EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Procedures, Politics, Policies: the pieces of the puzzle for the next institutional cycle of the EU

Valentin Kreilinger*

Summary

The European elections on 6–9 June 2024 will be decisive for the future of Europe. They mark the beginning of a routine reshuffle or renewal of the EU's key institutions in the weeks and months that follow. This analysis asks how the EU's leadership team for 2024–2029 will be shaped and what the pitfalls will be.

The 'top jobs' package itself seems manageable with the help of qualified majority voting, but increasing party-political fragmentation and the rise of the far right create an uncertain situation. It will not be easy for a candidate for Commission President to secure the necessary 361 votes in the European Parliament. The EU can formulate policy responses in planning documents but will need to address economic and geopolitical challenges, enlargement, and internal reforms in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, by the end of 2024, there will be both new and familiar faces with policy agendas to steer the Union for the next five years.

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Introduction

Forty-five years after the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, the 2024 European elections will be an important and decisive moment for the future of Europe. In the weeks and months after the elections, the EU will see changes in the composition and/or leadership of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council. In anticipation, political parties are adopting manifestos, lists, and candidates. Three major European party families — the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE) — have dominated EU politics for decades. Now, about three months before the elections, two of them have chosen their top candidate for the post of Commission President, also called Spitzenkandidat. At an EPP congress in Bucharest on 6–7 March 2024, Ursula von der Leyen, the current Commission President, from Germany, will be officially declared the EPP's top candidate. Nicolas Schmit, the current Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, from Luxembourg, was elected common candidate of the PES at the party's congress in Rome on 2 March 2024. In addition to the top candidates of the EPP and PES, the ALDE and its Renew Europe (RE) group is likely to present a potential candidate for the post of Commission President or a team of candidates for high-level posts. Beyond these three parties, the Greens have chosen their two top candidates, and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) has not yet decided if it will have one.

Whether any of these candidates will ultimately become Commission President is difficult to predict today (Crum 2023), because the European Parliament would be able to assert itself against the European Council if one of the Spitzenkandidaten got the job. The latter has always insisted that there is no 'automaticity' between the elections and its proposal of a candidate for the post. However, the current Commission President and expected EPP Spitzenkandidat, Ursula von der Leyen, is widely considered to be the frontrunner (Moens et al. 2024). In addition to the woman or the man at the head of the EU executive, the posts of President of the European Council, High Representative of the Union, and President of the European Parliament will also have to be filled. The party-political composition of the next European Parliament and

the next European Commission will in any case also influence the direction of the EU's policy agenda for the 2024–2029 institutional cycle. One can expect that fundamental questions of European integration will play an outstanding role in the EU over the next five years: the Union will have to prepare for enlargement and undertake internal reforms, possibly including treaty change (Costa and Schwarzer 2023; von Sydow and Kreilinger 2023).

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This European Policy Analysis asks how the EU's leadership team for the next five years will emerge and what the pitfalls in the process will be. It sets out to examine the pieces of the puzzle that define a new institutional cycle in the EU: *procedures, politics, and policies*. The first section addresses the *procedures* for filling the key posts in the EU: the appointment and election of all 'top jobs', governed by written rules in the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) or other texts such as the institutions' rules of procedure. Section two turns to *politics* and the party-political composition of the key institutions: the activities of leaders and parties at the EU level, the political battles and debates that influence the composition of the key institutions almost as much as the election results. The third section looks at *policies* and the political direction of the EU: the course of action that is proposed or adopted by the key institutions for the next five years, setting the political direction of the EU. The final section concludes the analysis.

1. Procedures for filling the EU 'top jobs'

Each of the four great offices of state in the EU follows its own procedure for proposing and electing a suitable candidate. These procedures have evolved over time and involve the European Council and the European Parliament to varying degrees. When putting together the new

leadership team that eventually emerges, the overall composition will have to consider various factors such as party affiliation, geography, population size, and gender balance. Ideally, the appointees to the top jobs should come from the major political parties, from old and new Member States, from east and west as well as north and south, and from big and small Member States, and women and men should be represented equally.

In 2019, the meeting of the European Council, at which the heads of state or government agreed who should be the next heads of European Commission, European Council, and European Central Bank and the next High Representative, lasted from 30 June to 2 July. With the candidate for the post of Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, being German from the EPP; Charles Michel being Belgian from the ALDE/RE; Josep Borrell being Spanish from the Party of European Socialists (PES) / Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); and a split of the presidency of the European Parliament, one can see the ambition to have a broadly representative team. The appointment of the President of the European Central Bank, which coincided with the other 'top jobs' in 2019, Christine Lagarde, being French from the EPP, completed the selection.[1] In 2019, the European Council mostly succeeded in terms of political affiliation and gender balance. Large Member States managed to secure key posts, and the founding members of 1957 clearly dominate, too. Neither Central and Eastern Europe nor the Nordics are represented.

This section outlines and discusses how the procedures for filling the posts of President of the European Council (1.1), President of the European Commission (1.2), High Representative of the Union (1.3), and President of the European Parliament (1.4) work. In 2014 and 2019, the first three posts were filled together as a 'package deal' by the European Council, while the President of the European Parliament is within the remit of this institution.

1.1 President of the European Council
The President of the European Council chairs the meetings of the heads of state or government. Article 15(5) TEU states that *'[t]he European Council shall elect its President, by a qualified majority, for a term of two and a half years, renewable once. In the event of an impediment or serious misconduct, the European Council can end the President's term of office in accordance with the same procedure.'*

Just like his two predecessors, Charles Michel was a member of the European Council when elected its President in 2019. The post of a permanent President of the European Council was created by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and replaced the previous arrangement that meetings of the European Council were chaired by the rotating six-month presidency of the Council and the respective head of state or government. In January 2024, Charles Michel announced that he would stand for a seat in the European Parliament in the elections in June and would therefore step down early. Three weeks later, he abandoned his plan and said that he would stay as European Council President until the end of his term on 30 November 2024 (Foy 2024).

