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# **Central and Eastern European Countries and the New European Commission 2019**

**Chief Editor  
Chen Xin**

**CHINA-CEE INSTITUTE  
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## Contents

Preface.....	i
The New European Commission and the Nomination of Bulgarian Mariya Gabriel.....	1
Goals and Challenges of the New European Commission and the Election of Croatian Dubravka Šuica for One of the Vice-Presidents .....	8
New European Portfolio for the Czech Republic: Success or Failure? .....	14
Estonia and the New European Commission.....	20
The European Commissioner from Hungary .....	26
Lithuania’s Delegated New Commissioner in Brussels.....	31
Poland and the New European Commission.....	38
Romania’s Chronicle on the Nomination of the European Commissioner for Transport.....	45
Slovakia and the New European Commission.....	50
The New European Commission and Slovenian Candidate .....	57
Albania and the New European Commission .....	62
BiH and the New European Commission .....	68
Macedonian Debates on the New European Commission.....	73
Montenegro and the New European Commission .....	78
Serbia and the New European Commission.....	84

## **Preface**

The new European Commission led by Ursula Von de Leyen step into office on 1 December 2019. Till then three European institutions, namely the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, as well as the European Commission, have finished the leadership change. There was a one-month delay for the new Commission, due to heavy debates in the European Parliament on some nominations of commissioners. This book is trying to present the analysis on the nomination from the member states in Central and Eastern Europe. The focus is on the background of the selection, the political consideration, and the expected role of the candidate in the Commission. The other part of the Book is for the countries which are not the member states of the EU. These countries are at different stages in the process of joining the EU. And the focus of these countries is mainly related to the future of the EU Enlargement and its expectations from the European Union.

This book is a collection of reports by the associate researchers of the China-CEE Institute. The reports are originally from the October 2019 issues of Weekly Briefings, a core product by the China-CEE Institute. The views in the book are represented by the individual authors instead of the China-CEE Institute.

The China-CEE Institute is established by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), registered as a non-profit limited company in Budapest, Hungary in April 2017. The China-CEE Institute is building ties

and strengthen partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks in Hungary, Central and Eastern European countries, as well as other parts of Europe. The China-CEE Institute aims to encourage scholars and researchers to carry out joint researches, field studies, to organize seminars and lecture series, to hold some training programs for younger students, and make publication, etc.

I hope this book will help to better understand on the European Commission, and to promote the bilateral relations between China and EU, as well as CEE countries.

Prof. Dr. CHEN Xin  
Executive President and Managing Director, China-CEE Institute  
Deputy Director General, Institute of European Studies, CASS

# **The New European Commission and the Nomination of Bulgarian Mariya Gabriel**

Evgeniy Kandilarov

At 1<sup>st</sup> of October the Culture and Education and Industry and Research and Energy committees of the European Parliament have unanimously approved the nomination of Bulgaria's Mariya Gabriel to the Innovation and Youth portfolio in the forthcoming Ursula von der Leyen European Commission. This was announced by the European People's Party group. This was a day after Gabriel appeared in a hearing at a joint sitting of the two committees. In the opening remarks of Bulgarian nomination at her September 30 hearing, Gabriel highlighted the importance of creating a European space of research, innovation, education, culture and sport and synergies between programs in order to live up to Europeans' expectations, not least the young in terms of creating sustainable development and opportunities for young people. The two committees were critical of the lack of reference to culture and research in the name of the Commissioner's portfolio. Members of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy underlined the necessity of an ambitious budget for the forthcoming Horizon Europe research program in line with the EP's position and of involving the EP in its implementation. MEPs from the Culture and Education Committee put forward questions on the budget of the Erasmus+ program, calling on the Commissioner-designate to support the tripling of the budget. They also wanted to know how digitalization can be useful for European heritage as well as how to best protect and guarantee access to culture and education for all cultural and language communities in Europe. Further questions underlined the necessity to promote audio-visual media from a cultural perspective. During the hearing, Gabriel answered a total of 50 questions within nearly three hours.

Who is Maria Gabriel? Her educational and professional background includes Bachelor degree from the Institute of Political Studies in Bordeaux (France), where she studied International Relations, History of the European Institutions, Political Sociology and Comparative Politics. In 2003 she obtained her Master's degree in 'Comparative Politics and International Relations' from the same Institute. From 2004 to 2008, Mariya Gabriel was a teaching and research assistant at her Alma mater in Bordeaux. Her teaching assignment was related to the topics of the Decision-Making process in the EU, Political Sociology and International Relations. She also participated in two international projects: the European EQUAL Programme 2004-2008 "Values and Economics - equality in professional activities and social economy" and the International research program "Parliamentary Representation at national and European levels" under the leadership of Olivier Costa. Mariya Gabriel was a Member of the European Parliament, EPP/GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) from 2009-2017. Since 2012, Mariya Gabriel has served as Vice-President of EPP Women. Prior to this she was Parliamentary Secretary to MEPs from the GERB political party within the EPP Group in 2008-2009. She is part of project teams, such as Digital Single Market, Energy Union, Better Regulation and Interinstitutional Affairs, Budget and Human Resources, and Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness. As a member of the project teams, her responsibilities include launching ambitious proposals for the completion of a connected Digital Single Market, supporting the development of creative industries and of a successful European media and content industry, as well as other activities turning digital research into innovation success stories. From 2014-2017 she was the Vice-President of the EPP Group in the European Parliament. On 10 May 2017 Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, announced that Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov had nominated Mariya Gabriel to replace Kristalina Georgieva as Commissioner. President Juncker appointed Günther Oettinger to replace Georgieva as European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources, leaving Gabriel with the digital portfolio Oettinger had previously headed.



