

# The von der Leyen Commission's six priorities: State of play in autumn 2020

In her statements to the European Parliament in [July](#) and [November](#) 2019, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen outlined the political priorities that would shape the Commission's work programme for the years 2019 to 2024. The 2020 [Commission work programme](#), adopted before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe, mirrored these priorities. Without changing the overall structure of the six priorities, the spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and its significant impact across Member States obliged the Commission, however, to focus on immediate crisis management. As a result, at the end of [May](#), the Commission adjusted its work programme for 2020, prioritising initiatives that it considered to be essential or necessary for the EU's post-crisis recovery, in line with the [Recovery Plan for Europe](#). The State of the Union debate provides the opportunity to take stock of the progress made thus far and to look ahead.

## Delivering on promises while adjusting to a crisis scenario

### Recalibrating political priorities

The von der Leyen Commission took office on 1 December 2019, a month later than expected and after a long [investiture process](#), beginning in May 2019 with the European Parliament elections. The new Commission's priorities were sketched out in von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#), presented prior to her election as President of the Commission in July 2019, and further developed in the Commission's [2020 work programme](#) (CWP 2020), adopted on 29 January 2020. Building on the European Parliament's political priorities and the European Council's new [Strategic Agenda](#) for the 2019-2024 period, the Commission sought to shift from the [crisis management](#) mode that had dominated the Juncker Commission's activities in the previous term (i.e. the eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit) to focus on the long term. The new priorities aimed at leading the transition to '[a fair, climate-neutral, digital Europe](#)', building on six 'headline ambitions' or priorities: i) A European Green Deal; ii) A Europe fit for the digital age; iii) An economy that works for people; iv) 'A stronger Europe in the world; v) Promoting our European way of life; and, vi) A new push for European democracy.

The Commission has [delivered](#) on some of its commitments for its first year in office. However, as the coronavirus spread among Member States and the public health crisis unfolded, the Commission focused on coordinating a [common European response](#) to the pandemic, through a wide range of [actions](#) aimed at supporting the Member States' health systems and countering the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. As a result of the adoption of all those non-planned measures, the CWP 2020 was [adjusted](#) on 27 May 2020. Presented on the same day as the [Commission's Recovery Plan for Europe](#), the adjustments to the CWP 2020 introduced changes affecting the [scope and timing](#) of some of the initiatives included in the original work programme. The adjusted work programme [prioritises](#) all the initiatives that, according to the Commission, are essential or support the immediate recovery of Europe, such as the strategy for smart sector integration (Priority 1), the renovation wave strategy (Priority 1), the strategy for sustainable and

smart mobility (Priority 1), the digital services act (Priority 2), the reinforcement of the youth guarantee (Priority 3) and the white paper on an instrument on foreign subsidies (Priority 2). In relation to some other relevant initiatives, such as the new pact on migration and the updated skills agenda for Europe (both Priority 5), the Commission expressed its commitment to adopting them as swiftly as possible, whereas some other initiatives have been delayed until the end of the year or early 2021. In any case, timelines may again be changed to reflect the Commission's 2021 work programme, expected to be adopted in October this year.

## Adjusting EU finances

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has had significant consequences for EU finances too. Both the 2020 EU budget and the proposals for the next long-term budgetary plan, covering the 2021-2027 period (the multiannual financial framework – MFF) have had to be adjusted to the new circumstances and priorities. Already in the first weeks of the pandemic, as part of the immediate EU response to the crisis, the Commission proposed to [reallocate](#) part of the 2020 budget to support the policies most in need, such as healthcare systems, research into treatments and a vaccine, and protection of jobs and businesses. To finance these actions within the very limited resources of the 2020 budget, the Commission had to resort to the budgetary margins and flexibility instruments, while also proposing [amendments](#) to the provisions of the 2014-2020 MFF.