The President of the European Council is elected for two and a half years, renewable once. The initial term of office is thus half the term of office of the Parliament and the Commission. All Presidents of the European Council, including the current President, Charles Michel (ALDE/RE), have been re-elected and have thus served for five years. Donald Tusk (EPP) had been elected for a second term despite opposition from Poland's (new) conservative government in 2017.

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All previous European Council Presidents have been Prime Ministers, and all have been male, reflecting the generally poor gender balance among heads of state or government in the European Council (Johansson et al. 2022, 6).

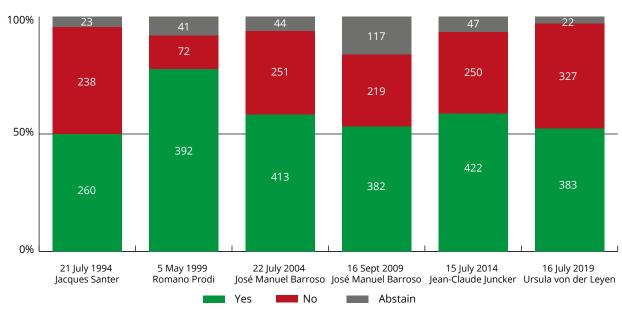[1] Her eight-year term does not end until 2027.

Figure 1. **Votes for the President of the European Commission in the European Parliament**

Sources: Valentin Kreilinger for Jacques Delors Institute Berlin (July 2019). Data: European Parliament.

1.2 President of the European Commission

The President of the European Commission is the head of this institution whose election precedes the process of appointing the Commission as a whole, including the double-hatted High Representative/Vice-President. Article 17(7) TEU states that *[t]aking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members.'*

Ursula von der Leyen (EPP) did not stand in the 2019 European Parliament elections. When the European Council proposed her, this was a complete surprise. Her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, became Commission President after being the lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) of the EPP for the elections in 2014 and was subsequently nominated for the office by the European Council. This vote was taken by qualified majority, with Hungary and the United Kingdom not voting for Juncker. Germany abstained on von der Leyen because the Christian Democrats' Social Democratic coalition partner did not agree.

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty had introduced the provision of *'taking into account the elections to the*

European Parliament' in Article 17(7) TEU, but the word Spitzenkandidat does not appear there. The fact that the European Council did not propose any of the lead candidates of a European political party for the office of Commission President in 2019 has triggered some discussions about how the process to propose and elect the Commission President should be organised in the future (Crum 2023). But the procedure has not been changed since then.

Over the years, the European Parliament had been able to increase its influence over the selection of the Commission President: The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 gave the European Parliament the right to be consulted on the choice of Commission President. It was clear that Jacques Santer would not take office without the support of a relative majority of MEPs in 1994 (Hix et al. 2007, 182-199). In the end, 260 MEPs voted for him and 238 against. The Lisbon Treaty changed the majority requirement: while a simple majority of votes cast was sufficient until 2009, since its entry into force this has been lifted to an absolute majority — a 'majority of component members' of the European Parliament is required. In 2019, Ursula von der Leyen won with a narrow majority of just nine votes: 383 MEPs voted for her, 327 MEPs voted against her, and 22 abstained from voting (see Figure 1).

While the European Council insists that there is no automatic link between the Spitzenkandidat and the Commission presidency, the European Parliament has positioned itself as an advocate of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and is still committed to it. This is part of its long-term ambition to strengthen its role in the political system (Héritier et al. 2019). Most recently, the European Parliament repeated that the lead candidate of the European political party *'that has obtained the largest share of seats must in the first instance lead the negotiations to identify the common candidate with the largest majority, followed, if needed, by the other lead candidates in this effort, in proportion to the share of seats obtained by their respective European political parties'* (European Parliament 2023, point 8). It was arguably only because none of the top candidates could unite a majority behind them that von der Leyen was able to take office in 2019.

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After the European elections in June 2024, it will be equally difficult for the candidate for Commission President to command a majority of 361 votes in the secret ballot. Article 17(7) TEU, quoted above, continues that if the candidate for President of the Commission *'does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.'*

In addition to Article 17 TEU, the Declaration N°11 on Article 17(6) and (7) of the TEU foresees that representatives of the European Parliament and the European Council carry out consultations in the framework *'that is considered the most appropriate'* before the European Council proposes a candidate for the post of Commission President.

But what is the most appropriate framework? The institutions have not answered the question. The European Council and the European Parliament have never discussed common principles and procedural aspects for the consultations on proposing and electing the Commission President.

It is important to remember that in summer 2024, in addition to the presidencies of the European Council and the European Commission, other top-level posts will have to be filled: the office of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the post of President of the European Parliament.

1.3 High Representative of the Union

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is responsible for these policy areas. Article 18(1) TEU states that *'[t]he European Council, acting by a qualified majority, with the agreement of the President of the Commission, shall appoint the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The European Council may end his term of office by the same procedure.'* Although the post is not considered as prestigious as the previous two 'top jobs', the High Representative has usually been part of the 'top jobs' package of the European Council.

According to Article 18(4) TEU, *'[t]he High Representative shall be one of the Vice-Presidents of the Commission.'* Due to this 'double-hatted' nature of the post, the European Council chooses an appropriate candidate, subject to the agreement of the President-elect of the Commission. The precise remit and seniority of the High Representative/ Vice-President (HR/VP) within the European Commission is a matter for the Commission President. Jean-Claude Juncker's Commission had a First Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, while Ursula von der Leyen's appointment of three Executive Vice-Presidents has pushed the HR/VP further down the ranks, making Josep Borrell (PES) just one of a total of eight Vice-Presidents. The new External Coordination Group (EXCO) in the 2019–2024 Commission, which prepares weekly discussions in the College on the external aspects of each portfolio, the task of the HR/VP to link foreign and economic policy, and his assignment to provide a weekly update on foreign policy to the College, however, give a prominent role to this policy area in the 'geopolitical Commission' and to the HR/VP's portfolio (Håkansson 2024).

For the next term, one of the major European parties, the EPP, will reportedly call for the creation of the post of a Defence Commissioner in its election manifesto and 'wants to cancel EU top diplomat job' (Pugnet 2024). While it is unclear how this would be compatible with Article 18(1) TEU, the creation of a Defence Commissioner portfolio (beyond the defence issues for which the Internal Market Commissioner is responsible and the dedicated Directorate-General) is possible. Alternatively, the policy area could also be attached to the HR/VP.