This way from July 2017, Gabriel Gabriel became the European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Digital Society. Within her mandate, she created the first, fully digital Europe program with a budget of € 9.2 billion for the next seven-year budget of the European Union. She is also the author of the "WIFI4EU" free wireless internet for municipalities in Europe, as well as the "Digital Opportunity" paid cross-border traineeship scheme. Maria Gabriel created the first EU Digital Program for the Western Balkans and as early as July 2019 dramatic roaming charges between the six Balkan countries were drastically reduced. Gabriel's leadership has developed a new European cyber-security legislation, including strengthening the European Cyber Security Agency and for the first time a certification framework for products and services in this area.

In Bulgaria's May 2019 European Parliament elections Maria Gabriel was the GERB lead candidate and was elected as an MEP. Soon after the elections on 3 June Gabriel announced that in spite of being elected, she gives up her seat as MEP. She added that although there was a risk for her not to be a part of the new Commission, she would remain commissioner until the end of her term. Gabriel said the decision was consulted with the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, who in her words accepted the idea.

Gabriel explained that in the 5 to 6 months remaining until the end of the mandate of the Juncker Commission she could not imagine that Bulgaria would remain without a commissioner, while important issues such as the "reducing the number of commissioners", accepting Bulgaria in ERM II and Schengen were going to be discussed.

Her comment about everything she has achieved during her mandate was as follows: "It is said that I have turned the portfolio "Digital Economy and Society" from nothing to one of the most powerful sectors in the European Commission. It is no coincidence that this is a priority of all the EU countries. In this context, I cannot afford not to be a member of the European Commission. I cannot think even for a moment that Bulgaria will not have a commissioner for the next six months," Gabriel said. Gabriel's MEP seat have been taken by the next in line, Lilyana Pavlova, who was

the minister responsible for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2018. Of course, Bulgarian Prime minister's plans were to leave Mariya Gabriel as a commissioner in the next EU executive. It was assumed that he doesn't nourish hopes that Kristalina Georgieva would be a serious contender for the presidency of the next European Commission. Soon after that Prime Minister Borissov refused to reveal his cards. At the EU summit doorstep, when he was asked can Bulgaria afford Gabriel to be left without a Commissioner, if Gabriel leaves the EU executive to become an MEP, he replied: "Do you know more than I do?" While Gabriel was explaining her position to one of the national televisions, Pavlova said in an interview to another channel that Gabriel could stay as commissioner for more than six months, if the mandate of the current Commission is extended. The name of Kristalina Georgieva has reportedly been mentioned at the EU summit in Sibiu, when EU top jobs have been briefly discussed. She was Vice-President for Budget and Human Resources of the European Commission under Jean-Claude Juncker from 2014 to 2016, when she resigned and took a job in the World Bank. Before that, from 2010 to 2014 she was European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response. She is not politically affiliated, but considered close to the EPP.

On 24 of July 2019 Bulgarian Council of Ministers officially approved the nomination of Maria Gabriel as a member of the new European Commission on behalf of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Naming the nominees, the President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the central role assigned to Gabriel, saying the brief is an "enormous responsibility, but she is determined, and capable, she'll manage." Commissioner Gabriel is expecting to create new perspectives for young generation with portfolio Innovation and Youth, von der Leyen said.

For many analysts Innovation and Youth is the portfolio of the future and includes education and culture as well. The Erasmus Program, Creative Europe and Horizon 2020 programs are also part of this portfolio. Over EUR 100 billion will be distributed under these programs during the new

programming period. A central task for Gabriel will be to deliver an increase in research spending, from €77-odd billion today up to €94.1 billion from 2021, at a time when the EU budget will take a hit from the UK's departure.

Speaking in front of journalists, Gabriel congratulated Ursula von der Leyen on her bravery to combine into one portfolio the so-called golden triangle - science, business and education. This is recognition for Bulgaria, Gabriel said, adding that it was important for her that her new portfolio is part of the achievements in the digital sector. She reminded also that supercomputers, digital innovation hubs, everything related to cybersecurity were funded by the Horizon 2020 program. Its successor will be Horizon Europe and it will be under Maria Gabriel leadership.