The pandemic has further complicated the lengthy [negotiations](#) on the 2021-2027 MFF. On 27 May 2020, together with its adjusted CWP 2020 and its Recovery Plan for Europe, the Commission presented a [budgetary package for recovery and resilience](#). The Commission's [proposal](#) linked the [future 2021-2027 MFF](#) with the €750 billion recovery instrument ('[Next Generation EU](#)'). The latter would be financed through funds borrowed on the markets by the Commission on behalf of the EU, the first time such a method had been used on such a big scale. Political [agreement](#) on the proposals was reached by EU leaders at a special European Council meeting on 17-21 July 2020, opening the way for formal negotiations between the Council and the European Parliament, whose consent is required for the adoption of the MFF.

## Adjusting the Commission's structure and working methods

The pandemic has also had an impact on the von der Leyen Commission's original [structure and working methods](#). As all Commission staff in 'non-critical functions' [moved](#) to teleworking (as of 16 March) and all meetings of Commission decision-making groups, [including](#) the weekly meetings of the College of Commissioners (as of 18 March), switched to being held by video-conference or tele-conference, efforts were stepped up to facilitate the exchange of information, increase coordination and speed-up the decision-making process. The Commission [introduced](#) fast-track procedures to accelerate coordination at administrative level and the College privileged written procedure (as opposed to oral procedure) to expedite the adoption of decisions. Coordination was ensured by different means, including the creation of [thematic clusters](#) (global vaccine, macroeconomic aspects of the crisis, recovery phase), in which the members of the Commission took part on the basis of their areas of responsibility, and the creation of a [coronavirus response group](#). Initially composed of five Commissioners (Janez Lenarčič, Stella Kyriakides, Ylva Johansson, Adina Vălean and Paolo Gentiloni) and headed by the Commission President, the group aimed to coordinate the EU's efforts to handle the crisis, although its creation was seen by some [commentators](#) as a move towards further centralisation and presidentialisation of the Commission.

Finally, it is to be noted that the recent resignation of the Trade Commissioner (Phil Hogan) may also lead to changes in the Commission's structure or working methods. On 26 August 2020, Hogan tendered his [resignation](#) to President von der Leyen after controversy over his attendance at an event with more than 80 people, despite the applicable Irish public health guidelines to contain the coronavirus pandemic restricting gatherings to a fraction of that number. Although von der Leyen did not formally request Hogan's resignation under [Article 17\(6\) of the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#), she accepted it the following day, opening the way to the appointment of a new Irish

Commissioner through the procedure provided for under [Article 246 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union \(TFEU\)](#). As [requested](#) by von der Leyen – who has been committed to ensuring parity within the Commission since the beginning of her mandate – the Irish government proposed both a female and a male candidate, the First Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness, and a recent European Investment Bank Vice-President, Andrew McDowell. On 8 September, von der Leyen announced that she had chosen Mairead McGuinness, and that she would take over financial services, financial stability and the capital markets union from Valdis Dombrovskis. The latter would take the trade portfolio permanently (having already taken it in the meantime), while continuing in his role of Executive Vice-President. The Council has to appoint the new Commissioner, by common accord with the Commission President, after consulting the European Parliament. Parliament is expected to organise hearings of both McGuinness (on her qualifications to be a member of the College and for her portfolio) and Dombrovskis (as regards his new portfolio), as set out under Rule [125\(9\)](#) of Parliament's Rules of Procedure concerning candidates proposed to replace individual Commissioners or in the event of a substantial reshuffling of Commission portfolios.

## 1. A European Green Deal

The [European Green Deal](#), first outlined in President von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#), was adopted by the Commission on 11 December 2019. 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 work on the European Green Deal. The [CWP 2020](#) contained numerous initiatives related to the European Green Deal. When the Commission [adjusted](#) its [work programme](#) in May 2020, these initiatives were retained, with only slight [modifications](#) to their timing. The European Green Deal is a focus of the [Next Generation EU](#) instrument, as the [European Council](#) meeting on 17-21 July decided that at least 30 % of the 2021-2027 MFF and of Next Generation EU spending should support climate objectives.

