

# The von der Leyen Commission's priorities for 2019-2024

In her statements to the European Parliament in [July](#) and [November](#) 2019, as candidate for European Commission President and President-elect respectively, Ursula von der Leyen outlined the six political priorities that would shape the working programme of the European Commission over the next five years. While the former Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, had claimed to lead a '[political Commission](#)', his successor, Ursula von der Leyen, has pledged to lead a '[geopolitical Commission](#)'. Such a Commission will have a political agenda in which reinforcing the EU's role as a relevant international actor, and trying to shape a better global order through reinforcing multilateralism, is to become a key priority ('A stronger Europe in the world'). The other main political priorities of the Commission are brought together under five broad headings: 'A European Green Deal', 'A Europe fit for the digital age', 'An economy that works for people', 'A new push for European democracy', and 'Promoting the European way of life'. Together they define the framework within which the Commission will act in the coming five years. The [structure](#) and [working methods](#) announced by von der Leyen show that her Commission will differ from its predecessors in a number of ways.

## What is new in the 'geopolitical Commission'

### New structure

Concerned about the coordination and coherence of the College's activities and decisions,<sup>1</sup> von der Leyen has decided to [structure](#) the Commission around three executive vice-presidents (Frans Timmermans, Margrethe Vestager, and Valdis Dombrovskis) and five vice-presidents (Josep Borrell Fontelles, Maroš Šefčovič, Věra Jourová, Dubravka Šuica, and Margaritis Schinas). The executive vice-presidents are to assume a dual role as commissioners dealing both with a specific portfolio and as coordinators responsible for one of the core topics of the political agenda, while the five remaining vice-presidents will assume a single coordinating role for specific policy priorities.

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Borrell), who also has the role of Vice-President (HR/VP, [Article 18\(4\) TEU](#)), coordinates the external aspects of the work of all Commissioners, in addition to being responsible for the European External Action Service (EEAS). The importance attached to the EU's external action under von der Leyen's political priorities explains why external policy will be systematically discussed and decided upon by the College. A specific Group for external coordination (EXCO) has been created to prepare the external aspects of College meetings on a weekly basis and to enhance coordination between the Commission and the EEAS. It remains to be seen how this new approach and emphasis will fit with the dual character of the mandate of the HR/VP and the prevalence of the Council in every decision taken under the common foreign and security policy.

The Commission President had originally assembled a gender-balanced College, although this balance was lost with the new candidates replacing those who failed to pass the parliamentary hearings process. But von der Leyen has sought to favour gender equality with [new rules](#) for the composition Commissioners' cabinets (private offices), requiring Commissioners to include 50 % of

women among their administrator staff. She has also pledged to work towards gender equality among the Commission's senior management.

## New working methods

Seeking to avoid the much criticised 'silo' management of different Commission portfolios and the consequent lack of political coordination of College decisions,<sup>2</sup> von der Leyen has repeated the cluster structure initiated by her predecessor. Six [Commissioners' groups](#), each headed by an executive vice-president or vice-president, are entrusted with the tasks of analysing cross-cutting issues and shaping coherent policies within the six political priorities established by the President. As an exception, the Commissioners' group on 'A new push for European democracy' will be led by the Vice-President for Values and Transparency (Jourová), but Vice-Presidents Šefčovič and Šuica will chair the points on the agenda falling under their respective responsibilities. This distinctive feature might be explained by the interlocking competences assigned to the three vice-presidents in relation to the organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the strengthening of the EU's democracy through different means.

A number of Commissioners are sometimes part of different groups, having to liaise with different vice-presidents depending on the policy areas (for example, Didier Reynders, Commissioner for Justice, will have to liaise with Vestager under 'A Europe fit for the digital age' and Jourová under the group 'A new push for European Democracy'). This is a complex scenario that might become more challenging if the commissioners' groups decide to create specific project groups, as envisaged by the new working methods. The Secretary-General of the Commission, assisting the President and all the vice-presidents in their coordinating role, will probably play the same enhanced coordinating role as under former Commissions.<sup>3</sup>