Bulgarian commissioner will have responsibility for the smooth running of Horizon Europe during the financial period 2021-2027. This is the flagship instrument that the EU will be using to promote research, innovation and science policies across the different member states of the European Union. It is clear that the European Commission will be supporting basic scientific effort right through the value chain that will, in turn, deliver innovative products and solutions into the EU marketplace. Horizon Europe 2021-2027 is an economic policy instrument. It can support the key economic and social policy objectives of the European Union. It will be used to advance stronger regional policies in Europe while at the same time promoting sustainability and combating climate change. The practical operation of Horizon Europe will, in effect, cut across many important and different policy domains.

The rise of Gabriel is seen as a victory for Bulgaria, whose government is pushing to improve research and innovation at home from its current low standing. In its yearly innovation scoreboard, the EU classes the country as a "modest innovation performer", with R&D spending "well below the EU average".

The appointment of a commissioner from Eastern Europe has a broader symbolic purpose. The EU-13's participation in Brussels research programs remains at a low level. From 2007 to 2013, the poorer countries

got 4.2 per cent of all Framework funding; from 2014 to mid-2018, it was 4.8 per cent. These countries account for about 10 per cent of all Horizon 2020 applications, but their success rate is 11.8 per cent, compared to 14.9 per cent in the EU-15. They do especially poorly in the toughest competitions, such as the European Research Council and its frontier research grants.

Maria Gabriel was very clear that for the EU to stay as a global leader in the field of ICT, then the EU must set the standards for Key Enabling Technologies (KETs). Already the EU is to the forefront in technical expertise when it comes to advances in the fields of Artificial Intelligence and cyber-security issues. Pillar 2 of Horizon Europe will be promoting extensive collaborative research in the areas of quantum technology, High Performance Computing (HPC) and photonics. On the core of her argumentation was the fact that the USA is already a very strong player in the field of basic scientific research with China catching up quite fast.

According to Gabriel these means that policies to promote stronger digital economy and research activities will be interlinked. EU research will be modernising telecommunication networks in Europe via innovations under 5G, Big Data, cloud computing and the Internet of Things (IoT). International collaboration and co-operation between the public, private, research and educational sectors across the length and breadth of the world is so important if key EU policy objectives are to be achieved. More support will be given to small and medium sized enterprises (smes) so that they can take part under Horizon Europe backed initiatives. It is also important that governments in Europe increase spending in the fields of research, innovation and science. EU governments are spending between 5% and 4% GDP per annum on research intensity. The governments that spend more money on these important policy areas can stay more competitive and secure stronger economic returns in the medium term.

Early reaction to the make-up of the portfolio and Gabriel's appointment among researchers was positive. "It's the best portfolio we could imagine, integrating everything we care about, and Gabriel was my

number one pick in the lottery,” said Christian Ehler, German MEP and one of two lead draftsmen from the parliament on Horizon Europe legislation. “She is intrinsically interested in all these topics, which is not always the case with commissioners. And the jump from DG CONNECT to DG Research is a small one.”

The former director general of the European Commission’s research directorate, Robert-Jan Smits, said the merging of education and research made sense. They “are two sides of the same coin,” he said.

Now the European Parliament has to approve the new members of the European Commission. On 17 October, a general assessment of the EP for the Commissioners-designate is expected. The entire composition of the new EC is scheduled to be voted on by the MEPs in Strasbourg on 23 October.

In conclusion the expectation of Bulgarians for the future work and political actions of the new European commission are still very ephemeral and not clear at all. Yet there is a tight feeling of hope that its work will be for positive changes, for social security, sustainable development and institutional stability of the EU. Very positively Bulgarian society accepted also the announced vision, priorities, goals and scheduled agenda named by Ursula von der Leyen, such as the changes in climate, technology and demography that are transforming our societies and way of life. Together with this goes the ambition for the new EC to be “*geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies...[committed to] build our partnership with the United States, define our relations with a more self-assertive China and be a reliable neighbor, for example to Africa.*”

Whether the new European Commission will succeed in achieving these goals remains to be seen in the nearest future.

# **Goals and Challenges of the New European Commission and the Election of Croatian Dubravka Šuica for One of the Vice-Presidents**

Benjamin Petrović

## ***Summary***

*On the 1st of November 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, will swear an oath to become a new president of the European Commission. In its mandate, von der Leyen's Commission will deal with issues on several subjects which will decide the course of action of the European Union for the future. In nominating her vice-presidents and commissioners, von der Leyen recognized Croatia as a valuable member state, by appointing Dubravka Šuica as a vice-president and commissioner of Democracy and Demography sector.*

## **A new European Commission president**

After a certain post-parliamentary-elections turmoil that the European Council faced in the process of electing a new head of the executive power of the European Union, the final agreement was that Ursula von der Leyen, by that time a Defense Minister of Germany, is the right person for the job. Undeniably, the position of the president of the European Commission is of the highest importance in the EU, especially considering many issues that it is faced with on the inside and on the geopolitical playfield. For the members of the European Council, i.e. the heads of states or governments of member countries, who define the general direction and priorities of the EU, a right person heading the Commission, the structure with greatest legislative power in Europe, is of utmost relevance. Despite some misgivings, Ursula von der Leyen, a multilingual, experienced politician, born in Belgium, with many political

connections amassed on a global level has been accepted as the best compromise the EU can reach at the moment.