### Making Europe the first climate-neutral continent

On 4 March 2020, as part of the European Green Deal, the European Commission adopted a legislative proposal for a [European climate law](#) that sets the objective for the EU to become climate-neutral by 2050 and establishes a framework for achieving that objective. The Commission has also set more ambitious 2030 emissions reduction targets, both for the EU and internationally. The Commission President wants the EU to lead international negotiations to raise the ambition of other major emitters by 2021. By September 2020, the Commission plans to adopt an impact-assessed climate target 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. Pricing of carbon emissions is mentioned as a key element to ensure that every person and every sector contributes. 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 road transport and buildings.

A new [European Climate Pact](#), to be launched in the fourth quarter of 2020, 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, to include work on a carbon border tax and a review of the [Energy Taxation Directive](#).

## Circular economy and biodiversity

The European Green Deal will be aligned with a new long-term strategy for Europe's [industrial future](#), adopted on 10 March 2020, to make the EU a world leader in the circular economy and clean technologies, and to decarbonise energy-intensive industries, complemented by the strategies for [hydrogen](#) and [energy system integration](#) adopted in July 2020. A new [circular economy action plan](#), adopted in March 2020 promotes the sustainable use of resources, especially in resource-intensive sectors with high environmental impact, such as textiles and construction. A [biodiversity strategy for 2030](#), adopted in May 2020, supports the key objective of mainstreaming biodiversity across all policy areas. Internationally, von der Leyen would like Europe to lead the world at the next Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity ([COP15](#)). Further initiatives of the European Green Deal include the ['farm-to-fork' strategy](#) for sustainable food adopted in May 2020, the EU's zero-pollution ambition to safeguard citizens' health, and a 'renovation wave' for the building sector (expected for the third quarter of 2020).

## Financing the European Green Deal

According to von der Leyen's political guidelines, record amounts of public funds would be invested in advanced research and innovation, complemented by a strategy for green financing. EU funding for the European Green Deal will be provided through the EU budget and the Next Generation EU instrument, which supports economic recovery from the pandemic crisis, with emphasis on the green and digital transitions. Parts of the European Investment Bank should become Europe's climate bank. In 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. At the same time, 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, to which €10 billion will be added through the Next Generation EU instrument. 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.

## 2. A Europe fit for the digital age

In her political guidelines, 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. The [CWP 2020](#) announced 21 legislative and non-legislative actions. [Adjustments](#) to the programme in May 2020 delayed four of them, while one new initiative was added (*ex-ante* rules on platforms, discussed below). The Commission has so far adopted seven of those initiatives.

### Digital future

On 19 February 2020, the Commission outlined its vision on shaping Europe's [digital future](#). It proposed to base the digital transformation on three pillars: (i) technology that works for people; (ii) a fair and competitive economy; and (iii) an open, democratic and sustainable society. On the same day, the Commission launched initiatives under the first two pillars: a [white paper on artificial intelligence](#) (AI) and a [European data strategy](#). The former presents a framework for the development of AI based on excellence and trust. The Commission aims to accelerate deployment of AI in partnership with the private and public sectors, starting in research and innovation. This will be achieved by creating the right incentives and mobilising resources along the entire value chain. The aim is also to build trust in AI applications by protecting citizens' safety and rights and securing legal certainty regarding AI innovations. The latter initiative aims at creating a single market for data

based on the principle of making data available to all. This will be done by: (i) creating a regulatory framework for data governance, access and re-use; (ii) supporting the development of technological systems and a cutting-edge infrastructure; (iii) improving competences in society and business; and, (iv) building European data spaces in many crucial areas, such as industrial manufacturing, the Green Deal, health and energy.

The Commission has also shed light on the upcoming [Digital Services Act](#) package (expected in the fourth quarter of 2020) meant to update the current legal framework for digital services. Firstly, there will be new rules increasing and harmonising the [responsibilities](#) of digital services providers towards their users in terms of mitigating the risks they face and protecting their rights. Secondly, the Act will contain *ex-ante* rules specifically addressing the role of large online platforms as [gatekeepers](#) between consumers and businesses. In this capacity they currently set the rules for both their users and their competitors. The new initiative will aim to guarantee fair conduct of the platforms and ensure that the markets on which they are present remain competitive and conducive to innovation. This will open up possibilities for both new entrants and existing competitors to challenge platforms' market positions. Revision of the [Security of Network](#) and Information Systems Directive is also planned for 2020.

