

**PRIORITIES OF THE NEW  
EU COMMISSION**

**STRUGGLING TO BALANCE LONG-TERM  
GOALS WITH SHORT-TERM NEEDS**

**Manuel Müller (ed.)**



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### STRUGGLING TO BALANCE LONG-TERM GOALS WITH SHORT-TERM NEEDS

- The EU has always been more comfortable with long-term policymaking, but recent crises have forced it to become more agile and reactive. This shift is also reflected in the structure and policy priorities of the new Commission.
- Geopolitical rivalries and the struggle for “competitiveness” shape the Commission’s plans for economic as well as foreign and security policy, and also impact areas like climate and energy.
- At the same time, domestic disagreements and the rise of far-right parties affect asylum and migration policy as well as the prospects for enlargement and institutional reform.
- While the Commission must drive on sight, the focus on short-term challenges can create tensions with long-standing policy objectives, especially where these are not easily translated into geopolitical gains. To be successful, the EU must equip itself to respond more effectively to current developments, but also ensure that its policies are consistent with its long-term vision and values.



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# PRIORITIES OF THE NEW EU COMMISSION

## STRUGGLING TO BALANCE LONG-TERM GOALS WITH SHORT-TERM NEEDS

### INTRODUCTION

The European Union's strengths have traditionally been in long-term, rather than short-term policymaking. With its consensus-oriented system and its focus on legislation and regulation rather than executive action, it has sometimes been slow to respond to changing circumstances. On the other hand, the same consensus-oriented system has also made it less prone to sudden policy shifts, and a shared vision of "ever closer union" has enabled it to pursue integration goals like the creation of the single market or the development of supranational institutions over decades. However, the recent accumulation of interrelated crises, coupled with domestic pressure from the far right and disagreements between member state governments, has made long-term policy planning difficult. With even the short-term outlook appearing highly uncertain, the EU is forced to drive on sight – even though its institutional infrastructure is often ill-equipped for the kind of rapid, reactive decision-making that this requires.

The effort to respond to these challenges is reflected in the structure and policy priorities of Ursula von der Leyen's new Commission, currently under scrutiny by the European Parliament. Von der Leyen has organized her team with a centralized core of power around herself and a small number of executive vice-presidents, and many overlapping portfolios for individual commissioners. This will give her the flexibility to assign specific tasks according to the needs of the moment, even though more structural reforms will be required to overcome other fundamental inefficiencies in the EU's decision-making capacity.

In terms of priorities, the Commission's agenda has been marked by recent crises and urgencies, often related to the increased strategic competition at the global level. This creates tensions between short-term policy responses and traditional long-term objectives, particularly those that do not easily translate into immediate geopolitical gains. This Briefing Paper analyzes the Commission's priorities – as set out in von der Leyen's political guidelines and her mission letters to

the individual commissioners<sup>1</sup> – in five key policy areas impacted by regional and global crises: economic policy; climate and energy; asylum and migration; foreign, security and defence policy; and enlargement and institutional reform. It discusses challenges and opportunities, as well as the often-complicated relationship between short-term needs and long-term goals.

### ECONOMIC POLICY: AIMING FOR "COMPETITIVENESS"

*Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek & Niklas Helwig*

The EU has so far been stronger in creating rules-based markets than in pursuing an industrial or geo-economic policy. This approach has come under increasing pressure with the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war on Ukraine, and the energy transition. The EU is falling behind in economic growth, while also risking the negative effects of market fragmentation. The Draghi and Letta reports, requested by the outgoing Commission and Council, have criticized internal shortcomings and called for a deepening of the single market and a greater use of industrial policy.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, "competitiveness" is high on the new Commission's list of priorities, with Spanish Executive Vice-President Teresa Ribera emerging as the main actor in Brussels to set the conditions for growth. The concept links a strong economy to global influence and other priorities such as technology, energy transition, and even security and defence. Still, the debate about competitiveness is marked by a complicated relationship between the EU's traditional approach of trade liberalization and the rising spectre of protectionism and "picking winners".

- 1 Ursula von der Leyen: Europe's choice. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029, 18 July 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en); Ursula von der Leyen: Mission letters to the Commissioners-designate, 17 September 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/towards-new-commission-2024-2029/commissioners-designate-2024-2029\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/towards-new-commission-2024-2029/commissioners-designate-2024-2029_en).
- 2 Mario Draghi: The future of European competitiveness, 9 September 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en); Enrico Letta: Much more than a market – Speed, Security, Solidarity. Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens, April 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>.