### **Failure of Spitzenkandidat concept and a matter of democracy**

The uncertainty in choosing between the candidates for the position of the president of the Commission must not be neglected. The heavily praised concept of a Spitzenkandidat failed. It did not lead to an agreement on forming the “government” of Europe. Due to a wide dispersion of votes after the European Parliament election, a large number of compromises were needed to achieve a majority. In addition, the main power leverage lies at the hands of two most powerful member states, Germany and France, both attempting to achieve balance between their nations’ ambitions and priorities of the European Union. Consequently, in a situation where the main players are pulling the strings and other states are there to position themselves mainly according to their interests, without the majority win of a certain party, or a strong coalition, the Spitzenkandidat concept is implausible.

Another matter that is a lack of citizen control in the EU. In an instance where citizens of the member states elect members of the European Parliament whose only role in the process of the election of the president of the Commission is its affirmation, a question of democratic legitimacy can be raised. Accordingly, the issue of a lack of transparency on the highest levels of European politics, even though craftily hidden with concepts such as Spitzenkandidat, must be addressed if the European Union wants to sustain and advance its democratic nature. The election of a leader behind closed doors does not send a message in line with the virtues that the EU promotes, therefore the criticism of the democratic deficit in the EU can be expected from all sides of the European Parliament, and public as well.

### **The focus of the new European Commission**

The initial ideas which Ursula von der Leyen presented as her vision of the new European Commission are more or less based on expected ideas

of a true believer in the European Union, and do not stray from the basic concepts promoted by globalization and integration-oriented politicians. The possible focus of her mandate can be identified from newly introduced sectors such as Protecting our European Way of Life, European Green Deal, and sectors which will engage in digital transformation of Europe. Unfortunately, not much can be concluded about the ways in which some of the mentioned ideas will be manifested, because they are merely at a declaratory level. For example, the most controversially received sector, protecting our European Way of Life, immediately raised eyebrows of some progressive liberal groups that identified it as hostile towards migrants and perhaps racist. Putting that aside, because it is completely unlikely that the EU will go in that direction, a more appropriate question can be directed at the sole concept of the “European way of life“, and how it is endangered. The proclaimed narrative of a “European way of life“ is something rather vague, and potentially dangerous. Considering the European countries, the differences at social, economic, welfare, cultural and ideological level are evident. In addition, von der Leyen emphasized the establishment of gender balanced college of commissioners, importance of digitalization and a necessity for prioritization of green policies, which would lead towards Europe “becoming the first climate neutral continent in the world by 2050“.

### **Relevant issues to address**

Some of the vital issues that the new European Commission will have to face are preserving the stability of the Eurozone and avoiding potential banking crisis, especially considering the large financial debt of Italy, which could spread on other member states. Also, the implications of Brexit will inevitably lead towards lower income that should already cause concerns. In addition, many of the geopolitical issues still must be formally addressed. For instance, the trade war between The United States and China, high export tariffs introduced by the United States towards the EU, Great Britain's sliding towards a no-deal Brexit and the fact that Chinese investments in Central and Eastern Europe are a potential threat for the EU



interests and possible cause for greater division of European East and West. Such matters must be discussed or von der Leyen's noted vision of a “united and strong Europe, from East to West, from South to North “will be hard to accomplish. Another issue to confront is a divided political and ideological landscape across the member states, and consequently inside the institutions of the EU, where the Eurosceptic and nationalist parties are achieving an ever-increasing impact on the decision-making process, hence making harder for certain institutions to pass legislations.

### **Election of Dubravka Šuica as one of the vice-presidents**

Regarding the specificities of certain sectors and nominations for the positions of commissioners in the new European Commission, Croatia has received a valuable recognition in nomination of Dubravka Šuica for a vice president of the Commission and commissioner in charge of Democracy and Demography sector. Šuica, a Member of European Parliament of the European People's Party and a former mayor of Dubrovnik, will be tasked with bringing her political and management experience forward in dealing with two very specific subjects. As said before, some of the sectors are not adequately explained and need to be more than interesting concepts. Concerning Šuica's sector, issues of democracy and demography can be recognized in every member state, of course on different levels, especially manifesting through low interest of the citizens of the EU countries towards that organization, noticed at the election for the European Parliament.

Furthermore, an alienation from the EU is occurring because of lacking belief towards democracy in the EU, but also democracy as a value and a principle. Such occurrence is especially perceived in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, therefore it makes sense that Šuica, as a commissioner from Croatia, is given such a task. Additionally, the issue of demography is seen as direct contributing factor towards a declining faith in democratic processes. According to von der Leyen, the roots of such dissatisfaction stems from “demographic changes much more than democratic structures”, and those changes “encompass all parts of our society, from economy to healthcare, from migrations to environment and

shapes our policies, society and culture.“ Considering such a view, it is evident that Šuica's sector will be involved in the functioning of many other sectors because of many intertwined tasks. Thus, Šuica's assignment as a commissioner of Democracy and Demography sector and as a vice president of the Commission is significant on several levels of activity and management of various sectors and Commission as a whole.