1.4 President of the European Parliament

Unlike in the case of the other three posts, the European Council is not involved in the (s)election of the President of the European Parliament. However, the post is another 'top job' and therefore indirectly part of the 'top jobs' package. As a new President of the European Parliament needs to be in place to conduct its business, this is the post to be agreed most quickly after the election.

The President of the European Parliament is elected by the MEPs in a secret ballot and must obtain an absolute majority of the votes cast in the first three ballots. The rules of procedure of the European Parliament state that *'the fourth ballot shall […] be confined to the two Members who have obtained the highest number of votes in the third ballot. In the event of a tie, the older candidate shall be declared to have been elected'* (European Parliament 2019, Rule 16(1)).

The post has usually been subject to a mid-term renewal after two and a half years when MEPs reshuffle key positions. Most recently, in January 2022, Roberta Metsola (EPP) succeeded David Sassoli (S&D) as President of the European Parliament for the second half of the legislative term. Metsola is the third female President of the European Parliament. Apart from Martin Schulz (2012–2017), no President of the European Parliament has served for five years. And in recent times, except for the 1999–2004 term, the EPP and S&D have split the presidency between themselves.

2. Politics and the party-political composition of the key institutions

In the 2019 European elections, the two major European political parties lost in terms of their share of the votes,[2] and, for the first time, their groups in the European Parliament, the EPP and S&D, no longer had a majority of the seats on their own. Generally, the preferred 'winning' parliamentary majority during the current term was then formed by them together with RE. For the aftermath of the 2024 elections, continued cooperation between the EPP, PES/S&D, and ALDE/RE for filling the 'top jobs' is the most likely scenario, despite the gains for the far right that have been forecasted (Cunningham and Hix 2024). Most members of the European Council also belong to these three parties. However, the process of appointing the new Commission took several weeks and months in 2009, 2014, and 2019, although in the end there was always majority support for the candidate for President of the European Commission.

> ### 'The European elections are the beginning of a routine renewal of the key EU institutions.'
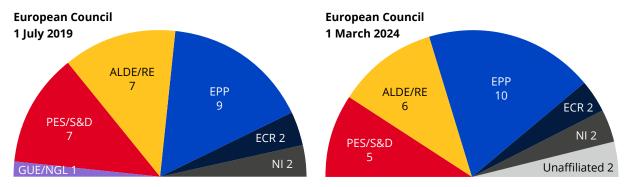
The European elections are the beginning of a routine renewal of the key EU institutions. Importantly, in mid-2024, the composition of the European Council (2.1), the newly elected European Parliament (2.2), and, ultimately, in late 2024, the new European Commission (2.3) will be different from the last time when the 'top jobs' were filled in 2019, and their composition will also change compared to the current 2019–2024 mandate.

2.1 European Council

In recent years, the European Council has become more heterogeneous, with a wider colour spectrum of national governments, which makes it more difficult to reach a consensus on the top jobs (Crum 2023). The institution operates under different conditions than the other key institutions and does not follow a fixed term, except for its President. However, it is influenced by the political cycles of Commission and Parliament.

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[2] At the same time, voter turnout increased by eight percentage points to 50.7%. It was the first time in 20 years that participation reached over 50%.

Figure 2. **Party-political composition of the European Council in July 2019 and March 2024**

**European Council
1 July 2019**

**European Council
1 March 2024**

Sources: Own elaboration. Data from Europe Elects (2024). In 2019, the United Kingdom was still a Member State.

After insisting on 'no automaticity' for the post of Commission President for a long time, Member States took back control of the process by ignoring the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019. This can be explained by the increased diversity of political parties and interests in the European Council, which came along with a weakened EPP influence among the heads of state or government. In addition, compared to 2014, the number of PES/S&D leaders had decreased, more members from the ALDE/RE were around the table, and the leaders from the ECR, European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), and non-affiliated heads of state or government completed the group (Johansson et al. 2022, 5-6). This required informal gatherings, such as an informal dinner of six leaders on 7 June 2019 (Rettman 2019). It was hosted by Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, with Pedro Sanchez (Spain) and António Costa (Portugal) for the PES, Andrej Plenković (Croatia) and Krišjānis Kariņš (Latvia) for the EPP, and Mark Rutte (Netherlands) representing the ALDE together with Michel. At the beginning of 2024, the European Council is fragmented in a similar way (see Figure 2), but it seems likely that the EPP will strengthen its influence in the European Council again due to elections and government changes in Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium, which could result in national leaders from the PES/S&D and ALDE/RE being replaced.

Interestingly, in terms of its party-political composition at the start of its mandate, the next Commission will broadly reflect the composition of the European Council, as the national governments appoint the Commissioner from their country. Usually, but not always, the largest national governing party can fill the post of Commissioner[3]: over time, governments have shown a strong inclination to appoint Commissioners who share a government's party affiliation, and the share of technocratic Commissioners declined (Wonka 2007).

2.2 European Parliament
The future power structure in the European Parliament is primarily determined by voter shifts. However, two other factors also matter for the party-political composition of the European Parliament. On the one hand, delegations of national parties may decide to change their political grouping in the European Parliament, leading to a different composition of the current groups or the creation of new groups and the disappearance of others. This happens mainly in the weeks after the elections, but it can also happen at any time during a parliamentary term. On the other hand, the total number of MEPs will rise from the current 705 to 720 (Cunningham and Hix 2024). To ensure that the number of seats per country reflects the respective population sizes in a better way, a total of 15 additional seats have been allocated among 12 of the 27 Member States

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[3] For instance, in the coalition agreement of the current German government, the Greens secured the right to appoint the next EU Commissioner unless the Commission President again comes from Germany: '[t]he right to nominate the European Commissioner lies with Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen, provided that the Commission President does not come from Germany' (177).

for the 2024 European elections, in accordance with the principle of degressive proportionality. The European Parliament elected in 2019 was originally made up of 751 MEPs, including those elected in the UK who stayed until the country left.[4]

Since 2019, the European Parliament has been organised into seven political groups:

- European People's Party (EPP)

- Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

- Renew Europe (RE)

- Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

- European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

- European United Left – Nordic Green Left (Left – GUE/NGL)

- Identity and Democracy (ID)

The formation of political groups in the European Parliament follows domestic political practices, helps to overcome collective action problems, and allows for a division of labour and competition along ideological positions — as at the national level. With less volatility, more predictability, and more efficiency in politics, this system is beneficial for all (Hix et al. 2003, 313-14; Hix et al. 2007, 89). In addition to size, the internal cohesion of political groups determines their actual influence in the European Parliament. The cohesion rate of political groups in the European Parliament (the percentage of members of a group who vote the same way) stands at a remarkable 90%.

