for People” portfolio. He will act as the only East-Central European executive vice-president, thus making geographical parity a reality during the selection process, which is an important aspect for the heads of state and government of MSs. Furthermore, the three executive vice-presidents represent the three major party families of the EP. Again, this is another symbolic gesture made by von der Leyen, in this case towards the EP.

Compared to the previous Juncker Commission, the number of vice-presidents has been increased. The [five vice-presidential positions](#) will be occupied by the commissioner responsible for “Values and Transparency”, “A Stronger Europe in the World”, “Institutional Relations and Foresight”, “Promoting the European Way of Life”, and “Democracy and Demography”.

As part of von der Leyen’s major restructuring efforts, it has to be noted that the previous “Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship” portfolio and the “Better Regulation, Institutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights” of the Juncker Commission were fundamentally transformed and “butchered” into several different portfolios in order to make them more transparent, evident, and distinct from each other. Vice-president Vera Jourová from Czechia will lead the “[Values and Transparency](#)” portfolio, which will deal with issues regarding electoral law, disinformation, media pluralism, rule of law, human rights, and citizenship. According to the three-tier structure, the “Values and Transparency” portfolio enjoys more attention than other, thematically very similar portfolios, like “[Justice](#)” or “[Home Affairs](#)”.

Another interesting development is that compared to the headlines of the previous Juncker Commission portfolios, von der Leyen tried to simplify the names of the portfolios (e.g. Health, Energy, Trade, Jobs and Social Rights, Equality, etc.). [Keywords](#) of the Juncker Commission such as Energy Union, growth, investment, social dialogue, research and science, education and sport have disappeared. This indicates that these issues, previously deserving an independent portfolio, will be highlighted less in the next years, since these topics have been incorporated

in other, bigger portfolios. For example, under the framework of the “[Promoting the European Way of Life](#)” portfolio, not just migration and asylum policies will be coordinated but education, sport, and culture as well. Social affairs, however, are scarcely mentioned in the headlines. Social priorities were diffused among the “Democracy and Demography”, “Economics and Finance”, “Jobs and Social Rights”, and “Equality” portfolios, thereby making social issues [cross-cutting priorities](#). Fears have already emerged that this will lead to the overlap of tasks or the lack of the implementation of social policies due to confusion. The portfolio “A Stronger Europe in the World”, headed by the High Representative, will also face [some losses](#), as dealing with sanctions will move from the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments to Directorate-General FISMA, which belongs to the “Economy that Works for People” portfolio.

Another interesting observation is that the French commissioner-elect, Thierry Breton will lead a very broad portfolio, namely “Internal Market”, which beside topics such as the Digital Single Market, industrial strategy, the EU’s intellectual property regime, and circular economy was also extended with the issue of [defence and space industry](#). To this end, a new Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space was created, forecasting the enhanced importance of linking space programs such as Galileo, EGNOS, and Copernicus to defence and security.

FROM A “POLITICAL” COMMISSION TO A “GEOPOLITICAL” ONE?

In Ursula von der Leyen, the new EC will have a president from the ranks of the European People’s Party (EPP) political family – just like the previous one. And yet, we cannot expect that the new Commission will distinguish itself only through the [reconfiguration and occasional renaming](#) of the commissioners’ portfolios and otherwise will be a continuation of the old one presided by Jean-Claude Juncker. While Juncker and his colleagues were outspokenly running a “political” Commission, von der Leyen has already tried to steer away from this approach, indicating that she is interested in the reorientation of the EC as a [“geopolitical” institution](#).

But how should we understand the Commission as a “political” institution, and what should we make of the contrast between a “political” and a “geopolitical” EU executive? President Juncker sought to distance himself from the preceding Barroso presidency, which was seen more as a giant bureaucratic and legal tool to supervise the correct execution of the Treaties than as a political body that actively engages in the steering of the EU’s political orientation inside and outside the bloc. [In other words](#), the Juncker Commission regarded itself as “highly political” because it “would not only administer EU policy, but also shape it actively along clear – and even controversial – political lines.”