## Industry and SMEs

The abovementioned long-term strategy for Europe's [industrial future](#), adopted in March 2020, focused not only on supporting a greener and more circular economy, but also on two other main priorities: (i) supporting industry's global competitiveness and a level playing field, and (ii) shaping Europe's digital future. The strategy announces a stronger focus on European policy on innovation, investment and skills and the twin transformation towards green and digital industry. It also envisages launching an intellectual property action plan in 2020, to support technological sovereignty in the EU and make the legal framework suitable for the twin transition.

On 10 March 2020, the Commission adopted a new strategy for small and medium-sized enterprises (the [SME strategy](#)). In 2017, there were close to 24.5 million non-financial enterprises in the EU, of which 99.8 % were SMEs. Although the economic contribution of SMEs to the European economy is significant, many find it difficult to succeed in growing their systemic presence or in gaining access to international markets. To help them to grow and scale up, the strategy focuses on three key objectives: (i) capacity-building and support for the transition to sustainability and digitalisation (ii) cutting red tape and improving market access, and (iii) improving access to financing. Up to 240 [digital innovation hubs](#) will expand across every EU region helping SMEs to build digital innovations into their products, business models and processes and assisting with training on digital technologies. The aim of opening up access to finance (see Priority 3) is to provide the investment needed for SMEs' ecological and digital transition. It is worth noting that the transformation of the EU towards a green and digital future is also the key goal of the [recovery plan for Europe](#).

## Single market

In March 2020, the Commission adopted reports on [barriers to the single market](#) and a [single market enforcement action plan](#). The aim was to identify the most common obstacles faced by businesses and consumers and to propose measures for better implementation and enforcement of single market rules. In June 2020, the Commission adopted a white paper on the distortive effects of [foreign subsidies](#) in the single market. This will form the basis for upcoming legislative proposals. Still envisaged for 2020 are the proposals for the [aviation services](#) package, [digital finance](#) and two communications on a [European research area](#).

## 3. An economy that works for people

In her political guidelines, 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\(3\) TEU](#). A number of initiatives implementing this priority were announced in the CWP 2020. The programme adjustments made in May 2020 did not modify the Commission's original plans significantly, but did delay the adoption of a few new initiatives. Additional measures were also taken to address the negative economic impact of the pandemic.

## Implementing the social pillar and promoting equality

Following the commitment made in the Commission President's political guidelines, in the [communication on a strong social Europe for just transitions](#) of January 2020, the Commission launched a process of dialogue and consultation to prepare the ground for an action plan for the implementation of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). This would place particular focus on policies to secure 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. The CWP 2020 announced the establishment of a European Unemployment Reinsurance Scheme by the end of 2020; in the interim, however, an instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency ([SURE](#)) was created to tackle the negative impact of the pandemic on the labour market. A proposal to improve the democratic accountability of EU economic governance looked at refocusing the [European Semester](#), in the context of the overall [review of the economic governance framework](#) adopted in February and designed to mainstream the UN sustainable development goals ([SDGs](#)). While reorganising the European Semester process, the Commission also pledged to engage further with Parliament through regular exchanges before each key phase of the European Semester cycle.

## Supporting SME investment and financing

The Commission President's political guidelines stated that social rights and climate-neutrality must go hand in hand with a competitive industry. 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. Continuing this approach, the Commission is working on a new long-term strategy for Europe's industrial future, including an SME strategy (see Priority 2), in part by enhancing SME access to finance by completing the CMU. To this end, the CWP 2020 announced and the adjusted programme confirmed the presentation of a new CMU action plan in the fourth quarter of 2020. In the future, the scheduled review of the relevant legislation adopted in recent years will offer an opportunity for 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 secure a stronger international role for the euro. The potential of the CMU to facilitate SME access to capital will be raised by a private-public fund specialising in initial public offerings of SMEs.