Political groups in the European Parliament do not permanently support a 'government', but their internal cohesion is based solely on genuine ideological convergence. The balance of power between the groups after the elections is the decisive factor in the European power structure. In 2024, a significant number of new MEPs from new national parties will be elected. Their future group affiliation is unclear, and some current MEPs are looking for a new political home or could change political groups. Such parties, delegations, or individual MEPs could join one of the existing groups or try to form a new group, which requires at least 23 MEPs from at least seven Member States (European Parliament 2024).

During the parliamentary term, there are also movements of MEPs and national parties changing groups in the European Parliament. Most prominently, the 12 Fidesz MEPs from Hungary left the EPP group in 2021 because of a long-running dispute about the rule of law and have since then been non-aligned MEPs. This switch had the biggest effect on the strength of the political groups in the current term. Another example is the Finns Party (2 MEPs) that switched from the ID group to the ECR group due to its stance on Russia (Camut 2023). Comparing the overall number of seats for each political group after Brexit in 2020 with the numbers from early 2024 reveals that some groups lost more members (ID -18 MEPs, EPP -9 MEPs) than others (S&D -5 MEPs), while some groups gained (ECR +5 MEPs, RE +3 MEPs, Greens/EFA +3 MEPs), and more MEPs are now not affiliated (+22 MEPs).[5]

Forecasting the June 2024 elections
Current projections for the composition of the next European Parliament, based on national opinion polls, show that the EPP group will remain stronger than the S&D group. Table 1 calculates the average of three prominent projections. The share of seats held by the two largest groups is expected to continue to fall by around 1 percentage point each, from 25.2% to 24.4% for the EPP and from 20.0% to 18.9% for the S&D. The two groups currently in third and fourth place, RE and Greens/EFA, are expected to lose even more, by 2.7 and 2.8 percentage points, respectively, with RE falling from 14.3% to 11.6% of seats and the Greens/EFA from 10.1% to 7.3%. The far-right groups ECR

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[4] Twenty-seven of the 73 seats previously allocated to the United Kingdom were redistributed among 14 Member States according to the principle of degressive proportionality and filled in accordance with the respective national voting results of May 2019. The European Parliament has had 705 seats since February 2020.

[5] Own calculation. The precise movements between the groups and from/to non-affiliated would require further analysis.

Table 1. **Current projections for the composition of the next European Parliament**

	Current European Parliament (9th term)		Cunningham and Hix for ECFR		POLITICO Europe		Europe Elects		Average of the three projections		+/- (in %pt.) to current EP
	February 2024		24 January 2024		27 February 2024		5 February 2024		**1 March 2024**		
EPP	**178**	**25.2%**	173	24.0%	174	24.2%	180	25.0%	**175.67**	**24.4%**	**-0.85**
S&D	**141**	**20.0%**	131	18.2%	137	19.0%	140	19.4%	**136.00**	**18.9%**	**-1.11**
RE	**101**	**14.3%**	86	11.9%	82	11.4%	82	11.4%	**83.33**	**11.6%**	**-2.75**
Greens/EFA	**71**	**10.1%**	61	8.5%	45	6.3%	51	7.1%	**52.33**	**7.3%**	**-2.80**
ECR	**67**	**9.5%**	85	11.8%	76	10.6%	80	11.1%	**80.33**	**11.2%**	**1.65**
GUE/NGL	**38**	**5.4%**	44	6.1%	33	4.6%	42	5.8%	**39.67**	**5.5%**	**0.12**
ID	**58**	**8.2%**	98	13.6%	85	11.8%	91	12.6%	**91.33**	**12.7%**	**4.46**
NI	**51**	**7.2%**	42	5.8%	44	6.1%	49	6.8%	**45.00**	**6.3%**	**-0.98**
New unaffiliated		**0.0%**		0.0%	44	6.1%	5	0.7%	**16.33**	**2.3%**	**2.27**
	705		720		720		720		**720**		

Data: European Parliament; Cunningham and Hix (2024); POLITICO Europe (2024); Europe Elects (2024); own elaboration.

and ID are expected to make significant gains, with ID increasing its share of seats from 8.2% to 12.7% (up 4.5 percentage points), coming third, and the ECR gaining 1.7 percentage points to 11.2% from 9.5%. The Left (the GUE/NGL group) is likely to remain almost stable: 5.5% instead of 5.4%. The figures for NI (non-inscrits) and new non-affiliated parties and MEPs are 6.3% and 2.3%, respectively (see Table 1).

The rise of the far right could even make an unlikely unified far-right group combining ID and the ECR larger than the EPP, as the average of the three projections puts ID+ECR (171 seats, 23.9%) almost on par with the EPP. While attempts to form far-right groups have often failed in the past, the possibility of forming what might be the largest group could help overcome existing differences within the far-right camp. However, Marine Le Pen's direct criticism of the AfD in January 2024 and her threat to leave the common group (Neubert et al. 2024) shows that even the existing far-right groups and parties are fragile, making the scenario of a unified far-right group rather unlikely.

The projections confirm that it will be more difficult to form majorities in the European Parliament. The EPP and S&D are again without a majority on their own (43%); together with RE they reach 55% of the seats. This may not always be enough (Cunningham and Hix 2024), given that the average cohesion of these groups is between 90 and 95%. As this majority will be less reliable, other majorities are likely to play a greater role. The question is whether these three groups will look to the left or to the right for an additional partner. Together with the Greens/EFA, they would reach 62%, while the EPP, S&D, and RE plus the ECR would reach 66% of the seats.