In practice, competitiveness is closely linked to attracting investment, especially in sectors deemed critical for future economic growth or security. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has applied unprecedented exemptions to its restrictive state-aid regime to allow member states to invest and use industrial policy to grow. Yet smaller members with less fiscal firepower dislike this approach, fearing that the exemptions will lead to state-aid races and distortions in the single market. This has ignited a debate on a more centralized investment policy, based on common European funds. However, the idea of more European investment funding – and especially of more common debt – has also been met with resistance. This leaves the Commission with a difficult balancing act for the upcoming post-2027 multiannual financial framework.

While the EU may not be able to directly replicate a federal system like the one in the United States, it must consider solutions to streamline the funding process from incentive to receiver. This includes untapping private investment, for example through the completion of the Capital Markets Union, which will facilitate cross-border capital flows within the single market. The competitiveness agenda also aims at “simplification”: Cutting red tape might attract new businesses and stimulate growth, but must be weighed against environmental and consumer interests and the need to ensure a level playing field for the single market.

Externally, the new Commission is faced with a growing role for geoeconomics, that is, the use of economic tools to influence other states. The EU must be consistent in how it applies its own tools, like sanctions, and also avoid economic coercion by outside powers. This includes unilateral measures to protect the single market from state-backed external competition, such as the Foreign Subsidies Regulation or the recent decision on import tariffs against China’s electric vehicle manufacturers. Even while striving for WTO conformity, such unilateral measures create tensions with the EU’s long-standing objective of a global rules-based trading system.

Finally, the EU is seeking new strategic partnerships, especially with normative allies like the US and the UK. This includes initiatives such as the EU-US Trade and Technology Council or the UK’s recent return to major EU research collaboration frameworks. At the same time, the EU also intends to intensify cooperation with the Global South through frameworks such as the Global Gateway.

The incoming Commission faces a fast pace of global economic change and increased geoeconomic

antagonism. It may be tempting to blindly match that pace, and indeed it seems inevitable for the EU to develop new industrial policy tools alongside its traditional market-building approach. Still, if the Commission views the world solely through the prism of competitiveness, it could risk losing the balance with other objectives that legitimize the European integration project – such as social mobility, cohesion, free trade, sustainable development, or environmental protection.

## **CLIMATE AND ENERGY: FOCUSING ON SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION**

*Federica Prandin & Marco Siddi*

The Commission’s energy and climate priorities for 2024–2029 reflect a strategic shift in response to evolving regional and global crises. Von der Leyen’s priority to tackle climate change, stated in 2019, has been reformulated to focus more on energy security. This approach pays particular attention to reducing external dependence, especially on Russia and China, while pursuing new partnerships guided by geostrategic considerations.

Compared to 2019, when von der Leyen presented the 2050 net zero target and the European Green Deal, her 2024 political guidelines reflect a more pragmatic and technology-focused approach to climate. The disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 energy crisis, coupled with concerns about the impact of decarbonization policies on the competitiveness of EU industry, led the Commission to propose the Green Deal Industrial Plan in 2023. This initiative aims to ensure a reliable supply chain for critical raw materials and technologies required to support renewable energy infrastructure, and fosters a market environment that incentivizes green electrification. The new Commission will intensify this focus on low-carbon industrial policy with the aim of investing in “sustainable competitiveness”. The forthcoming Clean Industrial Deal focuses on simplifying regulations, investing in low-carbon technologies, and ensuring access to affordable energy and raw materials. Concurrently, legislation such as the Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act aims to support European industries in advancing sustainability targets while maintaining global competitiveness.

There are still constraints to overcome, such as human resource limitations, administrative procedures, and dependence on non-EU technology. Energy security remains a key priority. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for the EU to reduce its dependence



The new European Commission is expected to begin its work at the start of December. From left to right: Raffaele Fitto, Maria Luís Albuquerque, Christophe Hansen, Jessika Roswall, Jozef Sikela, Dubravka Šuica, Andrius Kubilius, Wopke Hoekstra, Roxana Minzatu, Valdis Dombrovskis, Teresa Ribera, Henna Virkkunen, Ursula von der Leyen, Maroš Šefčovič, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, Kaja Kallas, Ekaterina Zaharieva, Costa Kadiis, Hadja Lahbib, Dan Jørgensen, Michael McGrath, Olivér Várhelyi, Glen Micallef, Piotr Serafin, and Stéphane Séjourné.