## Deepening Economic and Monetary Union

Further deepening of economic and monetary union ([EMU](#)) is being prioritised to enhance the ability of the euro to support the European economy. To achieve a more growth-friendly fiscal stance in the euro area, the Commission announced its intention to 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 Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis had stated that the Commission would work on the basis of the report by the European Fiscal Board, which sets out ideas on simplifying the SGP rules. A 'limited [golden rule](#)' was indicated as the basis for the Commission's considerations. The pandemic has, however, led to the need for a more drastic approach, resulting in the decision to suspend the SGP temporarily, activating the '[general escape clause](#)'.

The completion of [banking union](#) (BU) has remained a key priority. The Euro Summit of [29 June 2018](#) agreed that the European Stability Mechanism ([ESM](#)) will provide the common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund ([SRF](#)), with details to be arranged at a later stage. Further discussions took place at both 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. The strengthening of BU is also being pursued through an anti-money-laundering (AML) [action plan](#) adopted in May 2020, designed, not least, to bring about EU-level supervision in this field. According to the January CWP 2020, the Commission was to adopt proposals to review the prudential framework for banks in the second quarter of 2020, so as to implement the final Basel III standards. However, given the economic shock stemming from the pandemic, the adoption of these proposals has been postponed, while a legislative initiative for a [banking package](#) increasing flexibility in prudential and accounting rules was adopted in the context of the Commission's economic response to the coronavirus crisis. In addition to that, Dombrovskis acknowledged that while no specific proposals were envisaged in the CWP 2020, the Commission will need to 'try to reinvigorate [the] discussion' on the creation of a European safe asset, the crisis caused by the pandemic having revived supranational debt instruments as a solution to avoid a symmetrical exogenous shock to produce asymmetrical effects between Member States. In this vein, the Commission proposed a major [recovery plan for Europe](#), including a new recovery instrument of €750 billion (Next Generation EU), which would boost the EU's 2021-2024 budget with new resources raised on the financial markets through bonds issued by the Commission on behalf of the EU, as explained in the introduction to this briefing.

A significant contribution to improving the business environment for EU entrepreneurs would be made by strengthening the [international role of the euro](#). This would help to shape global affairs, for example by expanding Europe's responsible trade agenda, and allow European companies to trade all over the world, while safeguarding the European social and regulatory model at home. In this respect, under Priority 4 – A Stronger Europe in the World, the CWP 2020 announced the adoption of an overarching strategy to strengthen Europe's economic and financial sovereignty. However, the adjusted CWP postponed the presentation of this initiative slightly (initially planned for the third quarter of 2020) to the fourth quarter of 2020.

## 4. A stronger Europe in the world

In her [political guidelines](#), von der Leyen said that the EU 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 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 focusing on the European Neighbourhood and the western Balkans.

The Commission agenda 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'. One year into the Commission's mandate, despite positive and swift action in response to the global coronavirus crisis (with several initiatives, such as the ['Team Europe'](#) strategy, which provided €20 billion to support partner countries' efforts in tackling the coronavirus pandemic), the call for a united foreign and security policy remains the main challenge, 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. The pandemic has reinvigorated calls for a multilateral response, and the EU has played a strategic role in providing solidarity, financial and public health support for third countries and international institutions such as the World Health

Organization. On top of the 'Team Europe' strategy, neighbourhood and enlargement countries have received EU medical help and [macro-financial assistance](#), with €3 billion allocated. North African countries received additional support through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.

However, the latest MFF figures, as agreed by the special [European Council meeting](#) on 17-21 July 2020, include commitment appropriations for Heading VI not exceeding €98.4 billion for the 2021-2027 period, whereas the initial European Commission proposal was €120 billion. Parliament's negotiating team on the MFF and own resources [indicated](#) that 'Parliament cannot accept the proposed record low ceilings as they mean renouncing the EU's long-term objectives and strategic autonomy'. In a [resolution](#) on the conclusions of the extraordinary European Council meeting of 17-21 July 2020, Parliament underlined that 'people in the EU have a collective duty of solidarity' and that 'targeted increases on top of the figures proposed by the European Council must single out programmes relating to ... border management and solidarity' such as ... the Integrated Border Management Fund, the European Defence Fund, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and humanitarian aid'.