As was the case under the [Juncker Commission](#), vice-presidents have a major role to play in the von der Leyen Commission. They have to assess whether new initiatives fit the political guidelines of the President and recommend their inclusion in the Commission work programme, helping the President to fulfil her coordinating and leading role. The Commissioner for Budget and Administration ([Johannes Hahn](#)), reporting directly to the President and not part of the Commissioners' groups system, is also expected to play a major role as his advice will be used by the President to determine the budgetary and resources implications of policy decisions. In this sense, the organisation scheme introduced by von der Leyen could be seen as replicating to some extent the hierarchical and centralised structure of the previous Commission. That structure was criticised by some for departing from the principle of collegiality and for introducing differences among Commissioners, but welcomed by others as a mechanism to overcome the difficulties attached to the coordination of an over-sized Commission and ensuring a strong political leadership of the institution.<sup>4</sup>

## Better coordination of interinstitutional work

Finally, Vice-President Šefčovič seems to have partially assumed the task entrusted to First Vice-President [Timmermans](#) under the Juncker Commission. Leading the Commission's interinstitutional relations and better policy-making, [Šefčovič](#) will be responsible for the implementation of the interinstitutional agreement on better law-making, will lead the interinstitutional discussions on annual programming, and will represent the Commission in the General Affairs Council and in Parliament's debates on cross-cutting issues. The tasks entrusted to Vice-President Šefčovič derive from President von der Leyen's [wish](#) to better coordinate the work of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament, and to strengthen the special partnership between the European Parliament and the Commission through different means. These include supporting Parliament's right of legislative initiative and reviving the question hour with the Commission during Parliament's plenary sessions. In this logic, Šefčovič will also coordinate the Commission's presence at Parliament's plenary sessions, with all the members of the College being asked to give priority to attendance at Parliament and Council meetings, and in trilogue negotiations.

# 1. European Green Deal

The European Green Deal is a programme outlined in the [political guidelines](#) of the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen. It aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, while boosting the competitiveness of European industry and ensuring a just transition for the regions and workers affected. Preserving Europe's natural environment and biodiversity, a 'farm-to-fork' strategy for sustainable food, and a new circular economy action plan are other key elements. Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans is in charge of leading and coordinating the work on the European Green Deal.

## Background

The EU is committed to taking action to limit global warming to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement. In November 2018, the Commission adopted the '[clean planet for all](#)' strategy, aiming for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate-neutral economy by 2050. It analyses scenarios for long-term decarbonisation, as a basis for a debate on the move towards an emission-neutral economy and the development of the EU's long-term low-carbon strategy under the Paris Agreement. In line with the previous Parliament's [position](#), the December 2019 [European Council](#) endorsed the objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050, although one Member State (Poland) cannot yet commit to implementing this objective.

## Making Europe the first climate-neutral continent

According to von der Leyen's political guidelines, making Europe the first climate-neutral continent is the 'greatest challenge and opportunity of our times'. Von der Leyen pledged to put forward the proposals for the European Green Deal within the first 100 days of the new Commission's mandate, including a new 'European Climate Law' that sets a climate-neutrality target for 2050. On 11 December 2019, the Commission adopted a communication on the [European Green Deal](#) that sets out a detailed vision to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, safeguard biodiversity, establish a circular economy, and eliminate pollution.

Pricing of carbon emissions is mentioned as a key element to ensure the contribution of every person and every sector. The Emissions Trading System ([ETS](#)) would be extended to the maritime sector, and the free allowances allocated to airlines would be reduced over time. The Commission plans to investigate the possibility of further extending the ETS to traffic and buildings.

A new European Climate Pact is expected to bring together regional and local authorities, civil society, industry and schools to agree on commitments to change behaviour. Tax policies would be reformed in line with climate ambitions, which includes work on a carbon border tax and a review of the Energy Taxation Directive.

The von der Leyen Commission also aims for more ambitious 2030 emissions reduction targets, both in the EU and internationally. The Commission President wants the EU to lead international negotiations to raise the ambition of other major emitters by 2021, and has pledged to put forward a comprehensive, responsible plan to increase the European Union's emissions reduction target for 2030, from 40 % towards 55 %. The plan would ensure a level playing field and stimulate innovation, competitiveness and jobs, based on social, economic and environmental impact assessments.

