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## The EU at the Dawn of a New Political Cycle: What Diplomatic Balances Between Member States?

Europe and International





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"Von der Leyen II" Commission's entry into office brings to a close the sequence of institutional renewal opened by the European elections of June 2024, and highlights new political balances within the European institutions. While it has allowed the expression of new partisan balances of power, giving the advantage to the conservative right, the entry into the 2024-2029 political cycle has also reflected and prefigured a recomposition of diplomatic balances within the EU.

This reshuffling first took shape in the distribution of responsibilities within the three main EU institutions but can also be analysed in the light of the evolution of the respective influence of member states, which stems from both geopolitical and domestic factors. These transformations are bound to shape EU governance and decision-making over the coming months, particularly in the face of the external challenges symbolized by Trump's return to the White House.

## Diplomatic Influence Through Presence: a More Northerly and Easterly Union?

### A More Northerly Union

Ursula von der Leyen's re-election for a second term as President of the European Commission is, first and foremost, a clear victory for Germany, with the ruling coalition in Berlin choosing to support her even though her party was in opposition to the government. Germany is also the only member state to be able to "claim" 4 heads of Commissioners' cabinets. In addition to the powerful Bjorn Seibert, who works with the President, Michael Hager is pursuing his work with the Latvian Commissioner for Economy and Productivity, Bernd Biervert heads Maros Sefcovic's team for Trade and Economic Security, while Andreas Schwarz heads Ekaterina Zaharieva's cabinet for Start-ups, Research and Innovation. In other words, many key positions on issues presented as priorities and strategic for the EU are under the influence of German diplomats. As for deputy heads of cabinet positions, three other German diplomats will be in office while France stands out with 7 deputy positions. Five of these are positions of influence on international issues: Alexandre Adam with the President, Laure Chapuis-Kombos with High Representative Kaja Kallas, Anne Fort with Defense Commissioner Andrius Kubilius and Roland Sourd in the cabinet of Commissioner Jozef Sikela (International Partnerships).

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The granting of sovereign portfolios to Kaja Kallas (from Estonia), as High Representative and Vice-President for Foreign and Security Policy, and to Andrius Kubilius (from Lithuania) as the new Commissioner for Defense and Space (see Chart 1), reflects an unprecedented increase in the influence of the Baltic states. It is further strengthened by the 3rd consecutive mandate given to former Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovkis, tasked with dealing with economy and productivity, other key issues for the EU.

Closely linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this reinforced influence of the EU's North-East countries is also visible with the appointment of Henna Virkunnen (from Finland) as Executive Vice-President for Technological Sovereignty, Dan Jorgensen (from Denmark) for Energy and housing, and Jessika Roswall (from Sweden) for the Environment - three key issues for the definition and implementation of the EU's "sustainable competitiveness" strategy.

## Chart 1 - Distribution of Portfolios Within the "Von der Leyen II" Commission

It is also noteworthy that Poland's Commissioner-designate, Piotr Serafin, inherited the budget portfolio, while Slovakia's Maroš Šefčovič begins his 4th term in office by being entrusted with leading the EU's trade policy. Again, these two portfolios are equally strategic in the light of the European and global geopolitical context.

Partisan balances within the College seem to also have been at play in the composition of the Commission. Spain's Commissioner-designate, the Socialist Teresa Ribera likely inherited the Executive Vice-Presidency for Ecological Transition and the powerful DG Competition to respect partisan balances rather than for diplomatic considerations. It was also no doubt for the same reasons that Raffaele Fitto, the Commissioner nominated by Italy, was ultimately entrusted with the post of Executive Vice-President in charge of cohesion policy and reforms. **These "southern" promotions only serve to attenuate the northern and eastern tropism of the "Von der Leyen II" Commission, which is also reflected in the reduced role assigned to French Commissioner.**

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Executive Vice-President Stéphane Séjourné, in charge of "EU prosperity and industrial strategy", will only have hierarchical authority over DG "Grow", dedicated to the internal market and companies, whereas his predecessor Thierry Breton could also mobilize those dedicated to the digital economy ("DG Cnect") and defense and space ("DG Défis"). He also had much more experience of economic issues than his successor.