## 'Geo-political' Commission

The Commission President's ambition to transform the EU's executive branch into a 'geo-political Commission' and the call for an integrated and comprehensive approach to security and defence were fully supported in Parliament's January 2020 [resolution](#) on the annual report on implementation of the common security and defence policy (CSDP). The EU is facing 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 and in its vicinity are provoking 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, also stating that 'NATO will always be the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence'. A decrease in the proposed budget for defence policy could, however, delay realisation of the EU's objectives.

The Union is facing instability and unpredictability on its borders and in its neighbourhood and is often confronted with the unilateral actions of regional powers, such as Russia and Turkey, notably in Syria and Libya. A major escalation and tensions in the eastern Mediterranean have affected some EU Member States. The November 2019 memorandum of understanding between Libya and Turkey effectively drew a dividing line between eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean, threatening maritime security, natural gas exploration and new infrastructures, such as the EastMed pipeline. Among positive developments in the Middle East and North Africa region has been increased regional cooperation with Egypt. Cairo is hosting the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#) and has also signed a bilateral agreement with Greece on delimitation of their maritime borders.

In addition, the strategic shift of the current presidential administration of the United States is leading to divergent positions even among its closest historical allies with regard to key countries within the region, such as Iran. The European Commission has expressed the wish to preserve the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) with Iran, which remains of utmost importance in the light of 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, and, as analysed by the [UNHCR](#), 'undocumented sea arrivals' in August 2020 exceeded numbers for the whole of 2019. With regard to the western Mediterranean route, where migrants come mainly through Libya and Morocco, 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'.

Challenges remain with regard to EU engagement with neighbourhood and enlargement partner countries. The EU is facing an unstable Donbass region in Ukraine and also the Transnistrian dispute. Meanwhile, regarding the internal democratic process in Belarus, von der Leyen has already announced €53 million in aid to help the Belarusian people fight for democracy, and is considering limited sanctions. Without any doubt, the first year of the von der Leyen Commission has brought major positive developments in the western Balkans. First, both Albania and North Macedonia have opened accession negotiations, following the March 2020 greenlight from the European Council. Second, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi has announced a [new methodology for enlargement](#), to keep reform efforts moving and proposing credible accession prospects. Third, the Zagreb EU–Western Balkans summit in May 2020 gave new momentum to enlargement and pushed back against rival influences from third countries, such as China, Russia and Turkey. Finally, the appointment of Miroslav Lajčák as EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and other western Balkan regional issues points to positive advances in resolving long-term regional disputes.

The EU will also have to increase its strategic capabilities and autonomy given the growing rift between the US and China, and the deepening gap within the transatlantic partnership, in particular in trade policy. The EU has been at the forefront in devising approaches to global governance through its preferential commitment to the World Trade Organization. The Treaties express a preference for collective governance as well; [Article 21 TEU](#) notably suggests that the Union 'promote multilateral solutions to common problems.' On 17 June 2020, European Commission presented a [European strategy](#) to accelerate the development, manufacturing and deployment of vaccines against coronavirus, in Europe and in the world. Finally, the outcome of the US presidential elections will determine if the current US policy of disengagement is to be pursued, deepening current difficulties, jeopardising the international rules-based order, the cornerstone of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of human dignity, equality and solidarity.

## 5. Promoting our European way of life

Under the heading 'Promoting our European way of life' (initially 'Protecting our European way of life' in the Commission President's [political guidelines](#), but modified following discussions with Parliament), this priority was originally built around three main strands: upholding the rule of law; strong borders and a fresh start on migration; and internal security. However, in the CWP 2020, the Commission presented its future action on rule of law and fundamental rights under the priority 'A new push for European democracy' (see Section 6). On the other hand, initiatives on health, education, skills and integration were added to the current priority, in line with the tasks assigned to the vice-president responsible for 'Promoting our European way of life', Margaritis Schinas.