## Circular economy and biodiversity

The European Green Deal would be aligned with a new industrial strategy to make the EU a world leader in the circular economy and clean technologies, and to decarbonise energy-intensive industries. A new circular economy action plan would promote the sustainable use of resources, especially in resource-intensive sectors with high environmental impact, such as textiles and construction. Europe would lead on the issue of single-use plastics, and extend the fight against plastic waste to micro-plastics.

Another key objective is mainstreaming biodiversity across all policy areas and a biodiversity strategy for 2030. Von der Leyen would like Europe to lead the world at the 2020 Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity ([COP15](#)). Further elements of the European Green Deal include the EU's zero-pollution ambition to safeguard citizens' health, a 'renovation wave' for the building sector, and a new 'farm-to-fork' strategy for sustainable food.

## Financing the European Green Deal

According to the guidelines, record amounts of public funds would be invested in advanced research and innovation, complemented by a strategy for green financing. Parts of the European Investment Bank (EIB) should become Europe's climate bank. On 14 January 2020, the Commission adopted a communication on the [Sustainable Europe Investment Plan](#) (often referred to as the European Green Deal Investment Plan). It aims to increase funding for the transition by mobilising €1 trillion for sustainable investment over the next decade through the EU budget and associated instruments like InvestEU; create an enabling framework for sustainable investment; and support the identification, structuring and execution of sustainable projects.

The same day, the Commission adopted a legislative proposal for a new [Just Transition Fund](#) with a budget of €7.5 billion to support the people and regions most affected by the low-carbon transition. The new fund is part of a just transition mechanism that cuts across different funds and financing instruments and should mobilise at least €100 billion in public and private investment. The [Commission](#) expects the proposal to be accommodated in the final agreement on the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework.

## 2. An economy that works for people

In her political guidelines, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised a fair transition for all towards a green social market economy. In this context, she committed to deploy an 'economy that works for people', enhancing the distinctive features of the social market economy called for in [Article 3 \(3\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

### Implementing the social pillar and promoting equality

Following the 2017 joint endorsement of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) by all three European institutions, von der Leyen put forward the idea of an action plan for the implementation of the social pillar, within which particular focus should be put on policies on a fair minimum wage, a stronger social dialogue, improved working conditions for platform workers, a European unemployment benefit reinsurance scheme, and equality, including measures on binding pay transparency. As part of further improving the democratic accountability of EU economic governance, a refocusing of the [European Semester](#) is proposed, aimed at integrating the United Nations sustainable development goals ([SDGs](#)).

While reorganising the European Semester process, the Commission also pledged to engage further with the European Parliament through regular exchanges of views to be held before each key phase of the European Semester cycle.

### Supporting SMEs investment and financing

The political guidelines highlight that social rights and Europe's climate-neutrality must go hand in hand with a competitive industry. In 2017, there were close to 24.5 million non-financial enterprises in the EU, of which 99.8 % were small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Overall, the economic contribution of SMEs to the European economy is significant. However, many find it difficult to succeed in growing their systemic presence or in gaining access to international markets. Investment and financing have been recognised by the EU as precondition for European industry to drive industrial transformation. In this respect, the European Fund for Strategic Investments ([EFSI](#)) was launched in 2015 to trigger financing for strategic projects across the continent. Beyond this,

the capital markets union ([CMU](#)), launched in 2015, has further sought to reduce the cost of raising capital, minimise barriers for cross-border investments, and provide new sources of funding for EU businesses, especially SMEs. In continuity with this approach, the Commission will work on a new long-term strategy for Europe's industrial future, including an SME strategy, in particular by enhancing SMEs' access to finance by completing the CMU. The scheduled review of the relevant legislation adopted in recent years will offer an opportunity for a further acceleration in the integration of EU capital markets. A deep and liquid European capital market will enhance private risk-sharing, make the EU more competitive and resilient, and ensure a stronger international role for the euro. The potential of the CMU to facilitate SMEs' access to capital will be raised by a private-public fund specialising in initial public offerings of SMEs.