While that was arguably not what it was originally designed for, Juncker rightly perceived that if the EU wants to position itself closer to its citizens, it needs to be both more vocal and more visible in issues that concern their everyday life, and he made the decision to use the Commission's strategic abilities to convert it into exactly that kind of institution.

[Was that an efficient approach?](#) To a degree. Was it controversial? Definitely. The governments of the MSs, also known as the European Council when gathered in the format representing their joint European identity, were not too keen on having a Commission that does not merely follow its specifically circumscribed roles but amplifies them to the extent where it becomes a very active "guardian of the Treaties," intervening in MSs' political life when it suspects that the foundational values of the EU are not being respected. This also meant the frequent formulation of judgments based on the Commission's interpretation of these values against actions of the MSs that had traditionally been treated as their internal dealings – they tended to be polite and covered in the usual EU-language, of course, but they were also often rather strong at the same time. These judgments can be interpreted as programmatic statements by Juncker and his team for claiming that any MS's internal affairs are also the EU's internal affairs. While this approach might have borne fruit in bridging at least part of the distance between the EU's "government" and the citizenry, it also actively annoyed MSs, which could claim with some credibility that the Commission was overstepping its constitutional boundaries while also not being sufficiently neutral in formulating sharp judgments. Hungary, Poland, and the Article 7 procedures launched against them can serve as an example: although the same legal tool was applied in the two cases, the way it was applied differed and depended a great deal on certain political circumstances the Commission thought it should take into account. This made the Commission the attorney and judge for the same case, which have been criticized by some of the MSs.

Ursula von der Leyen, whose presidency is the result of compromises between the MSs, and also between the Council and the Parliament, might have sensed that the new Commission needs to deal with the MSs in a less confrontational way, as she will need their backing in the important reforms that she will be bound to undertake. Envisaging a "geopolitical" (rather than a "political") commission can serve the purpose of a creative appeasement of the MSs because it implies less interference in the European Council's role to orient the constitutional-political dynamics of the integration, while [suggesting an approach](#) that is fit for the Commission as the external representative of the EU.

And indeed, the times are ripe for the EU to put more emphasis on its capabilities of external action. Recent events like the US-China trade war, the environmental damage in the Amazon rainforest, and the expected withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU highlight the importance of firm and cohesive policies at the international level. And the president-elect is entirely conscious of that. With the assertion that "[m]y Commission will be a geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies," [she promised](#) not only to make the EU "the

guardian of multilateralism” but more specifically to “take bold action against climate change, build our partnership with the United States, define our relations with a more self-assertive China and be a reliable neighbour, for example to Africa.” An ambitious and dynamic vision for a Union that acts as a global power on the international scene “[b]ecause we know that we are stronger by doing together what we cannot do alone.”

The fulfilment of the foreign policy ambitions of the new Commission are, however, not independent of its successful participation in the protection of the values that it wants to promote as a global actor also inside the EU. The EC should not become an overstuffed diplomatic apparatus that completely withdraws from internal EU affairs just because they are “political.” One of the greatest challenges facing von der Leyen is whether she will be able to find the right balance between representing a geopolitical entity and complementing the MSs’ role in the building of integration, a very political task indeed. Whether she succeeds or not, it might soon become apparent that rescaling the Commission to its previous role of a neutral arbiter is no longer possible.

VON DER LEYEN’S POLITICAL ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE

In June 2019, the heads of state and government proposed Ursula von der Leyen to be the next President of the EC. This political move marked the failure of the *Spitzenkandidat* system, as government heads did not nominate any of the top candidates of the European political groups, irrespective of their political affiliations. Even the EPP – the political group where the new candidate comes from – [echoed doubts about its own candidate](#) and finally turned its back on its previous nominee, Manfred Weber.

A politician from the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), von der Leyen represents some political and ideological values that are appealing across the European political spectrum. A mother of seven and born in the European capital, the former German defence minister is nevertheless less known in the Brussels political bubble. As first female President of the EC, one of her first political declarations was to ensure a gender balance in the new EC. Therefore, she requested MSs to nominate two persons, both a man and a woman.