## A Spanish-German Dominated European Parliament

**National influence in the European Parliament is determined by the 27 member states' ability to elect a maximum number of MEPs in the groups that negotiate and forge majority coalitions:** the conservatives of the European People's Party, the Social Democrats and, to a lesser extent, the Liberals of Renew, the Conservatives and Reformists and the Greens.

**In this respect, the influence of Germany and Spain appears all the stronger as their national delegations not only dominate the EPP group but are also well represented within the S&D group.** To a lesser degree, this is also true for Romania. On the other hand, Poland and Italy are well represented either in the EPP or S&D, but too few in the other dominant group. **As for France, its citizens have elected more than half of their representatives in peripheral and "vocal" groups (Patriots for Europe & European United Left), while at the same time weakening the leadership capacities of Macron's elected representatives, who have fallen from 23 to 13 within a liberal group that is itself in sharp decline.**

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The fact that 7 out of 22 European Parliament's committees are now chaired by German MEPs, 3 by Spanish MEPs and 3 by Polish MEPs, compared to just one for most other countries, is a first tangible sign of the redistribution of national influence within this assembly. The choice of rapporteurs for each of the legislative texts under discussion throughout the 2024-2029 cycle will also express this redistribution of the cards. Rapporteurs are appointed according to the balance of power within and between political groups, like the political group coordinators have already been

In this respect, it is striking to note that German MEPs have been appointed coordinators for the EPP group on 8 parliamentary committees, and 4 others for the S&D group; that Spanish MEPs perform the same role on 4 occasions for the EPP, but also 6 times on behalf of the S&D. Compared to that, while no fewer than 4 Portuguese MEPs are coordinators for the S&D, most other national delegations are content with just one or two coordinator posts within the two political groups dominating the Strasbourg hemicycle. As for the French, they can try to console themselves by claiming 8 coordinator posts within the Renew group. As for Georgia Meloni's Italy, it could have decisive influence via its numerical dominance within the ECR group, if the "convergence of conservatives", already observed between this group and the EPP, were to develop by 2029.

## A Council Looking for Some Leadership

With a permanent President from Portugal, Antonio Costa, the European Council began the new 2024-2029 political cycle in a context marked by an unprecedented weakening of Franco-German leadership. Hitherto a highly influential figure, but already diminished by the retreat of his political family, Emmanuel Macron initiated a misunderstood dissolution of the National Assembly, with the verdict of the following elections damaging his personal image as much as his country's governability. Germany is facing a different kind of end to its political reign, coupled with an economic hole - even if the CDU-CSU's predicted victory in February 2025 would appear to be a positive outcome to a multifaceted slump with no clear way out. It would give the new authorities in Berlin even greater influence and centrality in a Union dominated by the EPP and leaning towards the North-East.

In the short term, Donald Tusk's Poland will no doubt try to take advantage of this political vacuum, thanks to its rotating presidency of the Council in the first half of 2025. Poland also benefits from the strengthened position of its Prime Minister following the European elections and a rather buoyant geopolitical context, with the announced retreat of its traditional American ally, placing Europeans in the front line in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Donald Tusk will also be able to benefit from the EPP's now fairly clear pre-eminence in the European Council and the Council (see Chart 2), a party he himself has chaired and where he counts a number of national counterparts, who could soon be joined by the German Chancellor.

## Chart 2 - Evolution of Partisan Affiliations in the European Council (2019-2024)

Description

The situation of Georgia Meloni's Italy is more ambivalent. Her transatlantic tropism and reactionary political stance could be significant assets *vis-à-vis* the Trump administration and as a result in terms of influence within the EU. Nevertheless, her country's financial fragility remains a disadvantage. It also remains to be seen whether she wants to play her European part to the full, including acting as a constructive interlocutor with Washington in the interests of the EU, or whether she prefers a more radical, peripheral stance. In this respect, it is symptomatic that she was the only leader, along with Viktor Orban, to oppose the reappointment of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the Commission, without being in a position to prevent it as the decision is taken with a qualified majority.