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on fossil fuels and accelerate its energy transition. To mitigate increased energy price volatility, the Commission will promote joint procurement and investment in renewable energy sources. Among other measures, the 2024–2029 guidelines propose to extend the joint purchasing mechanism for natural gas to hydrogen and critical raw materials.

The new Commission has declared its continued commitment to the EU's climate goals of a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050. This includes incorporating the 90% net emission reduction targets by 2040 into the European Climate Law, as previously implied in the 2040 Climate Target Communication. Still, comparing the climate priorities of the current cycle with those of 2019 reveals a shift from preserving Europe's natural environment to a more geopolitically oriented stance, focused on enhancing green diplomacy and establishing a global climate vision alongside new trade cooperation with selected partners. Such partnerships aim to secure

the supply of raw materials, clean energy, and technologies, while also engaging in external climate and energy policies in the run-up to the COP30 conference in Brazil in 2025.

Behind these shifts is also a tension between a climate-focused and a geopolitical approach. The former requires multilateral cooperation, also across geopolitical dividing lines, and prioritizing the fight against the root causes of climate change. The latter drives competition with geopolitical rivals, including efforts to isolate them from technological advances that accelerate the green and digital transitions. Moreover, it is unclear how the Commission will reconcile its declared climate priorities with its support for rearmament, which depends on energy-intensive and polluting industrial processes. Finally, a geoeconomic agenda focused on moving energy supply chains away from main competitors might also push the EU to expand trade ties with smaller authoritarian regimes, contradicting claims of a values-based foreign policy.

## ASYLUM AND MIGRATION: DRIVING TOWARDS EXTERNALIZATION

Saila Heinikoski

Since the 2015 asylum crisis and the rise of far-right parties in many member states, the EU's migration and asylum policies have become more restrictive. One of the first priorities of the incoming Commission will be the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was approved in May 2024 and must be implemented by June 2026. As a proposal for a recast return directive was discarded from the Pact, it can be expected that the Commission will issue a new one, which might include so-called "return hubs" outside the EU.

The mission letter to the proposed migration commissioner, Magnus Brunner from Austria, states that he will "steer further reflections on innovative operational solutions to counter irregular migration", apparently referring to externalization strategies like the transfer of asylum-seekers from Italy to Albania.<sup>3</sup> Von der Leyen has previously welcomed this scheme as out-of-the-box thinking, stating that such ideas deserve the Commission's attention in the new institutional cycle. Her choice of an Austrian candidate to lead the migration portfolio may also be indicative of her policy priorities. In recent years, Austria has been among the most vocal countries demanding more action on migration policy. For example, it co-signed a 15-country letter to the Commission calling for externalization schemes similar to the one between Italy and Albania in May 2024.<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, the incoming Commission is likely to initiate a discussion on different models of asylum externalization – despite its high costs, human rights implications, and lack of evidence that it would deter migration. Rather, the focus on externalization seems to be driven by short-term political considerations to rein in the rise of the far right. The choice to make such significant changes to the external dimension of the EU in response to internal political manoeuvring carries serious risks for the EU's global agency, creating new dependencies on third countries as well as undermining

the EU's normative power. Instead of focusing on the immediate reduction of asylum seekers, the EU should place more emphasis on developing mutually beneficial and comprehensive partnerships that reduce the long-term need for emigration – something that the externalization schemes are not suited for.

As more and more member states adopt national legislation that contradicts the common asylum framework, or even announce that they will "suspend the right to asylum" altogether,<sup>5</sup> the Commission will also face challenges in maintaining the primacy of EU law. This is also true for the Schengen area, where several member states – including Brunner's Austria – have continuously conducted "temporary" internal border controls since 2015. While the Commission seems reluctant to refer such cases to the European Court of Justice in order to avoid internal conflicts, their growing number threatens to become a new crisis for the European rule of law.