But von der Leyen did not have a smooth landing in the seat of the EU’s top position. The retaliation from the European Parliament for neglecting the EC lead candidates of the EU political parties started right after von der Leyen’s nomination. Although she tabled a [program](#) with political priorities that appealed to most EP groups, she barely had the majority in the vote in the European Parliament. The main reason: negligence of the *Spitzenkandidat* system by the European Council.



In the secret vote held on 16 July, 383 MEPs voted in favour of von der Leyen, giving her a very narrow majority of 9 votes. Von der Leyen got most of the votes from the EPP, S&D, and Renew Europe (RE) groups. Approximately 182 MEPs from the EPP and 108 MEPs from the RE group [supported her in the confirmation vote](#), while also some 75 percent of the centre-left MEPs of the S&D group supported her. Most MEPs from the Greens and GUE/NGL groups reportedly voted against her. Interestingly, von der Leyen also obtained support from the Eurosceptic political camp: Poland's [Law and Justice Party](#) announced that its MEP voted for von der Leyen.

This narrow win in the EP raises questions about the legitimacy and power of the future president of the EC. There are two power dimensions to be analysed: first, how von der Leyen will be able to implement her political agenda towards the MSs, as well as how the EC under her presidency will be able to ensure that MSs comply with EU legislation, and second, how the EC President will be able to gain majority for her political direction in the EP.

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL POWER STRUGGLE

Von der Leyen announced her picks for the EC portfolios on 10 September, and the [Commissionaire designate hearings](#) started on 30 September. The first round of hearings already highlighted a clash with the EP, as the EP Committees [rejected the Romanian, Hungarian, and French commissionaire designates](#). It is important to note that these three candidates have been nominated by governments with party affiliations to the three main EP groups: the French En Marche! to the RE, Hungarian Fidesz to the EPP, and Romanian PSD to the S&D. The rejection of these candidates could be interpreted as a will to create a political balance among the three EP groups in line with the principle of “an eye for an eye”. This way, all three EP groups have one lost commissionaire-designate, and none of them suffer a loss of face.

With the rejection of these three designates, it became clear early on in the procedure that the entry into power of the new EC might be delayed, and some members of the von der Leyen Commission might face uncomfortable grilling and rejection by the EP Committees. Although the three new commissionaire designates – [Thierry Breton, Olivér Várhelyi, and Adina-loana Vălean](#) – have finally been approved, the EP has sent a clear sign during the hearings that the EP and the EP groups will play a highly political game in the coming five years. Also, it has become clear that the traditional alliance of EPP and S&D is gone for good: the two main political groups are more rivals in the current term, and there will be competition between them. The RE group has been the kingmaker in many votes so far. The rejection of EPP candidates with the help of the RE earmarks a [political strategy](#) from the liberal group where cooperation and retaliation have both been part of the toolkit. With French President Macron in the background,

the RE's movement might pave the way for a [post-Brexit French dominance](#), with a traditionally pro-France Chair of the RE Group, former Romanian Prime Minister Dacian Cioloş.

In order to ensure the approval of the designates in the EP, von der Leyen made a number of gestures to the most influential political groups of the EP. First, in order to have the backing of the EPP, she appointed three EPP Vice-Presidents, including Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis. To make a gesture to the second largest EP group, the [S&D](#), she renamed some of the portfolios: the controversial vice presidency for "Protecting the European Way of Life" will be renamed "Promoting the European Way of Life". Additionally, in line with S&D's requests, the future commissioner for jobs, Nicolas Schmit from Luxembourg, will have "social rights" added to his title, while "fisheries" will be added to the title of Virginijus Sinkevičius, the commissioner designate for Environment and Oceans.

In the forthcoming term of the EC, the allocation of the top positions of EU institutions is very much leaning to the big and founding MSs of the EU. The five key positions of the EU institutions – the President of the European Council, the President of the EP, the President of the EC, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), and the President of the European Central Bank (ECB) – are currently held by Belgium (European Council), Italy (EP), Germany (EC), Spain (HR/VP), and France (ECB). Unlike in the previous term, EU13 MSs are seriously underrepresented, or rather not represented, in the top positions of the EU institutions. This disregard of Central and Eastern European MSs might cause a potential East-West (EU13 and EU15) conflict, as the EU13 MSs might get frustrated by not being able to influence the political agenda and the decisions of the institutions.