However, RE has ruled out any cooperation with the far right (and the far left) in its Vienna Declaration from September 2023 (Renew Europe 2023). Other majorities fall short of 50% of the seats and are not very viable either (see Figure 3). The 'cordon sanitaire', the approach of the other groups to isolate the ID group, has worked so far, but active cooperation between the EPP, ECR, and ID (47%) would put an end to it. A key question is whether a majority spanning from the centre-left (S&D) to the ECR — with Georgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) as the ECR's strongest component — is imaginable at all. There has also been speculation that FdI could join the EPP. In
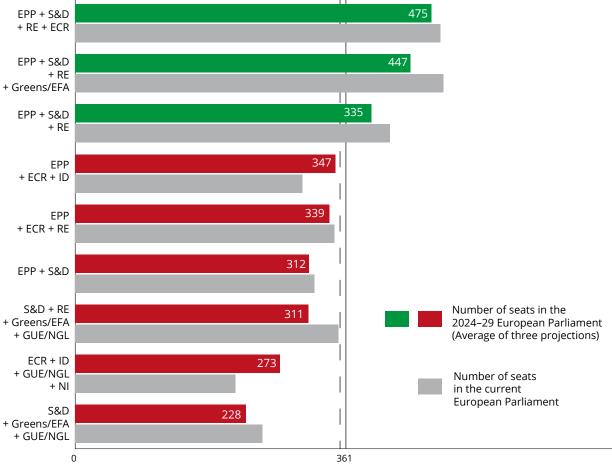
Figure 3. **Possible majorities in the next European Parliament based on current projections**

Source: Authors' calculations based on Table 1 (above).

Note: The solid line shows the majority of component members in the next European Parliament (361 MEPs). The dotted line shows the majority of component members in the current European Parliament (353 MEPs). The absolute numbers of seats for the possible majorities should be seen in relation to these lines. For the election of the Commission President in 2019, the threshold was 376 MEPs (751 MEPs in total before Brexit). The figure uses the average of three projections from Table 1 for each group. If the rounded values were added together, there may be differences of one seat. Possible majorities in the 2024–2029 European Parliament that meet the threshold appear in green. If the groups do not meet the threshold, they appear in red.

the European Council, decisions can be made between leaders with very different ideological views; the European Parliament is different. But the issue will be important for the election of the Commission President and beyond. The threshold is 361 votes, the absolute majority of component members.
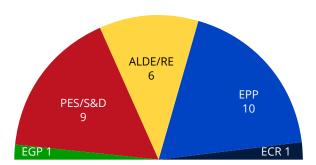
2.3 European Commission
The most likely scenario is that the European Council will propose incumbent Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for a second term, given that the EPP is expected to come first in the elections and that it has a solid base among the
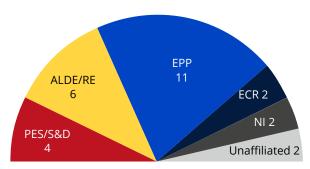
heads of state and government in the European Council. There is also a certain advantage in having a Commission President who has already been in office for five years to deal with the fundamental issues of enlargement and reform that the EU will face in the coming years. Ursula von der Leyen's ability to build a broad enough coalition of support for the policy priorities in her second term will then determine whether she reaches the required 361 votes in the European Parliament. If she is re-elected, the Commission presidency will continue to be in the hands of the EPP. Like in 2019, one would then expect (elevated) Vice-Presidency roles to go to the PES/S&D and ALDE/RE. These roles

Figure 4. **Party-political composition of the European Commission in 2019 and a possible composition of the next European Commission**

Possible composition of the next European Commission (with von der Leyen as President and Commissioners according to party-political composition of the European Council)

Party-political composition of the von der Leyen Commission when taking office in 2019

Note: EGP is the European Green Party. Data on the party-political composition of the European Council from Europe Elects (2024a). If von der Leyen continues as Commission President, the German governing coalition will not appoint a Commissioner from the ranks of its three parties. Otherwise, the post will go to the Greens according to the Coalition Treaty (not shown in the figure). Data on the party affiliation of Commissioners are from the EPP, S&D, and Renew websites. Reflecting the composition when the von der Leyen Commission took office in 2019, Frans Timmermans is included for the PES/S&D, Olivér Várhelyi among the EPP members, and Maroš Šefčovič among the PES/S&D members. Wopke Hoekstra is not counted among the EPP members. Other replacements and new appointments since 2019 did not alter the party-political composition.

would then be part of the grand bargain on the Commission. The support of the Greens/EFA and/or the ECR will depend on political promises. In 2019, the Greens/EFA did not support Ursula von der Leyen, while five years later a weakened group will face the dilemma of either voting for her in 2024, with less ambitious climate policies, or voting on principle (against von der Leyen), with even more limited climate action as a result.

The party-political composition of the next European Commission would — as an approximation — resemble the make-up of the European Council, with Ursula von der Leyen as the German national among the 27 members. This is, of course, an indication that is only accurate in the unlikely event that all governments appoint a member of the leading government party (see also Wonka 2007) and no changes in national governments occur between now and the appointment of the Commissioners. However, the likely reduction in the number of centre-left Commissioners from the PES/S&D to just four (compared to nine when the von der Leyen Commission took office) is notable (see Figure 4), and elections and government changes in

Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium in the first half of 2024 could replace one PES/S&D-led and two ALDE/RE-led governments, thus (further) reducing the number of Commissioners from these parties.

An alternative candidate for the post of Commission President, either in place of Ursula von der Leyen or after her defeat in the European Parliament, would have to be someone who could command broad support and who could be backed by the three main political groups (EPP, S&D, RE) and ideally MEPs from at least one other political group. If the EPP loses the Commission presidency and someone who is not an EPP member is elected, the party would probably demand a big consolation prize. The scope for a 'compromise candidate' who was not a frontrunner thus seems limited. However, one name that has been floated in the press that would meet the strict criteria is former ECB President Mario Draghi (Tito 2023).