## Deepening the economic and monetary union

To enhance the ability of the euro to support the European economy, a further deepening of economic and monetary union ([EMU](#)) is prioritised. To this end, the Commission will work on delivering a budgetary instrument for convergence and competitiveness in the euro area, as part of the work on supporting Member States' structural reforms with a view to fostering inclusive growth and territorial cohesion. To achieve a more growth-friendly fiscal stance in the euro area, the Commission will also make full use of the flexibility allowed within the Stability and Growth Pact ([SGP](#)). In this respect, during his hearing before the committees for Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) and for Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis stated that the Commission will work on the basis of the report of the European Fiscal Board, which sets out some ideas on simplification of the rules of the SGP. A 'limited [golden rule](#)' will be taken as a basis for the Commission's considerations. The completion of the [banking union](#) will also be crucial. That includes the creation of a European deposit insurance scheme ([EDIS](#)) and a common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund ([SRF](#)). The Commission's [proposal](#) for an EDIS would complement the EMU by improving the protection of bank customers and further increasing the stability and resilience of the financial system in the euro area and beyond. New elements might be put on the table to facilitate discussions on this. The Euro Summit of [29 June 2018](#) agreed that the European Stability Mechanism ([ESM](#)) will provide the common backstop to the SRF, with details to be arranged at a later stage. Further discussions took place both at Euro Summit and Eurogroup level. On [13 December 2019](#), the euro-area leaders took stock of progress made on the implementation of the political agreement reached in [June 2019](#) and tasked the Eurogroup with continuing work on the ESM package of reforms.

In addition to that, Dombrovskis acknowledged that the Commission will need to see how to 'try to reinvigorate this discussion' on the creation of a European safe asset.

A significant contribution to improving the business environment for EU entrepreneurs would be made by strengthening the [international role of the euro](#). That would help in shaping global affairs, for example by expanding Europe's responsible trade agenda, and allow for European companies to trade all over the world, while safeguarding the European social and regulatory model at home.

## 3. A Europe fit for the digital age

In her July 2019 political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen outlined the main strands of a policy aimed at building a Europe fit for the digital age, insisting that there is still a possibility of achieving technological sovereignty in certain critical technologies, such as 5G. According to the guidelines, the EU should define global standards and increase investment in technologies such as blockchain, high-performance and [quantum computing](#), as well as in algorithms and tools that facilitate data sharing and usage. While pursuing data-based innovation, the EU needs to safeguard the balance of the free flow and the widest possible use of data with the preservation of privacy, security, safety and ethical standards.

The guidelines also mention tabling legislation covering the human and ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI), to be announced within the first 100 days of the new Commission's mandate. This includes examining ways to use and share non-personalised big data in order to develop new profitable technologies and business models. To that end, von der Leyen has pledged to prioritise investment in AI, both through the multiannual financial framework (MFF) and through increased use of public-private partnerships (PPP). A white paper is expected in mid-February 2020. Another major policy initiative is a new digital services act, which will upgrade liability and safety rules for digital platforms, services and goods, and take further steps towards completion of the digital single market. The draft legislation is expected to be tabled in the second half of 2020. Furthermore, the guidelines aim to make the [European education area](#) a reality by 2025 in order to increase the uptake of digital skills across society.

In her [speech presenting the College of Commissioners and their programme](#) to the European Parliament in November 2019, von der Leyen added support of critical chip technologies to the Commission's priorities. To reap the benefits of digitalisation, the EU will focus on building future-proof infrastructure, based on common standards, gigabit networks, and secure clouds of both current and future generations. The President also highlighted the importance of developing a common EU data strategy to enable governments and companies to share data and to pool it securely. This will be complemented by a strengthened common cyber security policy, which is to include a common European platform and an enhanced [European Cybersecurity Agency](#).

According to the [mission letter](#) to [Margrethe Vestager](#), the Executive Vice-President for a Europe fit for the digital age, another crucial task is to co-lead work on a new long-term strategy for Europe's [industrial future](#). This will be done together with the Executive Vice-President for an economy that works for people, [Valdis Dombrovskis](#), and with involvement of the Member States and businesses of all sizes. The strategy, expected to be adopted in March 2020, will seek to maximise the role of investment in research and innovation in supporting the policy objectives. The EU will protect a level playing field so that companies have an incentive to invest, innovate and grow, using tools such as state aid where there are market failures and where the need to strengthen value chains exists. Furthermore, the Commission will focus on strengthening links and seeking synergies between civil, defence and space industries. Another joint project with Dombrovskis will be the development of a new small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) strategy. This will be focused on cutting red tape, providing finance and supporting digital skills development, so that small businesses, start-ups and their entrepreneurs make the most of digitalisation. Meanwhile, the Commission will also seek to achieve progress on the digital taxation front where two legislative [proposals](#) adopted by the former Commission in 2018 remain blocked in Council. In parallel, the international community, under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/G20 inclusive framework on base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS), is working to find a global [solution](#) by the end of 2020. The Commission has expressed its commitment to achieve this goal or, if no consensus is reached within this timeframe, to propose a fair European tax.