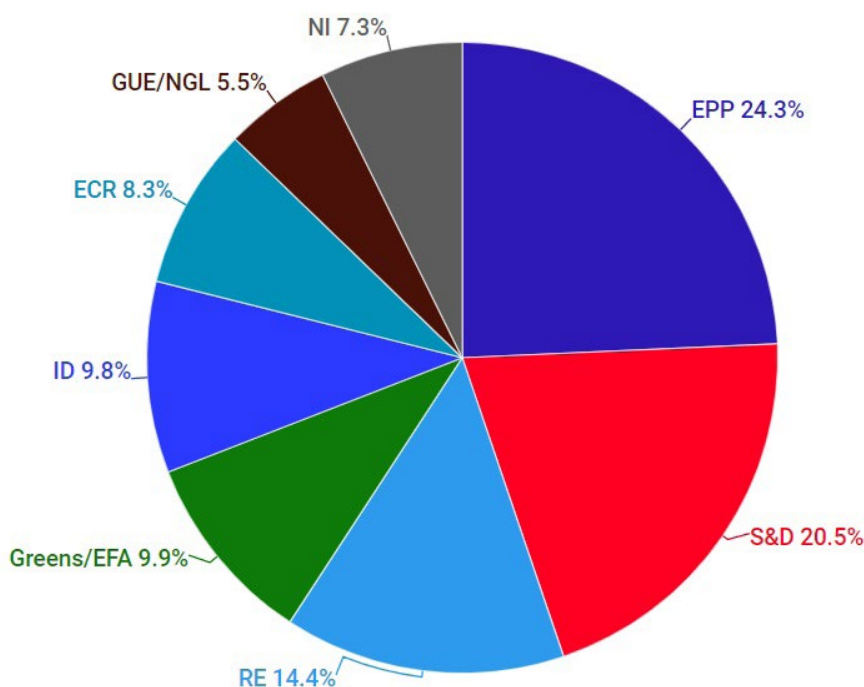
In light of these, von der Leyen needed to make some gestures to the EU13 Member States. In exchange for the votes of Law and Justice in the EP, von der Leyen gave the influential and high-budget "Agriculture" portfolio to Poland. She appointed four vice-presidents from EU13 MSs, two of them from the Visegrad countries: Maroš Šefčovič from Slovakia and Věra Jourová from Czechia. She also did Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a favour by offering the crucial "Neighbourhood and Enlargement" portfolio to his designate.

Since the outcome of the April 2019 EP elections, it has been a recurring question what a more fragmented EP means for the EU's decision-making. The previous duopoly of the EPP and the S&D is over, as these two EP groups do not have the majority in Parliament now. Previously, the grand coalition meant a comfortable way to the smooth adoption of political decisions and legislation in the EP. The partnering relationship between the EC and the EP was further backed by the personally good relationship between Juncker and Schulz, later Tajani. This is not yet the case between von der Leyen and Sassoli. Nevertheless, the current diversity and power balance of the EP groups is not bad news for von der Leyen. The new composition of the EP might also mean more room for manoeuvre to ensure majority in the EP for the policy proposals of the Commission.



[Figure 1](#)

The composition of the European Parliament –
Share of seats by EP groups



In order to pacify the EP groups, von der Leyen has strived for a delicate political balance in the portfolio allocation. By mainstreaming the “green” issue via making the European Green Deal is one of the main projects of the next Commission, von der Leyen made a gesture to the Greens/EFA political group. With the nomination of Timmermans as Executive Vice-President, as well as crafting the most gender-balanced Commission to date, von der Leyen got backing from the S&D group. And giving crucial portfolios, such as internal market and energy to the RE group, she can expect further support from the liberals.