Each Member State continues to send one Commissioner to the Commission. After the Irish referendum in 2009, the European Council decided not to apply the Lisbon Treaty provision
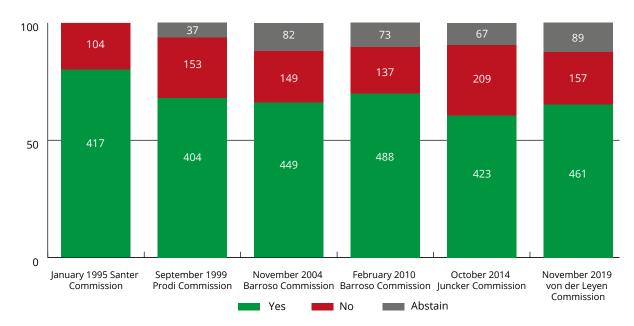
Figure 5. **Votes on the incoming College of Commissioners in the European Parliament**

Sources: Valentin Kreilinger for Jacques Delors Institute Berlin (October 2019), updated March 2024. Data: European Parliament. The European Parliament also voted on the Prodi Commission for the unfilled portion of the Santer term (427-138-29, September 1999).

for a smaller college. Ursula von der Leyen was the first female President of the Commission in 2019 and insisted on a gender-balanced Commission. Member States were reportedly asked to put forward one male and one female candidate. In the end, the Commission President almost achieved a gender-balanced Commission, and this is probably the minimum requirement for the future.

The newly elected President structured the Commission in 2019 such that it paves the way for more efficient internal decision-making, building on the organisation under Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who reformed the internal organisation of the Commission, notably by appointing several Vice-Presidents in charge of the Commission's main policy objectives. Ursula von der Leyen's Commission became similarly structured, with eight Commission Vice-Presidents — three of them Executive Vice-Presidents: Frans Timmermans (PES/S&D), Valdis Dombrovskis

(EPP), and Margrethe Vestager (ALDE/RE), who each belonged to one of the three largest European political parties/groups. They were assigned a dual function of leading a Commissioners' Group (as Vice-Presidents) and also manage a policy area with a Directorate-General under their authority for this part of their job, unlike (ordinary) Vice-Presidents who are not directly in charge of a Directorate-General. All in all, ten Commissioners, including the Commission President, were EPP members; nine belonged to PES/S&D; six were from ALDE/RE; one was from the ECR; and one belonged to the European Green Party (EGP) (see Figure 4).[6] However, Commissioners are not active in party politics during their mandate and should act independently to promote European interests (Johansson et al. 2022, 4).

All Commissioners are subject to rigorous scrutiny in committee hearings in the European Parliament. In 2019, a record number of three candidates for

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[6] The departure of Frans Timmermans in September 2023 has changed the structure: His Dutch replacement, Wopke Hoekstra, is from the EPP, and the post of Executive Vice-President was not filled, making Hoekstra the only European Commissioner for Climate Action. Maroš Šefčovič (S&D, initially PES/S&D but no longer party-affiliated after Slovak SMER is no longer part of the PES) took over as Vice-President in charge of the European Green Deal.

Commission portfolios were forced to withdraw. The backlash against French candidate Sylvie Goulard (RE) was the most notable, while the EPP and S&D each also lost one of their candidates. The expected reduction in the share of seats held by the three groups in the 2024–2029 mandate (Cunningham and Hix 2024) means that the 'grilling' of Commissioner-candidates will be even tougher, and withdrawals even more likely, as negative committee opinions will be easier to obtain.

The party-political dimension diminishes again when the College as a whole is concerned at the end of Article 17(7) TEU: *'The President, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the other members of the Commission shall be subject as a body to a vote of consent by the European Parliament. On the basis of this consent the Commission shall be appointed by the European Council, acting by a qualified majority.'*

The vote of consent on the entire Commission means that the key political groups, usually represented with Commissioners, would turn against one of their own. Furthermore, this vote is held by roll call, which allows the cohesion of the political groups to be assessed, and the majority requirement is (only) a simple majority of the votes cast. In 2019, the Commission was finally approved in a vote on 27 November 2019, with 416 MEPs voting in favour, 157 against, and 89 abstaining. The majority was larger than when von der Leyen was elected, but fell short of the majorities won by her predecessors (see Figure 5).

3. Policies and the political direction of the EU

Beyond the *procedures* for filling the EU 'top jobs', and the *politics* within the key institutions, the *policies* for the next institutional cycle are important. It is certain that the European Council and the candidate for the post of Commission President will set their course of action for 2024–2029. The major political groups in the European Parliament may also agree on a document with political priorities, although this will by no means be a coalition agreement. But do EU policies reflect the preferences of its citizens and, if so, to what extent? Responsiveness is often seen as a key feature of a representative democracy (e.g., Dahl 1971, 1).

In European Parliament elections, 'EU critics' hope to fundamentally change the course of the EU, while 'pro-Europeans' seek a mandate to continue and deepen the integration process.

> 'In European Parliament elections, "EU critics" hope to fundamentally change the course of the EU, while 'pro-Europeans' seek a mandate to continue and deepen the integration process.'

When drafting the documents, the institutions seem to try to include the issues that citizens think are the most important ones at the EU level. It is an open question whether this amounts to real responsiveness. In the 2019–2024 term, the EU institutions had launched the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which citizens were actively involved and whose conclusions they promised to follow up. Citizens thus had a new opportunity to express their preferences. Whether this was a one-off event or whether and how these conclusions could still be actively taken into account in 2024 is another open question.

This section turns to these policy documents, examining how and when they emerged in the order according to which they were adopted (or not) for the 2019–2024 term: setting out an 'agenda' (the European Council, 3.1), common priorities (the major groups in the European Parliament, 3.2), or 'guidelines' (the candidate for President of the European Commission, 3.3). These three institutional start-of-a-new-term documents are the final piece of the puzzle that defines a new institutional cycle of the EU.