But this counter-example also serves as a reminder that Georgia Meloni and Viktor Orban symbolize the partisan fragmentation of the European Council and the Council. It could prove counter-productive when more than a third of the decisions taken by the representatives of the member states require unanimity, notably in diplomatic, military, fiscal or financial matters (in the EU Council of Ministers, 74 legal bases - out of 190 - require unanimous decisions). A single, non-aligned country therefore has the power to obstruct them, including under the direct influence of a powerful third state (Russia, China, the United States, etc.). This is one of the great political perils threatening the cohesion and effectiveness of the EU in the 2024-2029 political cycle - like a sword of Damocles.

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## National Influence Through Foresight: the Importance of the Geopolitical and Political Context

The geopolitical and political context is also the yardstick driving relations of influence between member states. The same is true at the start of the 2024-2029 cycle, in the light of the priorities set out in Ursula von der Leyen's "Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission" and the European Council's "Strategic Agenda 2024-2029". These two documents reflect a form of diplomatic consensus around a number of priorities deemed consensual and motivational for 2030: strengthening European security in all its forms (military, economy, energy, food, democracy, etc.) and promoting the competitiveness of the continent's economies. But the implementation of these strategic orientations should also give rise to the expression of inter-state power-dynamics and influence, around a number of key issues.

## A Mixed Reception of Geopolitical Perspicacity

The changing international context, marked by the military or economic aggressiveness of Russia, China and the USA, seems supportive of the traditional French doctrines on European power, economic interventionism and financial activism, to the point of having led to notable advances in recent years. For example, the adoption of the "Next Generation EU" recovery plan and EU funding for arms deliveries to Ukraine.

It remains to be said, however, that the rise in institutional and political power of the countries of Central, Northern and Eastern Europe reflects an opposite dynamic, based in particular on their claimed clear-sightedness regarding the persistence of a Russian threat and their frontline positioning in support of the Ukrainian people: "Paris" and 'Berlin' have in fact lost much of their credit, given their energetic (Germany) and diplomatic (France) proximity to Vladimir Putin, even after the illegal annexation of Crimea, and in view of their somehow limited military support for the Kiev authorities.

## European's Economic Positioning Between China and the USA

On the economic front, [Enrico Letta's Report on the single market](#) and [Mario Draghi's Report on European competitiveness](#) set out guidelines which are now shaping the EU's [strategic agenda](#) and whose implementation will also serve as a test of diplomatic power relations. It is symptomatic in this respect that a "non-paper" emphasizing the need to deepen the single market was recently inspired by Germany, the Netherlands and Ireland, and signed by 20 member states, but not by Spain, France and Italy. This heralds the return of the traditional debate between the presumed liberal countries, now dominant, and the countries advocating a more interventionist State in economic matters. This debate will likely also come up in the upcoming announced revision of European legislation's debate.

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Implementing the green and digital transitions, on the other hand, could appear to be a more consensual orientation between member states, if not between partisan forces. However, it is likely to strain relations between countries such as France, keen to strengthen Europe's "strategic autonomy" vis-à-vis China and the USA, and those wishing to maintain both open economic relations with China and privileged strategic relations with the USA, such as Germany and most Central and Eastern European countries.

These tensions will undoubtedly prove to be particularly acute on climate and energy issues, at a time when the US is once again pulling out of the Paris agreements, and when the use of cheap Chinese vehicles and technologies would help to speed up Europe's green transition. Tensions between Member States will undoubtedly be just as high on the digital front, with American firms and authorities claiming to be free of the rules recently laid down by the EU (the DMA and DSA), while Chinese digital technologies will continue to be suspected of not complying with our norms and standards.