### **Conference on the Future of Europe**

An important responsibility assigned to Šuica will be the organization and running of a Conference on the Future of Europe. Imagined as a tool to attract European citizens, through dialogue achieved by ways of various activities. In that way, citizens, civil society organizations, and the EU institutions, will have an opportunity to communicate on different subjects, with an emphasis on the democratic process, and how to make it better and more satisfactory. Such initiative, in line with the aforementioned issues of citizens perspective of democratic deficit in the EU, and basic decline in confidence towards democracy, is a welcomed maneuver if it means that the new European Commission intends to take pragmatic and comprehensive steps towards promotion of democratic values through self-reflection and example.

### **The position of Croatia**

Croatia, the youngest member of the European Union, is happy to have one of vice-presidents of the European Commission, and even with the sector she was assigned to. As it is already mentioned, Šuica will have a large responsibility in dealing with a matter that encompasses several different sectors, therefore, her role could have a strong impact on decision making procedures in other sectors. On the other hand, it can be argued that Croatia, still not a member of Schengen Area, even though it is unofficially confirmed that it meets all technical requirements for accession, would have deserved a sector more in line with the pressing issues regarding its membership. Considering how one of the main reasons for a delayed accession into Schengen Area is a border dispute with Slovenia, a sector

dealing with enlargement and regional development could have been more suitable. Furthermore, as Croatia will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2020, when the decisions will be made about a long-term financial framework of the EU, agricultural and enlargement policies, having a commissioner presiding with a sector dealing with one of those matters would be beneficial.

### **Conclusion**

As previously indicated, the new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen, is faced with a multitude of issues and tasks on economic, social, cultural, and geostrategic levels. Moreover, it will have to confront the matters of democratic deficit in decision making processes, which has an impact on the growing skepticism of citizens towards the EU institutions and democracy itself. In coping with those issues, Dubravka Šuica, a commissioner of Democracy and Demography sector, will contribute to a direction the European Union will take regarding its core values.

# **New European Portfolio for the Czech Republic: Success or Failure?**

Ladislav Zemánek

*The European Union will be represented by a new European Commission very soon. The Czech Republic has gained the highest position ever when the present commissioner Věra Jourová becoming a vice-president in charge of defending EU values and transparency. But the reactions among Czech politicians, experts and public are ambiguous. Whereas the government camp considers it a great success, the opposition as well as communists tolerating the government point out to weakness of the portfolio or even threat it can pose. In the analysis, I will inquire into the agenda of the Czech commissioner, her previous experience and work in Brussels, problematic points connected with her views and activities concluding with reception of the Ursula von der Leyen's decision in the Czech Republic.*

Věra Jourová was nominated by the Czech government on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August which was the last possible day. The PM Andrej Babiš wanted to nominate a person with relevant experience from the EU structures. Jourová meets this requirement as she has been a commissioner for justice, consumers and gender equality in the current European Commission. Both the Czech PM and Jourová had preferred another portfolio than she gained eventually speaking openly about a possibility to reach one of the economic portfolios, for instance, internal market or trade. Besides that, the Czech nominee mentioned a digital agenda repeatedly.

## **Defending EU values and transparency**

Despite such expectations and statements, Andrej Babiš and Věra Jourová expressed their satisfaction with assigned portfolio. As usual, the

president-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen sent her a letter on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September in which von der Leyen acquainted her with future tasks and obligations.<sup>1</sup> The Czech Republic got the portfolio focused on values and transparency and, in addition, Jourová was entrusted with the role of the Commission vice-president which is the highest position the Czech Republic has ever taken (so far, four Czech representatives has worked in the Commission including Věra Jourová).

Basing on the letter, we can mark several priorities Jourová should cope with. First of all, supervision of abiding by the so-called EU values which are characterised as follows in the document: democracy, freedom, diversity, openness, rule of law and European identity. The Czech commissioner should protect the EU against external interference. The president-elect does not give any concrete examples, nevertheless, it is obvious she has Russia and China in mind particularly. With this area, fighting disinformation and supporting media is connected. Last but not least, Jourová is charged to bring more transparency to the European legislative process and prepare an “independent ethics body” within the EU framework.