The table below summarizes the political and national affiliations of the members of the next Commissions, as well as the chairs of the EP committees responsible for the commission portfolio. Although we can see some ideological or national connections between commissioners and EP committee chairs, for example, in the field of Economy, Culture, Home Affairs and Foreign Policy, the main conclusion that can be drawn is that in most policy areas the EC Commissioner and the EP Committee Chair are from different MSs and political groups. This is, on one side, a pressing force to find cross-party and cross-country compromises, but on the other, it is also a potential political weapon to paralyse the legislative procedure and decision-making.

Table 1
[Commissioners](#) and [EP Committee Chairs](#) for policy domains¹

Commissioner	Member State	Political Group	Assigned Portfolio	Responsible EP Committee	EP Chair	Member State	Political Group	Same Political Group	Same Member State
Maroš Šefčovič	Slovakia	S&D	Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight	AFCO	Antonio Tajani	Italy	EPP	✗	✗
Phil Hogan	Ireland	EPP	Trade	INTA	Bernd Lange	Germany	S&D	✗	✗
Mariya Gabriel	Bulgaria	EPP	Innovation and Youth	CULT	Sabine Verheyen	Germany	EPP	✓	✗
Nicolas Schmit	Luxembourg	S&D	Jobs and Social Rights	EMPL	Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová	Slovakia	ECR	✗	✗
Jutta Urpilainen	Finland	S&D	International Partnerships	DEVE	Tomas Tobé	Sweden	EPP	✗	✗
Janusz Wojciechowski	Poland	ECR	Agriculture	AGRI	Norbert Lins	Germany	EPP	✗	✗
Ylva Johansson	Sweden	S&D	Home Affairs	LIBE	Juan Fernando López Aguilar	Spain	S&D	✓	✗
Stella Kyriakidou	Cyprus	EPP	Health	ENVI	Pascal Canfin	France	RE	✗	✗
Didier Reynders	Belgium	RE	Justice	LIBE	Juan Fernando López Aguilar	Spain	S&D	✗	✗
Helena Dalli	Malta	S&D	Equality	EMPL	Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová	Slovakia	ECR	✗	✗
Thierry Breton	France	RE	Internal Market	IMCO	Petra De Sutter	Belgium	Greens/EFA	✗	✗
Elisa Ferreira	Portugal	S&D	Cohesion and Reforms	REGI	Younous Omarjee	France	GUE/NGL	✗	✗
Janez Lenarčič	Slovenia	RE	Crisis Management	DEVE	Tomas Tobé	Sweden	EPP	✗	✗
Paolo Gentiloni	Italy	S&D	Economy	ECON	Roberto Gualtieri	Italy	S&D	✓	✓
Kadri Simson	Estonia	RE	Energy	ITRE	to be confirmed	–	–	✗	?
Virginijus Sinkevičius	Lithuania	Greens/EFA	Environment, Oceans and Fisheries	ENVI	Pascal Canfin	France	RE	✗	✗
Johannes Hahn	Austria	EPP	Budget and Administration	BUDG	Johan Van Overtveldt	Belgium	ECR	✗	✗
Margaritis Schinas	Greece	EPP	Promoting the European Way of Life	LIBE	Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar	Spain	S&D	✗	✗
Dubravka Šuica	Croatia	EPP	Democracy and Demography	AFCO	Antonio Tajani	Italy	EPP	✓	✗
Věra Jourová	Czechia	ALDE	Values and Transparency	AFCO	Antonio Tajani	Italy	EPP	✗	✗
Josep Borrell	Spain	S&D	EU Foreign Policy Chief	AFET	David McAllister	Germany	EPP	✗	✗
Valdis Dombrovskis	Latvia	EPP	Financial Services	ECON	Roberto Gualtieri	Italy	S&D	✗	✗
Margrethe Vestager	Denmark	RE	Competition	ITRE	N/A	–	–	✗	?
Frans Timmermans	Netherlands	S&D	European Green Deal	ENVI	Pascal Canfin	France	RE	✗	✗
Olivér Várhelyi	Hungary	EPP	Neighbourhood and Enlargement	AFET	David McAllister	Germany	EPP	✓	✗
Adina-Ioana Vălean	Romania	EPP	Transport	TRAN	Karima Delli	France	Greens/EFA	✗	✗

¹ At the time of this writing, the successor of Adina-Ioana Vălean as Chair of the ITRE Committee has not yet been identified