During her October 2019 hearing in the European Parliament, Vestager made a number of [commitments](#) that shed more light on the priorities of the new Commission. She underlined that the industrial strategy will be based on fair competition and will contribute to the greening of the economy and achieving a carbon-neutral Europe. The strategy will bring together entire value chains – universities, suppliers, manufacturers – to strengthen the circular economy. She also emphasised that SME interests will be met in both the new industrial policy and the financing instruments.

Regarding digital transformation, the upcoming rules on AI will aim to contribute to building trust and avoiding biases. Interestingly, Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the internal market, said during his [hearing](#) that the forthcoming framework for AI will not necessarily contain legislation. Furthermore, a new digital services act may include regulation on the way that companies collect, use and share data so that it benefits all of society. It will aim to regulate big digital platforms. It is also noteworthy that Vestager signaled the possibility of exploring new Treaty tools to achieve

progress in the digital and corporate taxation area, where the initiatives of the previous Commission have stalled in the Council.

## 4. Promoting our European way of life

Under the heading 'Promoting our European way of life' (initially called 'Protecting our European way of life' but modified following discussions with the European Parliament), this priority is articulated around three main strands: upholding the rule of law; strong borders and a fresh start on migration; and internal security. It should be noted that several Commissioners will be in charge of delivering on these priorities. Rule of law falls under the remit of the Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, under the coordination of the Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, while the Vice-President for Promoting our European way of life, Margaritis Schinas, will coordinate the work of Home Affairs Commissioner, Ylva Johansson, on migration and security.

### Upholding the rule of law

The rule of law in the European Union has come under pressure during recent years, with [Article 7 TEU procedures](#) launched against Poland (2017) and Hungary (2018), and the situation [reportedly](#) deteriorating since then in both countries. In her political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen put great emphasis on upholding the rule of law and EU values, stating that 'there can be no compromise when it comes to defending our core values', and committed to using all the EU tools at her disposal. She also expressed her support for a comprehensive European rule of law mechanism, with annual reporting by the European Commission based on objective criteria and applied to all Member States equally, and committed to ensuring a greater role for the European Parliament in this mechanism. She has also announced that she is in favour of the proposal to make the rule of law an integral part of the next multiannual financial framework (MFF). Following von der Leyen's election as President, the outgoing Commission issued a [communication](#) proposing to strengthen the EU toolbox to enforce the rule of law through various mechanisms, including a rule of law review cycle to monitor the situation in the Member States. During her [hearing](#) in the European Parliament, Jourová committed to bring forward the annual rule of law review cycle, in cooperation with Reynders. During his [hearing](#), the latter expressed his will to 'promote a rule of law culture, prevent the development of rule of law concerns and respond when necessary'. According to him, the new European rule of law mechanism should be set up in 2020, leading to an annual report backed by the justice scoreboard. Also, the Commission would go forward with ongoing Article 7 procedures, and possibly with other cases, if needed. The Commissioner for Justice hoped for a quick agreement between co-legislators on the pending [proposal](#) for a regulation on the protection of the Union's budget in case of generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law in the Member States. Finally, with the latest [adjustments](#) to Commissioners' portfolios, the Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, has been asked to ensure that greater account is taken of the rule of law and human rights in the context of international cooperation.