### **Agenda continuity**

Why von der Leyen chose Jourová for this position? Let’s aim our attention on her previous activities and experience. As I have already mentioned, she became commissioner for justice, consumers and gender equality in the Jean-Claude Juncker’s Commission (2014–2019). In her answers to the European Parliament questionnaire which each candidate has to fill in before approval from the part of the European deputies, she put emphasis on ensuring the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Directive on Work-Life Balance as well as on leading the Commission’s work against racism, xenophobia and anti-

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-vera-jourova-2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-vera-jourova-2019_en.pdf)

Semitism, on the protection of LGBTI rights and on Roma inclusion. She has endeavoured to put women's rights and gender equality on the top of agenda in all its dimensions: economic empowerment, equal pay, women's role in political decision making, fighting gender-based violence and promoting gender equality internationally.<sup>1</sup>

To put it in brief, Jourová's responsibilities in the Juncker's Commission can be summarised in several main points: (1) fighting discrimination, promoting gender equality and pursuing negotiations on the proposed Anti-Discrimination Directive; (2) ensuring the swift adoption of the EU data protection reform and modernising and simplifying consumer rules for online and digital purchases; (3) concluding negotiations with the United States on a data protection agreement to protect the privacy of EU citizens; (4) setting up an independent European Public Prosecutor's office to protect the EU budget from fraud and reinforcing judicial cooperation on criminal matters; (5) concluding the EU's accession to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe; (6) ensuring that all Commission proposals respect the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.<sup>2</sup> She put forward several amendments of the legislation regarding consumer rules in the EU, class action lawsuits or anti-money-laundering measures and contributed to the decision of compensation from the part of the Volkswagen company in connection with the so-called Dieselpgate scandal which burst out in 2015. She resisted successfully pressure exerted by the chief executive officer of Volkswagen AG Matthias Müller retaining the position. Taking these agenda and work results into account, the decision to appoint her the commissioner for values and transparency does not seem illogical as it guarantees continuity in a wide array of issues.

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20190927RES62431/20190927RES62431.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova_en)

### **Problematic points**

Undoubtedly, the president-elect looked for a person who had proved dedication to the official EU values and loyalty to the EU institutions. Such an attitude, however, has been accompanied by somewhat problematic characteristics as manifested by her criticism of “media behaviour and habits” of the Czech citizens who are allegedly prone to accepting Russia-origin fake news and disinformation or by active promotion of the December 2018 European Commission initiative targeted at dominating media and internet platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Google whose representatives were called upon to monitor disinformation and inform the Commission regularly. Jourová warns against “Russian propaganda” that poses a great threat to the EU in general and the Czech Republic in particular. Not surprisingly, she blames Russia for subversive actions against the EU with the aim of weaken it urging the European representatives to adopt stronger attitude towards Russia and China. Such views can be appreciated by the Brussels elites but can complicate successful development of relations between the EU and non-Western partners.

In any case and notwithstanding problematic points mentioned, she managed to appeal to the majority of European deputies as they approved her nomination on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, unlike the candidates from Hungary and Romania who have not been approved by the Parliament or the French and Polish ones who were summoned for the second time to the Parliament. During the hearing, a Czech EP deputy and the chairman of the liberal-conservative TOP 09 party reproduced the internal Czech political struggle criticising her ties with the Czech PM and Andrej Babiš’s statements who had called into question Czech judiciary independence. Irrespective of such attempts to weaken her position, her goals found support among deputies. Jourová defined her aim as making the EU more democratic, more transparent, closer to citizens, more resilient against new threats to its democratic societies and to individuals’ fundamental rights as well as more capable of defending its values. Therefore, she considers the portfolio to be essential for the future of Europe. These priorities coincide with the overall

orientation of the forthcoming Commission set up by the president-elect von der Leyen (analysis of the new Commission will be made in the October external relations briefing).

### **Ambiguous reception in the Czech Republic**

Let's move to the reactions on the portfolio assigned to the Czech Republic among Czech politicians. It can be observed that positive or negative views reproduce the boundary between government and opposition camp. The PM and the chairman of the ANO movement (which has been a hegemon in the Czech political arena over a long period of time), whose member Věra Jourová has been since 2012, called the portfolio and vice-president post a great success, a prestigious position with great influence being natural that Czech commissioner has been entrusted with such an agenda given the Czech experience with fighting for democracy, freedom and human rights. Andrej Babiš appreciated the fact that the Central Europe would have two vice-presidents (together with Slovak Maroš Šefčovič) as well as the prospective European Commission president von der Leyen who tries to maintain good relations with the V4 region. He expressed his hope that the von der Leyen's Commission will better understand the needs and interests of the V4 countries. According to the foreign minister from the social democratic party (ČSSD), which participates in the government led by ANO, is important that Czech commissioner will be responsible for protecting the EU very core, namely the defence of democratic values.

All other parties which have representatives in the Czech Chamber of Deputies are more or less critical of the agenda regardless of admitting the Jourová's erudition. For instance, the chairman of the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) Petr Fiala speaks about heavy defeat which proves weakness of the Czech PM and considers the portfolio to have no real impact. His party colleague, long-time EU deputy and the president of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party, even warns against a possibility of censorship which lies in the portfolio contents. Tomio Okamura, the chairman of the euro-sceptic, anti-immigration and populist



Freedom and Direct Democracy movement, criticises Jourová's previous activities in the Commission being afraid that she will contribute to persecution of uncomfortable opinions of the member states, obviously meaning the V4 countries. Last but not least, communists point to possible motivations hiding behind von der Leyen's decision and resting in an effort to drive a wedge among the V4 which has been accused of unconstructive and insufficiently pro-European attitudes by a wide array of West European representatives. The communist party chairman Vojtěch Filip warns that Jourová's activities can lead to disputes and conflicts with V4 partners, thus being against the Czech interests.