Currently, there are only 26 Commissioners, as the [United Kingdom refused](#) to nominate one, triggering an infringement procedure against the country. London cites a legal guidance that no international appointments should be made during a general election campaign. With the launch of the infringement procedure, the EC's objective is to take all possible legal steps to force London to comply with EU law, and also to avoid any challenges to the legitimacy of the new Commission. Another aspect to analyse the potential power of the new Commission to carry out its political agenda is to see how the rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU can or cannot support its implementation. The rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU in the coming five years are as follows:

[Table 2](#)

Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2020-2024

Year	Semester	Member State holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU
2020	January-June	Croatia
	July-December	Germany
2021	January-June	Portugal
	July-December	Slovenia
2022	January-June	France
	July-December	Czechia
2023	January-June	Sweden
	July-December	Spain
2024	January-June	Belgium
	July-December	Hungary

Although it is impossible to foresee the political developments in these ten MSs in the years ahead, there will certainly be some political changes in these MSs that could potentially have a huge impact on von der Leyen's political power during her

term. With Merkel stepping down as German Chancellor in 2021, von der Leyen's main ally in the EU political arena will be replaced by a new, most likely CDU, Chancellor. This could be accelerated by a potential collapse of the current German grand coalition.

Macron is to run for re-election in April 2022, which also coincides with the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. Additionally, there will be elections in a number of EU MSs which are crucial for von der Leyen. In Slovenia, for example, the next elections will be held in the first half of 2022, right after the country holds the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2021. In October 2021, there will be parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic as well. The next general elections in Sweden will be held in September 2022, just before the country takes over the presidency in the first half of 2023. In sum, setting up new governments and coalition talks in these countries might impede the smooth operation of the rotating presidency, which could slow down the implementation of the Commission's political agenda. Additionally, political stalemate in Spain, or the rise of Salvini as Italy's new prime minister in the coming years might also cause some headache for von der Leyen.

CONCLUSION

The slight majority with which von der Leyen was elected Commission President has promised a contentious term for her. Especially the EP could feel disappointed, since her nomination came from a compromise among the MSs. The will to moderate the discontent is reflected well in the final settlement and structure of the new European Commission. The distribution of portfolios and the new structure of hierarchy will most likely appease the important actors and ease the workings of the Commission in the future.

In the new settlement, portfolios and positions were distributed in a way which can keep a balance both among the political groups within the European Parliament and between new and old MSs. With the hierarchy structure of the executive vice-presidents and vice-presidents it was managed that the main groups such as the EPP, S&D, and RE be in parity and that the EU13 MSs such as Latvia, Czechia, and Slovakia be present. Hungary and Poland have also received important portfolios, such as the Enlargement and Agricultural ones. The latter can contribute to bridging the East-West divide and represent issues important for new MSs, since currently none of the top positions of the EU are filled by an official from the East. However, it is more difficult to predict whether President von der Leyen can reach significant breakthroughs in her policy priorities.

It is clear that the priorities set out by von der Leyen reflect the current challenges of the EU well. Furthermore, this program can also be appealing for various political interests in the EP. Nevertheless, the more fractured and politicized EP might mean obstacles for the EC to bring through legislative proposals in the future. Beside the new policy goals, the new Commission seeks to play a different role



than its predecessor. The “geopolitical” Commission promises less conflict with the MSs than the previous “political” Commission, and more emphasis on external action. Most of it will depend to what extent von der Leyen will manage to gain the support of the MSs and moderate the rifts amongst them.

The end of the Brexit negotiation process, however, can mean that the Commission might progress on broader policy issues, not being occupied by crisis management. The progress will be affected by such intra-EU dynamics as the changes in Franco-German relations and visions on Europe. For the new “geopolitical” Commission to succeed, not only unity among MSs is needed. It is also crucial how von der Leyen seeks to tackle issues inside the EU connected to its values. Without this, the Commission has less chance to act globally and promote those values.

Altogether, the new settlement of the EC is a good starting point to progress on current and pressing issues. However, without political will coming from the MSs, it will be difficult to reach any serious breakthrough.