3.1 Strategic agenda of the European Council

By formulating a strategic agenda, the European Council aims to set out the future direction of the Union and take charge of the agenda-setting process. The last document of that kind was the 'New Strategic Agenda' for 2019–2024, adopted in June 2019. Others are the 2001 Laeken Declaration and the 2014 Strategic Agenda. The two strategic agendas of 2014 and 2019 have covered almost all areas of public policy.

The process of drafting such an agenda can be described as inclusive and actively involves the heads of state or government. In 2023, Charles Michel launched the process with a letter to the members of the European Council. The informal meeting in Granada featured an open discussion, and over the following weeks smaller gatherings of groups of leaders took place in Berlin, Copenhagen, Zagreb, and Paris.

The heads of state or government, all of whom are active in both the national and the European arenas, face external challenges that affect domestic interests. They have recognised that they cannot deal with such issues at the national level alone and follow a strategy that can be described as a 'problem-solving instinct' (Thieme et al. 2020, 5). They turn to the EU level to address these challenges and to find common European solutions. In 2019, the 'New Strategic Agenda' adopted by the European Council contained four headlines: protecting citizens and freedoms; developing a strong and vibrant economic base; building a climate-neutral, green, fair, and social Europe; and promoting European interests and values on the global stage (European Council 2019).

At the same time, however, leaders retain a 'sovereignty reflex' (Thieme et al. 2020, 5), which prevents them from transferring too much sovereignty to the European level. The heads of state or government did not plan any institutional changes for the five years from 2019 to 2024. There was no reference to 'deepening' the Union in the traditional sense through treaty changes. Nor, in line with the so-called 'enlargement fatigue', did the document envisage enlarging the Union. Both treaty revision and enlargement would have been key policy areas in which Member States play a major role. Such constitutional issues have not featured in recent European Council conclusions either, but the need to make the EU 'fit for 35' (von Sydow and Kreilinger 2023) in the coming years may even force the European Council to address them in one way or another. In a speech at the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2023, European Council President Charles Michel said that '*[a]s we prepare the EU's next strategic agenda, we must set ourselves a clear goal. I believe we must be ready - on both sides - by 2030 to enlarge*' (European Council 2023).

3.2 (Possibly) common priorities of the major political groups in the European Parliament

The real challenge in the European Parliament is to find political majorities in the day-to-day legislative work. The European Parliament is the parliamentary assembly of a political system based on the separation of powers and currently consists of seven political groups. There are several coexisting majority coalitions, although so far the Parliament has mainly functioned on the basis of an informal 'grand coalition' of the three largest groups. In all likelihood, however, the majority of the EPP, S&D, and RE will decrease in the next term. This will strengthen the position of the political group capable of forming alternative coalitions, namely the EPP (Cunningham and Hix 2024).

> 'There are several coexisting majority coalitions, although so far the Parliament has mainly functioned on the basis of an informal "grand coalition" of the three largest groups.'

At the beginning of previous legislatures and at mid-term, the EPP, S&D, and RE tried to formulate common priorities for EU policies. Compared to coalition agreements by national governing parties in countries such as Germany or, more recently, Sweden, the three political groups' documents were rather short and did not contain many details.

After the European Parliament elections in May 2019, an attempt was made to formulate a document like a 'coalition agreement' between the main groups in the European Parliament. The aim was to find a compromise on EU policies that would enable the parliamentary institution to work as effectively as possible for the next five years. The plan failed. However, instead of pushing for a strong coalition, the political groups in the European Parliament found other ways to influence the priorities of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission when she presented herself to them after she was proposed by the European Council. The ambitious green policies in her political guidelines show, for example, the influence of the centre-left and, in particular, of the Greens/EFA group.

As a sign of increasing internal convergence on political priorities, the EPP, S&D, and RE reached a mid-term agreement in January 2022, outlining their common priorities for 2022–2024 (European Parliament 2022). The priorities of the three were broadly compatible with those identified by the Commission and the European Council for the 2019–2024 term. It is, however, worth noting that the Greens/EFA did not join the pact of the three largest political groups (Johansson et al. 2022, 20).

3.3 Political guidelines of the candidate for Commission President

The political guidelines of the candidate for President of the Commission are the document issued by the candidate sometime after being proposed by the European Council but before standing for election in the European Parliament. In the meantime, the candidate has been meeting the political groups and actively trying to build a majority. In 2019, the outgoing European Commission had put a support team at the disposal of the candidate, Ursula von der Leyen. The political guidelines serve several purposes: they outline the candidate's vision for Europe, underpin the Commission's ambition to set the agenda, lay down the priorities that the Commission will follow in its work over the next five years (see Table 2), create a grid for the Commission's internal organisation, and aim to help win the support of as many MEPs as necessary to be elected.

In 2019, the political guidelines of the candidate for Commission President consisted of six priorities: a European Green Deal; an economy that works for people; a Europe fit for the digital age; promoting our European way of life; a stronger Europe in the world; and a new push for European democracy (European Commission 2019).

If the candidate for the post of Commission President proposed by the European Council stands in the European election as a Spitzenkandidat, one can expect that promises made in the manifesto of her or his political family will feature prominently in the political priorities. The main concerns of EU citizens reported in the latest Eurobarometer survey (European Commission 2023) could also offer an indication of the issue that might become key priorities for the Commission: The war in Ukraine is the first concern together with immigration (28% each), and another new foreign

Table 2. **Priorities of the European Council and the candidate for Commission President (2019)**

Strategic Agenda of the European Council	Political Guidelines by the Commission President
1. Protecting citizens and freedoms 2. Developing a strong and vibrant economic base 3. Building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe 4. Promoting European interests and values on the global stage	1. A European Green Deal 2. An economy that works for people 3. A Europe fit for the digital age 4. Promoting the European way of life 5. A stronger Europe in the world 6. A new push for European democracy

Sources: European Council (2019) and European Commission (2019).

