

New Commission rubber-stamped by Parliament as climate takes centre stage

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News

The incoming European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen has been given the green light by MEPs after a key vote in Strasbourg.



Ursula von der Leyen and her College of Commissioners | *Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

After a debate in plenary on Wednesday, MEPs approved the new Commission by 461 votes to 157 against, with 89 abstentions.

Von der Leyen, who is the Commission's first ever female Commission President, will take office with her team of Commissioners on 1 December, formally kicking off their 2019-2024 programme.

Under the auspices of von der Leyen - who has made gender equality one of her priorities - female

representation in the Commission is the highest it has ever been: in addition to the President-elect, the current composition of the Commission comprises 11 female members and 15 male members.

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In the run-up to today's vote, von der Leyen addressed MEPs, highlighting climate action as a key priority and calling for a transition towards climate neutrality by mid-century.

"If there is one area where the world needs our leadership, it is on protecting our climate. This is an existential issue for Europe - and for the world," she told a packed plenary.

"how can it not be existential when 85 percent of people in extreme poverty live in the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change? How can it not be existential when we see Venice under water, Portugal's forests on fire, or Lithuania's harvests cut by half because of droughts? This has happened before but never with the same frequency or intensity."

She added, "We do not have a moment to waste. The faster Europe moves, the greater the advantage will be for our citizens, our competitiveness and our prosperity."

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The European Green Deal, a flagship policy of the von der Leyen Commission, must work "for the health of our planet and our people and for our economy," she said.

She added that Dutch official Frans Timmermans was "the right person to make this happen."

After several of her team were rejected by Parliament, today's green light means her Commission can now make a delayed start to its work.

She acknowledged in her speech that she takes the reins of the Commission after a turbulent few years for the EU, which has had to handle a series of major challenges ranging from the eurozone crisis and migration to Brexit and a surge in support for eurosceptic political parties.

She said, "In the last years, we had to focus on the here-and-now, managing crises after emergency, fighting to keep our unity and solidarity intact. If we have emerged stronger in that time - and I believe we have - it is in great part thanks to the leadership and the conviction of my predecessor."

She described her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, as "a great European," who "has devoted his heart, his soul and his life to our Union and his legacy speaks for itself."

“We will work closely with the Commission to make sure that together we accomplish the ecological transformation Europe needs without leaving anyone behind” **Iratxe García Pérez, S&D leader**

Later on Wednesday, in a news briefing with Parliament’s president David Sassoli, von der Leyen reiterated many of the commitments she made in her speech, highlighting that appropriate investment and regulatory frameworks will be put into place for Europe to lead the way internationally on a range of what she called “critical issues,” including environmental protection and climate change, growth, inclusion, innovation and digitalisation as well as the protection of democracy.

Other key issues, she said, will be upholding European values, citizens’ rights and the rule of law.

Before the election at noon, political groups held brief meetings to decide on their voting intentions.

Reaction from MEPs to the vote in Parliament, which now paves the way for the Commission to start work at the weekend, was swift, with S&D leader Iratxe García Pérez, a Spanish MEP, saying her group had “managed to maximise our leverage and to shape an agenda for change in the next five years.”

“We also secured crucial portfolios for the S&D commissioners, and we will work closely with the Commission to make sure that together we accomplish the ecological transformation Europe needs without leaving anyone behind. Young people remind us that it is their planet and their future at stake.”

“Von der Leyen has delivered a positive and outward-looking speech. The Europe that we want and that the world needs is innovative, competitive, sustainable and self-confident” **Pierre Gattaz, BusinessEurope President**

She added, “This is also the most gender-balanced Commission ever, thanks to our pressure. Over the next years, we will keep pushing, not only for gender balance in terms of numbers, but also for a gender dimension mainstreamed in all policy areas, and we want a European directive to eradicate gender-based violence.”

She added, “We are very pleased that the New Green Deal is the priority of the next Commission and we know that [Frans] Timmermans will do an excellent job. The climate emergency cannot wait.”

Reaction also came from the business community, with BusinessEurope president Pierre Gattaz stating that “von der Leyen has delivered a positive and outward-looking speech. The Europe that we want and that the world needs is innovative, competitive, sustainable and self-confident.”

“We can be proud of our model, but in order to defend our role in the world, we will need to prove that it is also economically sustainable and successful.”

BusinessEurope director general Markus Beyrer added, “The core of the project will need to be a smart and modern industrial and innovation strategy that ensures that our joint efforts to protect the planet provide new business opportunities while avoiding negative effects on growth and jobs in Europe.”

“We need a bold and ambitious budget that increases EU aid for international development and puts the EU on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals” **Tim**

Cole, Europe executive director at The ONE Campaign

He added, “Putting the single market back on top of the political agenda and maintaining an ambitious bilateral and multilateral trade agenda are key.”

From the NGO world, Tim Cole, Europe executive director at The ONE Campaign, noted, “von der Leyen has highlighted how our greatest achievements have always come when we are bold. Now is the time for the European Union to be bold.”

“Member States are already considering the Union’s next long-term budget. We need a bold and ambitious budget that increases EU aid for international development and puts the EU on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.”

“If we want to show the rest of the world that they can rely on the EU as a global leader that honours its commitments and a champion of multilateralism, we need bold action now.”

About the author

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