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The New European Commission 2019-2024

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Introduction

The new European Commission will take office on 1 December 2019 after its members were approved by the European Parliament on 27 November. The start of the new Commission was delayed for a month after scrutiny committees of the European Parliament expressed concern about the suitability of three candidates; all were replaced by fresh nominees.

The UK had earlier declined to nominate a Commissioner for the new Commission on the grounds that it intended to leave on 31 October 2019. Subsequently the Prime Minister argued that he could not propose a candidate because Parliament had been dissolved for a general election. The out-going UK Commissioner was Sir Julian King, a diplomat and former Ambassador to France, who took the post after Lord Hill resigned following the 2016 referendum.

The members of the Commission

The innovation of Vice Presidents leading teams of commissioners, introduced in 2014 by the previous Commission President, is partially maintained and developed further. Three of them labelled "Executive Vice Presidents" will have a dual role, managing a portfolio and chairing the co-ordinating group in that area. Although not an "Executive" Vice President, the VP for External Relations & High Representative will have a co-ordinating function across external relations. The remaining three Vice Presidents also have a co-ordinating role across a policy area but will not have a directorate-general of the Commission reporting directly to them.

President and Vice-Presidents

Title	Member State	Name	Portfolio group /	Commission Directorates-General
President	Germany	Ursula von der Leyen	-	Secretariat-General Legal Service Communication
Executive First Vice-President	The Netherlands	Frans Timmermans	European Green Deal	Climate Action

Title	Member State	Name	Portfolio group /	Commission Directorates-General
			Deputies for President	
Executive Vice-President	Denmark	Margrethe Vestager	Europe fit for the Digital Age / Competition	Competition
Executive Vice-President	Latvia	Valdis Dombrovskis	An Economy that Works for People	Financial Stability, Financial Services & Capital Markets Union
High Representative / Vice-President	Spain	Josep Borrell	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; and “A Stronger Europe in the World”	External Action Service Foreign Policy Instruments
Vice-President	Slovakia	Maroš Šefčovič	Inter-institutional Relations & Foresight	[none]
Vice-President	Czech Republic	Vera Jourova	Values and Transparency	[none]
Vice-President	Croatia	Dubravka Šuica	Demography & Democracy	Communication
Vice-President	Greece	Margaritis Schinas	Promoting the European Way of Life [Justice & Home Affairs]	[none]

Commissioners

Member State	Name	Portfolio
Austria	Johannes Hahn	Budget & Administration
Belgium	Didier Reynders	Justice
Bulgaria	Mariya Gabriel	Innovation & Youth
Cyprus	Stella Kyriakides	Health
Estonia	Kadri Simson	Energy
Finland	Jutta Uripilainen	International Partnerships
France	Thierry Breton	Internal Market
Hungary	Olivér Várhelyi	Neighbourhood & Enlargement
Ireland	Phil Hogan	Trade
Italy	Paolo Gentiloni	Economy
Lithuania	Virginijus Sinkevičius	Environment, Oceans & Fisheries
Luxembourg	Nicolas Schmit	Jobs
Malta	Helena Dalli	Equality
Poland	Janusz Wojciechowski	Agriculture
Portugal	Elisa Ferreira	Cohesion & Reform
Romania	Adina Vălean	Transport
Slovenia	Janez Lenarčič	Crisis management
Sweden	Ylva Johansson	Home affairs
UK	-	-

All of the 17 “ordinary” Commissioners will have responsibility for a specific portfolio including the relevant directorate-general or part thereof.¹ A new directorate-general is to be established to handle space and defence industry issues; this will form part of the responsibility of the Internal Market Commissioner. Where relevant, Commissioners are also responsible for relations with any EU agency whose responsibilities fall within their portfolio.

¹ The full *Allocation of portfolios and supporting services*, including which Directorates-General report to whom, can be found at European Commission, ‘College (2019-2024): The Commissioners’, 7 November 2019

Each of the Commissioners received, as in 2014, a letter from the President of the Commission setting out her expectations in their policy area. These letters also explained the general structure of the new Commission, including the role of the co-ordinating Vice Presidents.²

Political guidelines

The President published a detailed set of political guidelines for her presidency in July 2019. This document followed the adopting by the European Council a month earlier of the new EU strategy for 2019-24; much of what Mrs Von der Leyen said subsequently is based on that strategy. The President explained her goals under six headings – now the portfolio titles of the Vice Presidents – covering a wide range of policy areas. They are:

1. A European Green Deal: this will be published in the Commission's first 100 days in office and will include the proposal for a law to make the EU carbon neutral by 2050; other ambitions in this field include extending the emissions trading scheme to include maritime emissions and the reduction of allowances for airlines over time; there will be an industrial strategy, and cohesion funds to support the areas and sectors affected by the transition away from fossil fuels;
2. An economy that works for people: the focus here is on promoting economic growth while giving greater protection to social rights; policy proposals include deepening economic and monetary union through a Eurozone budget for convergence, use of the flexibility in the Stability & Growth Pact to promote growth, measures to ensure a fair minimum wage for all workers, and tax reform including a common corporate tax base;
3. A Europe fit for the digital age: exploiting the benefits of digital services "within safe and ethical boundaries"; policy proposals include setting joint standards for 5G networks in the EU, establishing technological sovereignty in key technology areas, legislation to deal with the human and ethical consequences of artificial intelligence and more action on education opportunities;
4. Promoting the European way of life: Mrs Von der Leyen's initial use of the phrase "Protecting our European Way of Life" to describe migration, the rule of law and internal security was objected to by critics who feared it promoted the notion that migrants are a threat to Europe's culture and security. Policy areas include a robust defence of the rule of law, promotion of a new policy on migration (in response to the failure in this area of the Juncker Commission) and strengthening the office of European public prosecutor;
5. A stronger Europe in the world: a title that embraces the totality of the EU's external relations including trade, where the President-elect wants to see greater enforcement of trade obligations and reform of the WTO, enlargement including the Western Balkans and more action to make a reality of the idea of a European Defence Union;
6. A new push for European democracy: a Conference on the Future of Europe will start in 2020 and continue for two years; the President-elect supports the idea of a right of initiative for the European Parliament.

² For example, *President von der Leyen's mission letter to Věra Jourová*, 1 December 2019

Approval process

All Commissioners are subject to an approval process in which they answer questions about their personal financial interests and are then questioned by the relevant committee of the European Parliament. As in previous rounds of appointments to the Commission, not all nominees survived the confirmation process. In 2019 the initial nominees of France, Hungary and Romania were rejected by the Parliament and other candidates were required to return for further questioning before approval.

Assessment

As always, the Commission starts with high expectations and a crowded policy agenda. Recent Commissions have been notable for their mixed performance – achievements in some areas but significant difficulties and setbacks in others. The rise of populism has complicated the picture with some fragmentation amongst the Member States. The Commission has often been in an uncomfortable position as a result, as for example when seeking to uphold the rule of law in the face of objections from those Member States it has felt necessary to criticise.

This Commission will have to deal with the fallout from Brexit along with the possibility of a Europe-wide recession and continuing tensions with the Trump administration, in particular over its trade policies. Security in the EU's neighbourhood remains fragile in places with a serious risk of further challenges. The surprise rejection in October 2019 of Albania and North Macedonia as candidates for EU membership, following objections from three Member States, is an additional complication.

December 2019



Senior European Experts

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