Table 3. **Citizens' main concerns at the European level (max. 2 answers)**

QA5. What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?	Autumn 2023	Autumn 2018
Immigration	28%	40%
War in Ukraine	28%	---
International situation	24%	---
Rising prices / inflation / cost of living	20%	9%
Environment and climate change	16%	9% and 16%*
Economic situation	14%	18%
The state of Member States' public finances	11%	19%
Energy supply	11%	4%
Terrorism	10%	20%
EU's influence in the world	8%	11%
Crime	6%	9%
Unemployment	4%	13%

Sources: Eurobarometer 100 (Autumn 2023) and Eurobarometer 90 (Autumn 2018).

* Eurobarometer 90 included environment and climate change as separate issues.

affairs concern, the international situation, follows on third place (24%). Concerns about rising prices, inflation, and the cost of living come fourth with 20%, followed by the environment and climate change with 16% (see Table 3).

Comparing these concerns with the same survey five years ago provides some interesting insights: At the end of 2018, EU citizens were mainly concerned about immigration, which topped their list of important issues facing the EU (40%), followed by terrorism (20%), the state of Member States' public finances (19%), and the economic situation (18%) (see Table 3). Climate change was the next important issue, but if taken together with the environment, it would have featured more prominently (European Commission 2018).

All in all, it is difficult to establish a direct link to the priorities of the EU institutions, but the different policy areas addressed in the citizens' concerns can be found behind the headline goals on the European way of life, the protection of citizens and freedoms, 'a climate-neutral, green, fair, and social Europe' (the European Green Deal), and 'a strong and vibrant economic base' (an economy 'that works for people').

> 'Besides citizens' priorities, there is one policy area that is likely to be central to the guidelines of any candidate for Commission President: economic policy.'

Besides citizens' priorities, there is one policy area that is likely to be central to the guidelines of any candidate for Commission President: economic policy. The ongoing preparations by two former Italian prime ministers, Mario Draghi[7] and Enrico Letta, who have been separately mandated by Commission President von der Leyen and the Spanish and Belgian Council presidencies, respectively, to prepare reports on competitiveness (Draghi) and the single market (Letta), both due in spring 2024, show that EU policymakers will make economic policy a top priority for 2024–2029. Just

as in the 2019–2024 term of the current Ursula von der Leyen Commission, external events and crises may again override the planned policy agenda (Johansson et al. 2022). Ukraine and geo-politics are also likely to continue featuring prominently in the next five years.

Conclusions

This analysis looked at the European elections on 6–9 June 2024 and how they will shape the EU's next institutional cycle. They represent an important and decisive moment for the future of Europe. It could be argued that the elections are only the beginning of a routine reshuffle or renewal of the EU's key institutions, which will take place after citizens have voted for one national party or another. However, the limited number of possible majorities in the European Parliament and their shrinking size, based on three recent forecasts of the European elections by Cunningham and Hix (2024), POLITICO Europe (2024), and Europe Elects (2024), suggest that any candidate for Commission President proposed by the European Council will face an uncertain election in the European Parliament and cannot be sure of getting the necessary 361 votes. This is one of the major post-election pitfalls, a direct consequence of the increasing fragmentation of the EU party system and the rise of the far right.

On the basis of current forecasts, the risk of a 'clash of institutions', in which the European Parliament and the European Council would disagree on the automaticity of the path to the Commission presidency under Article 17(7) TEU, seems to have diminished compared to five years ago. With Ursula von der Leyen as the leading candidate of the EPP and her party/group coming first, her legitimacy from the election and as the incumbent President to be the first to be proposed by the European Council for a second term (with the majority of the EPP and the support of most other leaders) and to try to build a majority in the European Parliament for her bid seems undisputed.

On the way to agreeing on the new EU leadership team for 2024–2029, European Council President Charles Michel's backtracking on his plan to run

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[7] Draghi has also been mentioned as a possible Commission President himself — see above.

for the European Parliament was the first dynamic institutional development of the year. When it comes to the 'top jobs' package for the EU's four most senior posts, disagreements between heads of state or government can be loud and visible, but the risk of a much shorter timeframe due to Charles Michel's early resignation has disappeared. The composition of the 'top jobs' package will have to take into account various characteristics of the appointees, in particular party affiliation, geographical origin, population size of the country of origin, and gender balance. Ideally, the main political parties, old and new Member States, east and west, north and south, large and small Member States will be represented, and the number of women will be equal to or greater than the number of men. The European Council did not tick all the boxes five years ago. The process was difficult and could be difficult again in 2024, but it seems manageable with the help of qualified majority voting if necessary.

The feasibility of adopting policy agendas to steer the Union for the next five years varies from one institution to the other. For the European Council, a strategic agenda without firm commitments, covering many or all areas of public policy under lowest-common-denominator headings, seems much easier than the 'top jobs' package. The drafting of policy guidelines by a candidate for the post of Commission President is also manageable for the Commission's services; the tricky part is getting the necessary votes in the European Parliament. If the first candidate fails, the challenge for any second candidate would be unprecedented. In the European Parliament, it is hard to see common priorities emerging in the short time between the election and the first plenary session. The slim majorities increase the difficulties, and the parties will have just completed a politicised election campaign.

The real change is likely to come in day-to-day policy-making: Eleven years ago, EU scholars Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland (2013) concluded that the EU produced *'a particular set of policy outcomes close to the preferences of many European liberal parties and centrist voters: free-market economic policies (such as deregulation of the single market) and liberal social policies (such as open immigration policies, high environmental standards and gender equality)'* (Hix and Høyland 2013, 181). This has still been more or less correct in the current term. Recent predictions suggest that this will change, at least to some extent. If the 'pivotal MEP' in the European Parliament sits within the EPP and no longer within the liberal RE (Cunningham and Hix 2024, 9), this amounts to a fundamental shift of the centre of gravity of EU politics to the centre-right.

> 'If the "pivotal MEP" in the European Parliament sits within the EPP and no longer within the liberal RE, this amounts to a fundamental shift of the centre of gravity of EU politics to the centre-right.'

Despite all the possible pitfalls over the course of the year, one can expect that by the end of 2024 the EU will have both new and familiar faces in its 'top jobs'. There will most likely be political majorities that voted for them, and a course of action to steer the Union for the next five years will have been set. But whether it will be one that makes the EU fit for reform and enlargement, 'fit for 35', is by no means certain.

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