Many experts and commentators believe that in case of successful execution it can help Jourová to move up in the EU hierarchy in the future, however, at the same time, refer to very low practical influence of the portfolio and its ideological contents which is perceived as more or less controversial among the Czech general public. Therefore, the Czech commissioner will have to balance different interests and concepts and try to strengthen mutual understanding and trust among both individual member states and citizens on the one hand and the EU elites on the other.

# **Estonia and the New European Commission**

## **A Prospect for Further Integration?**

E-MAP Foundation MTÜ

Considering a unique composition of the EU-bound process of governance, the role of the European Commission ‘captures’ a significant segment within the process. For an outsider, the European Commission represents the EU’s ‘Government’, as it would be in the case of a sovereign nation. The actuality is, however, far more complicated, but it does not make the European Commission less relevant in any respect. Instead, since the body is on the frontline in regards of “development the EU’s overall strategy and in designing and implementing EU policies”<sup>1</sup>, each and every next College of Commissioners is destined to receive plenty of international attention. After all, as it was noted by Jean-Claude Juncker, the outgoing President of the body, the EU represents a major “trade power” and “the world’s biggest single market”, while having concluded “trade agreements with 70 countries around the world, covering 40% of the world’s GDP” and “accounting for a fifth of the world’s economy”<sup>2</sup>.

From May 2004, when the Republic of Estonia joined the EU, and before November 2019, two former Prime Ministers represented the country in the European Commission. Both of them were enjoying a very high-level status of a Vice-President. Remarkably, Siim Kallas was one of those politicians who served in three consecutive Colleges of Commissioners – briefly, in the Romano Prodi-led Commission (May-

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<sup>1</sup> ‘What the European Commission does in strategy and policy’ in The European Commission. Available from [[https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/what-european-commission-does/strategy-and-policy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/what-european-commission-does/strategy-and-policy_en)].

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Claude Juncker, ‘State of the Union 2018. The Hour of European Sovereignty’. *The European Commission*.

November 2004, Economic and Monetary Affairs), and then all the way in the two Commissions that were chaired by José Manuel Barroso (November 2004-February 2010, Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud; February 2010-November 2014, Transport). Andrus Ansip, one of the longest-serving Estonian Prime Ministers in the country's centennial-long history (April 2005-March 2014), was representing Estonia in the European Commission from November 2014 until July 2019, covering the Digital Single Market portfolio in the College, which was led by Jean-Claude Juncker. If at all a generalisation is academically appropriate in regards of such a significant period of time (15 years), the 'Estonian voice' has been heard on the highest level within the Commission, and, arguably, the aforementioned two politicians managed to make a noticeable difference for the EU to become a stronger power, political economy wise.

In June 2019, being directly engaged in the process of 'constructing' a new College of Commissioners, the Estonian Government submitted the country's nomination for the next European Commission. This time, the nominee was not a former Prime Minister but a former Minister of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure Kadri Simson who represented the Estonian Centre Party in the *Riigikogu*<sup>1</sup>. Undeniably, the Simson's nomination was a part of the political deal, which was concluded by the members of the current governmental coalition in Estonia (the 'centrists', *EKRE*, and *Isamaa*), and, speculatively, her candidature was one of those compromises that the three parties had to make, while negotiating a bigger picture in the post-elections mode. In his initial announcement of the then prospective nomination, Prime Minister Jüri Ratas noted that

Kadri Simson has long-term experience in cooperating with the European Commission and other institutions of the union. As [M]inister of [E]conomic [A]ffairs and [I]nfrastructure, she

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<sup>1</sup> 'Government nominates Simson candidate for European Commissioner' in *ERR*, 9 July 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/959742/government-nominates-simson-candidate-for-european-commissioner>].

managed the areas of the internal market, energy, and transportation in the Council of the European Union with competence, dedication, and great results.<sup>1</sup>

In regards of the candidature for the newest President of the Commission, the choice of Estonia was Dalia Grybauskaitė, former President of Lithuania<sup>2</sup>. However, instead of her, the EU decided to nominate Ursula von der Leyen, the then Germany's Minister of Defence for the position, and the high-profile German politician was elected by the European Parliament on 16 July 2019<sup>3</sup>. Notably, after the key nominations for the top-posts in the EU had been announced, the current Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Reinsalu stated that “the lack of incoming EU leaders from either the CEE nations, or the Nordic countries, was a bad thing”<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, Kadri Simson had to go through the hearing process at the European Parliament, and, as it was called by the European People's Party's<sup>5</sup> group “a mixed reaction to the hearing of Commissioner-designate”<sup>6</sup>, the Estonian nominee got a key ‘Energy’ portfolio in the new European Commission. As reported on the actual parliamentary hearing, Simson was described as being “weak”, “vague”, “nervous”, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jüri Ratas in ‘Estonian PM proposes to name Kadri Simson candidate for European Commissioner’. Postimees, 5 July 2019. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/6700472/estonian-pm-proposes-to-name-kadri-simson-candidate-for-european-commissioner>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Foreign Minister: CEE nations underrepresented in top-level EU appointments’ in *ERR*, 4 July 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/958226/foreign-minister-cee-nations-underrepresented-in-top-level-eu-appointments>].