## The Migration Challenge: Openness and Solidarity ?

*Last but not least*, the migratory challenges facing an ageing Europe will inevitably generate tensions between southern countries, where most of the flows from Africa and the Middle East originate, and northern and central European countries, which seem less and less willing to welcome them - even though they have shown greater openness towards Ukrainian refugees. The recent adoption of the "Asylum-Migration Pact" does reflect a consensus on the need to better control the EU's external borders and strengthen partnerships with countries of origin and transit. However, its scheduled implementation will inevitably resurface disagreements over the necessary financial and humanitarian solidarity with regard to migrants who often intend to join "Europe" rather than any particular country - and whose economic contribution is also deemed essential by the European Commission and many business sectors.

## Influence Through Performance: a More Balanced Diplomatic Equation?

Finally, a country's influence at European level is strongly indexed to its results and performance in tackling domestic and common challenges.

## The Weight of National Economic Performance

From an economic point of view, given the EU's competitiveness and investment targets, it is best to be among member states that have kept their books in order, run trade surpluses and have not seen massive de-industrialization in recent times. These countries, once again, tend to be found in the north and east of the EU. France is a counterexample in all three aspects, with a record triple deficit in trade, industry and budget: it may therefore find it more difficult to persuade other member states to launch new "industrial alliances" if the largely domestic origins of its productive devitalization are not properly identified and addressed by authorities with a strong legitimacy to do so.

On the other hand, as we enter the 2024-2029 political cycle, the southern EU countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy), once blamed and supported for their worsening economic and financial situation, are back in the limelight. In this context, the progress and outcome of discussions on the signature and ratification of the "EU-Mercosur" agreement will provide a real-life test of the ability of countries like Spain and Portugal to lead the way, in terms of diplomatic power relations.

## Chart 3 - EU Member States Public Debt (2024)

Description

### Heterogenous Capacities in Strategic Investments

The need to invest much more heavily in ecological transition, technological innovation and defense will also confront member states in discussions weighed down by their considerable financial heterogeneity. While the balance of power in this area will once again crystallize around the traditional distinction between net contributors (Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Austria, etc.) and net beneficiaries, it will also be much more favorable to those member states that have kept their public accounts in order and have considerable room for maneuver, including in terms of state aid. On the other hand, making the case for new joint borrowing and investment in the face of competition from China and the USA will be much more difficult for countries such as France and Romania, since they will be held accountable for their inability to meet their budgetary commitments (see Chart 3).

The situation seems more ambivalent when it comes to defense, at a time when EU member states are called upon to increase their spending and efforts in the face of the Russian threat and the announced disengagement of the United States (see Chart 4). While it is obvious that it is the countries of Central and Northern Europe that have mobilized the most in this area in recent years, a country like France benefits from an unrivalled level of military equipment and experience - as well as being the only EU country to possess nuclear weapons. The influence of member states in the diplomatic-military sphere will therefore evolve according to the more or less distended nature of the Atlantic Alliance, within which the partners traditionally favored by Washington (Poland, the Netherlands, etc.) have until now enjoyed extra credit - as well as according to the capacity of EU countries to reinforce their military and operational support for Ukraine.

## Chart 4 - Public Defense Spending and Defense Effort in EU Countries (2022)

Description

The diplomatic balances outlined above are naturally likely to vary according to changes in the international geopolitical and economic context: it remains to be seen how Donald Trump's adverse policy, the follow-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's growing aggressiveness or the instability in the Middle East will affect and influence them. Such balances will also evolve with the national elections that will mark the 2024-2029 political cycle, and in particular those scheduled in Germany (2025) or Spain and France (2027).

It goes without saying that it is also, and above all, **with regard to the different priorities the political forces leading the EU chose to take on, that their interaction will lead to the consolidation of one or other form of convergence or diplomatic or partisan, alliance.** These developments are bound to follow on from the inertia of the European Community's institutional triangle and majority decision-making mechanisms, which by their very nature are not very conducive to radical changes and breaks, but which are nonetheless sensitive to the verdicts of electoral deadlines and shifts in public opinion.

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Council President Antonio Costa, the President of the European Commission and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Brussels, December 19, 2024.