### Strong borders and a fresh start on migration

Current trends suggest that migratory flows to Europe will continue, which means migration management will remain high on the EU agenda. In her November 2019 [speech](#) in the European Parliament, Ursula von der Leyen insisted on the need 'to find common solutions to the shared challenge of migration', and confirmed the urgency of reforming the asylum system and strengthening the EU borders in order to return to a fully functioning Schengen area, as already announced in her political guidelines. These reforms should take the form of a 'new pact on migration and asylum', and include two main elements: reinforcing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency by reaching a standing corps of 10 000 border guards by 2024 (instead of the initial target of 2027), and delivering a modernised and truly common EU asylum system. Other important areas for action are the adoption of a more sustainable approach to search and rescue to replace current ad hoc solutions, and the update of the return policy rules. The new Commission President

also expressed herself in favour of stronger cooperation with third countries and of establishing humanitarian corridors. She tasked [Vice-President Schinas](#), inter alia, with creating pathways to legal migration as well as ensuring coherence between the external and internal dimensions of migration. During his [hearing](#) in the Parliament, Schinas expressed his will to promote modern and targeted legal migration schemes, without excluding a possible review of the 'blue card' proposal. He also committed to launching a new wave of readmission agreements and to taking a fresh look at the EU-Turkey Joint Statement. In addition, Commissioner Johansson stated during her [hearing](#) that 'the solidarity mechanism is not voluntary in the European Union and should not be' and announced that she will address the need to step up resettlement and to develop humanitarian corridors. She would be ready to discuss humanitarian visas and to consider new legislative proposals to better combat trafficking in order to destroy the business model of smugglers.

## Internal security

In continuity with the 2014-2019 term, achieving a 'genuine European Security Union' remains a priority for the new Commission: this is one of the main tasks assigned to [Schinas](#) by the new Commission President, together with developing a culture of cooperation between the internal and external dimensions of security and coordinating the Commission work on preventing, detecting and responding to hybrid threats. In her political guidelines, von der Leyen also underlined the need to improve cross-border cooperation to tackle gaps in the fight against serious crime and terrorism, including by reinforcing the powers of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) to allow investigation and prosecution of cross-border terrorism. She also pointed to new risks of money laundering and terrorist financing linked to the complexity of our financial system and called for better supervision. In her [address](#) to the Parliament in November 2019, von der Leyen focused on the need to ensure that law enforcement cooperation can deal with emerging threats. She asked the two Commissioners responsible to investigate whether Europol's current mandate is fit for purpose. During her hearing, Commissioner Johansson mentioned improving police cooperation, including with Europol, among her priorities, alongside fighting all forms of radicalisation and effectively implementing the laws already in place. On top of combating terrorism, she listed organised crime, drugs, trafficking in human beings and child sexual abuse as major priorities for action. Vice-President Schinas, for his part, stated that 'the respect of fundamental rights needs to be designed into policies from the start', which would be also his guiding principle when implementing interoperability proposals. He also committed to protecting Europeans online, with the adoption of the terrorist content online proposal.

According to the [decision](#) on the creation of Commissioners' groups, a dedicated group has been put in place to deliver on the political priority of 'Promoting our European way of life', chaired by Schinas and comprising the Commissioners for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth; for Health and Food Safety; for Jobs and Social Rights; for Equality and for Home Affairs. The rule of law aspects would be dealt with within the group 'A new Push for European Democracy' (see below), chaired by Jourová and including the Commissioner for Justice.

## 5. A stronger Europe in the world

In her [political guidelines](#) for 2019-2024, Ursula von der Leyen said that the European Union would support a multilateral rules-based order by 'strengthening our unique brand of responsible global leadership', and also gradually build-up a more assertive and united Europe that would have a strategic autonomy: 'To be a global leader, the EU needs to be able to act fast: I will push for qualified majority voting to become the rule in this area'. This ambition was also echoed by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, who, during his [hearing](#) in Parliament in October 2019 committed to fostering a more strategic, more assertive and more united Europe in the world and to focus on the European Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. The agenda of the new Commission develops the proposals of the June 2016 EU global strategy for foreign and security



policy ([EUGS](#)), which stated that 'in a more complex world, we must stand united'. The call for a united foreign and security policy remains the main challenge even today, with Member States often working on their own and reluctant to cede responsibility for foreign and defence policy matters to the EU, unwilling to go beyond the traditional Westphalian order. To be a strong global actor, the Commission wants the EU to spend 30 % more on external action investment in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF), increasing the total to €120 billion; this call for more resources echoes the European Parliament's May 2018 [resolution](#) on the next MFF.