## FOREIGN, SECURITY, DEFENCE: PROTECTING EUROPE'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Tuomas Iso-Markku & Katariina Mustasilta

Russia's war and increasing strategic rivalries also shape the foreign and security policy agenda of the new Commission. The increasing importance of defence matters and the Commission's growing role in dealing with them were already evident before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but the war has accelerated these trends. Since 2022, the Commission has put forward several initiatives that address both short-term and long-term issues – Ukraine's urgent military needs, long-standing capability shortfalls within Europe, and Europe's military-industrial capacity – with varying degrees of success.

Von der Leyen's second Commission continues this work, emphasizing its support for Ukraine and boldly proclaiming "a new era for European Defence and Security". Such rhetoric is complemented by the creation of the post of a commissioner for defence and space. Still, the EU's capabilities in the field of defence will continue to depend on the member states' level of commitment, the availability of EU-level funding, and the ability to coordinate with NATO. The Commission can try to advance the debates on all of these issues – for example through the report on preparedness

3 Ursula von der Leyen: Mission letter to the Commissioner-designate for Internal Affairs and Migration, 17 September 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/ea79c47b-22f8-4390-a119-5115dc40fc3e\\_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20BRUNNER.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/ea79c47b-22f8-4390-a119-5115dc40fc3e_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20BRUNNER.pdf). See also Saila Heinikoski: EU migration policy and calls for the externalisation of asylum: Intensifying partnerships, exploring new models, FIIA Briefing Paper 393, September 2024. <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/eu-migration-policy-and-calls-for-the-externalisation-of-asylum>.

4 Joint Letter from the undersigned Ministers on new solutions to address irregular migration to Europe, 15 May 2024. Signatories included the ministers responsible for migration from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania and Finland. <https://uim.dk/media/12635/joint-letter-to-the-european-commission-on-new-solutions-to-address-irregular-migration-to-europe.pdf>.

5 Reuters: Poland to temporarily suspend right to asylum after Belarus border tensions, Tusk says, 12 October 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-temporarily-suspend-right-asylum-after-belarus-border-tensions-tusk-says-2024-10-12/>.

commissioned from former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö,<sup>6</sup> or the White Paper on the Future of European Defence that von der Leyen has promised to deliver within the first 100 days of her new mandate – but the outcome is far from certain. Many member states remain wary of the Commission’s defence activities and want to ensure that it does not overstep its authority.

The continued focus on Ukraine comes at a time when the EU is struggling to exert influence in the Middle East, and to maintain it in the Sahel. The new post of commissioner for the Mediterranean demonstrates the weight of the EU’s interests in its Southern neighbourhood, particularly regarding migration, energy and (economic) security. In general, the EU’s aspiration to strengthen its credibility as a security actor, combined with the member states’ waning interest in personnel-intensive crisis management operations, means that the EU is more likely to rely on providing financial support to third countries through security assistance instruments such as the European Peace Facility. How effectively, and in response to which crises these are deployed, depends on the alignment of member states’ interests.

A geopolitical turn is also visible in the EU’s economic foreign policy, with economic security and competitiveness valued over multilateral development cooperation. For example, the mission letter for the commissioner for international partnerships focuses mainly on the Global Gateway initiative and on mutually beneficial partnerships, with considerably less emphasis on traditional development objectives.<sup>7</sup> How the EU can strike a balance between the most urgent strategic priorities on the one hand, and its aspiration to play a leading role in tackling global challenges on the other, remains an open question. The push towards a more interest-based and assertive approach to international relations has already drawn criticism about neglecting long-term development issues, which remain a key concern for most of the world and have recently suffered setbacks.

Finally, the Commission’s aim of becoming a more active player in foreign policy is accompanied by a new leadership structure. For example, the responsibility for defence will be divided between the new defence commissioner, the high representative, and the vice-president for tech sovereignty, security and democracy.

Meanwhile, the role of the High Representative-designate, Kaja Kallas, has been downgraded further from what was already a position with scant influence over sectoral policies. Rather than guiding the Commission’s overall external activities, she has been tasked to merely “coordinate the Commission’s presence in the Foreign Affairs Council”. Instead, the leading role is likely to fall to von der Leyen herself, further centralizing power within the Commission.