### Promoting education, integration and long-term skills

In her political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen committed to making a European education area a reality by 2025, emphasising the need to improve access to quality education and learning mobility. She is also planning an update of the digital education action plan to improve digital literacy and skills. In the [CWP 2020](#), the Commission announced three non-legislative initiatives attached to this priority: a new skills agenda for Europe to help identify and fill skills shortages; a new action plan on integration and inclusion to protect the most vulnerable; and an initiative to achieve the European education area. The [European skills agenda](#), initially envisaged for the first half of 2020, was finally adopted on 1 July 2020, following coronavirus-related delays. It sets out 12 actions, aiming to improve the relevance of skills in the EU so as to strengthen sustainable competitiveness, ensure social fairness and build resilience.

### A new pact on migration and asylum

Another major initiative delayed by the pandemic was the new pact on migration and asylum, announced by the Commission for the beginning of the year and then postponed to the second

quarter of 2020, according to the adjusted working programme from May 2020. According to the [roadmap](#) published in July, the new pact would take a comprehensive approach, covering the whole migration route – from origin and transit countries to the receiving countries in the EU. This comprehensive framework will complement the proposals presented in 2016 and fill the gaps to establish a truly common European asylum system. In this vein, it is to be noted that none of the [proposals](#) put forward by the Commission in 2016 in the area of asylum have been adopted. The new framework should also include a more predictable basis for search and rescue to replace current ad hoc solutions, and an update of the return policy rules, as the proposal put forward by the Commission in 2018 to recast the current [Return Directive](#) has not been approved either by the co-legislators. As part of her [ambition](#) to make a 'fresh start on migration' and to ensure strong borders, von der Leyen announced her intention to reinforce the European Border and Coast Guard Agency by reaching a standing corps of 10 000 border guards by 2024 (instead of the initial deadline of [2027](#)). The Commission President is also in favour of securing stronger cooperation with third countries and establishing humanitarian corridors. She has 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 Parliament, Schinas stated his intention to promote modern and targeted legal migration schemes, not excluding a possible review of the 'blue card' proposal.

## European security union

In continuity with the 2014-2019 term, achieving a 'genuine European security union' remains a priority for the Commission. In the CWP 2020, it announced a number of legislative and non-legislative initiatives, including a new security union strategy to guide EU action during the 2020-2025 period. Postponed from second to third quarter, the [new strategy](#) was adopted on 24 July 2020. It builds on the achievements of the 2015-2020 European agenda on security, and defines four main priorities for the next five years: achieving a future-proof security environment (by enhancing cybersecurity and protecting critical infrastructure and public spaces); tackling evolving threats (e.g. countering cybercrime, illegal content online and hybrid threats); protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime; and building a strong European security ecosystem (through cooperation and information exchange, security research and innovation, and skills). In this way, the strategy aims to ensure security in both the physical and digital environment and to take into account the increasing interconnection between internal and external security. In line with the strategy, the Commission is planning new legislation to enhance the protection of critical infrastructure – put under pressure by the coronavirus crisis – and to strengthen Europol's mandate. Non-legislative initiatives include a new EU drugs agenda, an action plan on firearms trafficking and an EU strategy to fight child sexual abuse, [adopted](#) together with the security union strategy. The update of the EU strategy to eradicate trafficking in human beings was postponed from the end of 2020 to the first half of 2021, following adjustments made in May.

## 6. A new push for European democracy

The common threads running through the final set of priorities in von der Leyen's initial [political guidelines](#) were 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 EU citizens a greater role in decision-making.** EU citizens are to be given the opportunity to share their concerns on the Union through a conference on the [Future of Europe](#), initially intended to start in 2020 and run for two years. Following on from that, the EU institutions and civil society representatives will 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 relationship between the Commission and the European Parliament.** To this end, the political guidelines indicate: prioritisation of the dialogue between Commission and Parliament, including through further commitment by Commissioners to liaise with Parliament at all stages of international negotiations; and support for a right of initiative of the European Parliament and a commitment to respond with a legislative act to Parliament resolutions adopted by a majority of its component Members in accordance with Article 225 TFEU, and asking the Commission to submit a legislative proposal.
3. **Enhancing the accountability of EU decision-making,** by establishing an independent ethics body for all EU institutions, and making the legislative process more transparent.