## Geopolitical Commission

The Commission President's ambition to transform the EU's executive branch into a 'geopolitical Commission', and the call for an integrated and comprehensive approach to security and defence, was fully supported in the European Parliament's January 2020 [resolution](#) on the annual report on the implementation of the common security and defence policy (CSDP). The EU faces not only internal challenges, but also the harsh reality of continuing deterioration in the international security environment. Conflicts and fragile states on the European continent (the Donbass region of Ukraine, the Transnistrian dispute) and in its vicinity (Middle East and North Africa) are provoking massive population displacement, undocumented migration flows, human rights abuses facilitated by transnational organised crime networks, jihadist terrorism, hybrid threats and cyber-warfare against European countries. To tackle these challenges, the political guidelines underline the need to develop proper EU military and defence capabilities, but also that 'NATO will always be the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence'. The move towards strategic autonomy is accompanied by concrete measures, such as the creation of a new Commission Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space.

The Union is facing instability and unpredictability on its borders and in its neighbourhood and is often confronted with unilateral actions of emerging regional powers, such as Russia and Turkey, notably in Syria and Libya. In its October 2019 [resolution](#) on the Turkish military operation in north-east Syria, the European Parliament condemned Turkey's behaviour. In addition, the strategic shift of the current presidential administration of the United States leads to divergent positions even among its closest historical allies with regard to key countries within the region, such as Iran. As noted in the above-mentioned resolution on the implementation of CSDP, the European Parliament regrets 'the gradual retreat by the United States from the multilateral world order, namely its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)'. The European Commission has expressed the wish to preserve the JCPOA with Iran, which remains of utmost importance, in light of the dangerous developments in the Middle East and the Gulf region.

The connection between internal and external challenges has been stressed by the European Commission, and EU policies are evolving accordingly. The EU has developed new financial instruments, such as the trust funds, and stepped up cooperation in international forums, since the 2015 migration crisis. Nonetheless, 139 000 irregular migrants crossed the EU's external borders in 2019. With regard to the Western Mediterranean route, where migrants mainly come through Libya and Morocco, President von der Leyen has announced a 'comprehensive strategy on Africa ... a continent full of opportunity and potential for cooperation and for business. It will become home to the youngest, fastest-growing middle class in the world, with private consumption expected to reach €2 trillion a year by 2025'. Among the tools deployed in the central Mediterranean is the naval Operation Sophia, which began in September 2015. Following the [Berlin Conference on Libya](#), which took place on 19 January 2020, this naval operation will be boosted and also used to monitor the respect of the arms embargo. As stated by President von der Leyen and the HR/VP, Josep Borrell, in a [joint statement](#): 'The European Union commits to play an important role [in Libya]. We will reflect on how to best contribute to the monitoring of the ceasefire and the respect of the arms embargo'.

## Western Balkans' European future

Within its immediate neighbourhood, the position on enlargement expressed by some Member States is, for the time being, keeping the doors closed to countries such as Albania and North Macedonia, and risks reinforcing the influence of the EU's competitors, China, Russia, Turkey and Gulf countries. In its [resolution](#) on the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, adopted on 24 October 2019, the European Parliament expressed 'deep disappointment' and considered that 'the incoming Commission should immediately take stock of the enlargement policy, taking into account the effects of the Council's recent decision, while emphasising the advantages of enlargement both for candidate countries and for Member States'. Just one month later, when presenting her College of Commissioners and its programme to Parliament on 27 November, President von der Leyen reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans, recalling that 'we share the same continent, the same history, the same culture and the same challenges'.

Finally, with regard to current and new trade agreements, von der Leyen promised to ensure 'the highest level of transparency, communication and cooperation with the European Parliament'. All trade agreements will include clauses on climate, development, labour protection and human rights. The Commission will also propose that provisional application of trade agreements take place only once the European Parliament has given its consent. This latter commitment, together with the continued regular consultations with the HR/VP, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission, will strengthen Parliament's roles of oversight and scrutiny of EU external action.

## 6. A new push for European democracy

The underlying themes of the final set of priorities in President von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#), under the heading of 'A new push for European democracy', are stronger interinstitutional cooperation and a more transparent and, most importantly, inclusive decision-making process, focused on the needs of European citizens, involving three key challenges.