## **ENLARGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM: STRIVING TO KEEP MEMBER STATES TOGETHER**

*Tyynne Karjalainen & Manuel Müller*

Driven by geopolitical considerations after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, enlargement policy has resurfaced as a key issue for the EU, and von der Leyen has declared it a core priority for her second Commission term. Although the EU has never formally endorsed a concrete timeline, the date of 2030 – first mentioned by outgoing European Council President Charles Michel in 2023<sup>8</sup> – is often considered a desirable target by which it should be able to accept new members. In this respect, von der Leyen can increasingly count on the support of other commissioners. High Representative-designate Kallas is known as a vocal advocate of the Eastern neighbourhood and is expected to actively back its EU integration. Similarly, the designated commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood, Marta Kos from Slovenia, is expected to push the agenda more vigorously than her predecessor Olivér Várhelyi.

But this is where the good news ends for von der Leyen. Both the larger context – particularly Russia’s slow advances in Ukraine – and domestic developments in many member states are likely to put the brakes on the enlargement drive. In the immediate aftermath of the 2022 Russian attack, EU member states were united in supporting the opening of enlargement negotiations as a geopolitical signal to their neighbours. But this unity will be much harder to maintain once the negotiations take shape and lasting policy decisions need to be made. Opposition to enlargement is regaining ground in key member states like France, and the EU-wide rise of far-right parties further complicates matters.

At the same time, the candidate countries are struggling to keep up with the pace of reform. This creates a dilemma between short-term ‘geopolitical’

6 Sauli Niinistö: Safer Together. Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness, October 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/safer-together-path-towards-fully-prepared-union\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/safer-together-path-towards-fully-prepared-union_en).

7 Katariina Mustasilta: Europe’s development and peacebuilding cuts: Securing short-term interests, risking long-term security, FIIA Briefing Paper 395, October 2024. <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/europes-development-and-peacebuilding-cuts>.

8 Charles Michel: Speech at the Bled Strategic Forum, 28 August 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>.

and long-term ‘rules-based’ considerations: While the EU may be tempted to ignore some red flags in order to support Ukraine, any deviation from the merit-based approach would undermine the incentives for democratic transition in candidate countries. The incoming Commission will thus face the challenge of maintaining credible progress towards enlargement while upholding its established accession criteria and keeping the member states together.

Even more difficult than enlargement is the related question of internal institutional reform. The EU’s institutional set-up suffers from several shortcomings in its democratic functioning, its capacity to act, and its ability to defend common values like the rule of law – with enlargement likely to exacerbate all these deficiencies.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the European Parliament presented a far-reaching treaty reform proposal in 2023.<sup>10</sup> However, due to a lack of agreement among the member states, the European Council has not responded to it. Its “roadmap on internal reforms”, adopted in June 2024, merely tasked the Commission with presenting in-depth policy reviews on EU values, policies, budget, and governance.

For her part, von der Leyen has promised to deliver these reviews within the first 100 days of her second term, and even declared abstract support for “Treaty change where it can improve our Union” in her political guidelines. However, she also pledged to focus on

“areas where a broad consensus is emerging” and made only a cursory mention of the reform agenda in the commissioners’ mission letters. This suggests that she is likely to keep reform proposals to a minimum. Such a lowest-common-denominator strategy might avoid conflict in the European Council in the short term, but it risks antagonizing the European Parliament and could lead to further trouble down the road if the institutional shortcomings of the EU remain unresolved.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a crisis-driven environment and a global landscape characterized by growing strategic rivalries, the EU is being forced to leave its comfort zone of slow and steady regulation and must become more agile and reactive. This is evidenced in the new Commission’s priorities, which are strongly driven by a wish to increase geopolitical competitiveness, sometimes even at the expense of traditional long-term goals. In other areas, domestic political disagreements and the rise of far-right parties risk leading the Commission to adopt policies with strong negative side effects, or to delay necessary reforms.

But even when driving on sight is unavoidable, one must know one’s destination. While acting with short-term necessities in mind, the EU must be aware of the long-term consequences of its policies. It must equip itself to deal with current geopolitical crises, but also ensure that its measures today are congruent with its vision for the world of tomorrow. /

9 Cf. Manuel Müller: EU reform is back on the agenda: The many drivers of the new debate on treaty change, FIIA Briefing Paper 363, May 2023. <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/eu-reform-is-back-on-the-agenda>.

10 European Parliament: Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties (2022/2051(INL)), 22 November 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.html).