Three additional measures were included in the CWP 2020 with the aim of strengthening the accountability and effectiveness of EU decision-making, namely: the strategic foresight report, the communication on better regulation, and the plan to combat misinformation. The first annual [foresight report](#), part of a broader foresight strategy for the Commission, was adopted on 9 September 2020, and aims to identify major trends and their potential policy implications. It should help to raise public debate on long-term strategic issues, and provide recommendations to help us meet the goals Europe has set itself. With the communication on better regulation (expected for the third quarter of 2020), the Commission is committing to reinforce the use of evaluation and foresight in its regulatory activity, to consult citizens more efficiently, and to promote the concept of 'active' subsidiarity. Finally, the measures envisaged to combat misinformation (also expected for the fourth quarter of 2020) are meant to guarantee a healthier public debate. In addition to these initiatives, several measures to protect fundamental rights and the rule of law within the EU have been adopted or are scheduled for 2020.

## Conference on the Future of Europe

Ursula von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#) envisaged a conference on the future of Europe as a tool to push for greater democratic participation of EU citizens in how the Union is run and what it delivers, through a three-step procedure. First, the Commission, Parliament and Council would prepare the concept, structure, timing and scope of the conference; second, efforts would be made to ensure the highest possible level of participation in the Commission's citizens' dialogues, by facilitating in-person and online participation; third, adequate follow-up to the actions agreed by the conference would also be ensured.

Parliament's preparations for the conference began soon after Ursula von der Leyen's announcement in July 2019. A [working group](#) was set up 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 conference, proposing to establish citizens' 'agoras' to feed into the conference's debate. The [Commission's communication](#) on the conference is [less clear on the details](#) of the conference's composition and working methods, although it considers the conference to be an invaluable opportunity to bring the EU closer to its citizens. The Council agreed its [position](#) on 24 June 2020, stressing the need for wide engagement, through multi-level and multilingual, online and offline, debates on cross-cutting issues related to EU policy-making. On 30 June, the Commission, Parliament and Council launched negotiations to agree on a joint declaration setting out a common concept, working method and scope. The joint declaration should also take into account the new epidemiological conditions and indicate a start date for the conference (initially envisaged for 9 May 2020 in Dubrovnik, but postponed because of the pandemic).

## Upholding fundamental rights and the rule of law

The rule of law has come under pressure in recent years in the EU, with [Article 7 TEU procedures](#) launched against Poland (2017) and Hungary (2018). In her political guidelines, von der Leyen put great emphasis on upholding the rule of law and EU values, and committed to using all the EU tools

available and strengthening existing ones to that end. She expressed her support for a comprehensive European rule of law mechanism, with annual reporting by the European Commission, based on objective criteria and applying to all Member States equally. She also committed to ensuring a greater role for Parliament in this mechanism. In this vein, in July 2009, the Commission published a [communication](#) announcing a new 'rule of law review cycle' culminating in an 'annual rule of law report' covering all Member States. According to the CWP 2020, the Commission will present its first annual rule of law report covering the situation in all Member States in the third quarter of 2020. Another way under consideration to further strengthen the current EU toolbox to protect the rule of law within the Member States would be to make receipt of EU funds subject to respect for the rule of law. In this vein, it is to be noted that agreement is still sought on the Commission [proposal](#) for a regulation on the protection of the Union's budget in case of generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law in Member States.

Also committed to protecting citizens' rights more effectively, by the end of the year the Commission intends to present a new strategy on implementing the Charter of Fundamental Rights, focusing on awareness-raising at national level. It has already adopted a first-ever EU-wide strategy for victims' rights. Last, but not least, in line with the 'equality for all' objective [pinpointed](#) by Ursula von der Leyen as one of the major priorities, in March 2020 the Commission adopted a [European Gender Equality Strategy](#), and is planning further initiatives on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people's rights and Roma inclusion for the end of the year.

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