- 1 Giving a stronger role to European citizens in decision-making.** In her July 2019 [statement](#) to the Parliament, the then candidate for Commission President committed to holding a conference on the [Future of Europe](#), to start in 2020 and run for two years. The conference, she explained, would offer a platform where citizens would be able to express their main concerns. Following on from that, the EU institutions and civil society representatives would work together to identify the best responses to these concerns. Prior to this commitment, the [Future of Europe debates](#), held by the European Parliament from early 2018 to April 2019, stressed the need for innovative approaches to democratic engagement at EU level.
- 2 Strengthening the relationships between the Commission and the European Parliament.** To this end, the political guidelines indicate: (1) prioritisation of the dialogue between the Commission and the Parliament, including through further commitment by Commissioners to liaise with the Parliament at all stages of international negotiations; (2) support for a right of initiative of the European Parliament and a commitment to respond with a legislative act to Parliament's resolutions adopted by a majority of its component Members in accordance with Article 225 TFEU, and requesting the Commission to submit a legislative proposal. This commitment to act on Parliament's legislative initiative resolutions was further reiterated by Maroš Šefčovič during his [hearing](#) in the European Parliament. Commissioners Šuica and Jourová also stressed the need for enhanced cooperation between the Commission and the Parliament during the legislative process; (3) improvements to the lead candidate system, and specifically to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

- 3 **Enhancing the accountability of EU decision-making**, through the creation of an independent ethics body for all EU institutions, and more transparency throughout the legislative process.

## Interlocking competences on democracy and transparency

In the plan of President von der Leyen, the tasks related to the advancement of democratic rights and transparency at EU level will be headed by three vice-presidents (Jourová, Šefčovič and Šuica). This choice has two explanations. First, it is justified by the interlocking competences that each of these vice-presidents will have in relation to the organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Second, and relatedly, it flows from the different means and scopes assigned to the goal of strengthening EU's democracy.

The statement of intent of the political guidelines was fleshed out for the first time in the September [mission letter](#) from von der Leyen to the Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica. The idea is to push for more democratic participation of EU citizens in how the Union is run and what it delivers on. A three-step procedure was suggested in the letter (and further clarified by Šuica during her [hearing](#)):

- 1 Elaborate a concept, structure, timing and scope of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in cooperation with Parliament and Council.
- 2 Ensure the highest possible degree of participation in the Commission's 'citizens' dialogues', by facilitating in-person and online participation.
- 3 Ensure adequate follow-up to the actions agreed by the Conference, with Šuica working in conjunction with the Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight (Maroš Šefčovič) and the Vice-President for Values and Transparency (Věra Jourová).

In her [mission letter](#) to Jourová, von der Leyen entrusted the Vice-President with the lead on the Commission's work on values and transparency, **working for a strong and vibrant EU democracy and upholding its common values**. In her [hearing](#), Jourová further clarified her mandate in the area of democracy and transparency. Among the initiatives aimed at strengthening the democratic values of the EU, were improving the 'lead candidate' system, increasing transparency in EU decision-making, protecting EU democracy against external interference and, finally, strengthening fundamental rights.

## The Conference on the Future of Europe

The European Parliament's preparations for the Conference started soon after von der Leyen's announcement in July 2019. A [working group](#) was created to define Parliament's position on the structure and organisation of the Conference. The Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) adopted an [opinion](#) annexed to a letter sent to President Sassoli explaining its approach to the Conference. In a [resolution](#) of 15 January 2020, Parliament set out its approach to the organisation and scope of the Conference. A crucial aspect concerns the participation of citizens in thematic citizens' 'agoras' to feed into the conference's debate. The [Commission's communication](#) on the Conference is [less outspoken on the details](#) of the composition and the working methods, although it considers the Conference as an invaluable opportunity to bring the EU closer to citizens. The process of defining the scope, organisation and design will be completed with the contribution of Council, solicited by the December 2019 European Council and due to be given at the General Affairs Council on 28 January 2020. After that, Commission, Parliament and Council should agree on a joint declaration that would commit them to a common concept, working method, and scope, with the Conference expected to kick off on 9 May 2020.

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## ENDNOTES

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