<sup>3</sup> ‘Towards a new Commission (2019-2024)’ in *The European Commission*. Available from [<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/interim>].

<sup>4</sup> Urmas Reinsalu as quoted in ‘Foreign Minister: CEE nations underrepresented in top-level EU appointments’.

<sup>5</sup> The EPP Group is the largest political group in the European Parliament with 182 Members from 26 Member States.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Kadri Simson can fill role as Energy Commissioner’ in *The EPP Group in the European Parliament*. Available from [<https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/kadri-simson-can-fill-role-as-energy-commissioner>].

“unconvincing”, attempting to avoid expressing her position on the Nord Stream-2, for example<sup>1</sup>. Another reporting account claimed that “Simson, speaking in English, stumbled with her answers in many places, with even a moment of levity arising as she was encouraged to finish a sentence she had started [...] [and] [m]any of the questions put to her had already been presented as written questions which she answered, but seemed at times more hesitant when put on the spot”<sup>2</sup>. In a follow-up interview after the ‘grilling’ at the European Parliament, Kadri Simpson underlined:

I must admit I missed the opportunity to talk about what was a thoroughly researched subject for me because I started answering other questions in my head and simply missed it. [...] My position is that of the European Union. [...] Nord Stream does not meet EU energy goals. The latter call for more diverse sources of supply, while the pipeline will bring two-thirds of Russian gas imports into a single corridor, boosting the largest importer’s influence. [...] Talking about energy security, it is imperative to have diverse energy sources that are not too dependent on any one supplier.<sup>3</sup>

On a concrete note, the Simson’s portfolio is tremendously important for the EU and the global economy as a whole. It will demand from the Commissioner to **lead** the ‘Energy Union’ project, **manage** the process of improvement energy efficiency (within the EU, there is a binding target of 30% less energy use by 2030), **coordinate** the body’s efforts to ensure that the EU is on its way to reach the entity’s climate and energy targets for 2030 *et cetera*. Strategically, as clearly declared on the level of the EU’s confirmed policy, the entity is aiming at building a cohesive energy union, while maintaining a “long-term vision for a prosperous, modern,

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<sup>1</sup> Berit Nuka, ‘Simson spared re-examination’ in *Postimees*, 4 October 2019. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/6793720/simson-spared-re-examination>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Kadri Simson faces tough climate questions at commission hearing’ in *ERR*. 3 October 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/987993/kadri-simson-faces-tough-climate-questions-at-commission-hearing>].

<sup>3</sup> Kadri Simpson in Nuka.

competitive and climate-neutral economy by 2050”<sup>1</sup>. A range of issues that requires a far-above-average professional skill from an Energy Commissioner are associated with the EU’s distinct position on the Nord Stream-2 and entity’s relations with the Russian Federation in that respect. At the moment, it is known that Stefano Grassi, an experienced Italian bureaucrat, was appointed to lead the Commissioner Simson’s office<sup>2</sup>. It is a serious as well as impressive move of the Estonian representative in the European Commission to quickly solidify her position in the body – until the end of October 2019, Grassi is in charge of the cabinet of Federica Mogherini, the outgoing High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission<sup>3</sup>. In such a context, the criticising commentary of Kaja Kallas, the head of the oppositional *Reform Party*, – “[t]he Centre Party is once again making Estonia smaller [and] [-] [t]hat Kadri Simson will take an Italian as her head of office is, in many ways, a very bad idea”<sup>4</sup>, – sounds too *intra*-political at its best. Objectively, having secured such a ‘seasoned’ professional to lead her Commission’s daily routine, Kadri Simson is in a better position to look forward to the future that is not very certain.

On the day of her election at the European Parliament, Ursula von der Leyen declared that, in order to respond to a growing range of global challenges, the EU “will do it the European way”<sup>5</sup>. From the Estonian side, Urmas Reinsalu argued that “the new makeup” of the EU’s governing bodies “would be striving for greater EU integration”<sup>6</sup>. Now, on the level

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Energy strategy and energy union’ in *The European Commission*. Available from [<https://ec.europa.eu/energy/en/topics/energy-strategy-and-energy-union>].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Italian Stefano Grassi to lead Kadri Simson’s commission cabinet’ in ERR, 9 October 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/990177/italian-stefano-grassi-to-lead-kadri-simson-s-commission-cabinet>].

<sup>3</sup> ‘Head of Simson cabinet at European Commission to be announced within month’ in ERR, 19 August 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/971985/head-of-simson-cabinet-at-european-commission-to-be-announced-within-month>].

<sup>4</sup> Kaja Kallas in ‘Italian Stefano Grassi to lead Kadri Simson’s commission cabinet’.

<sup>5</sup> Ursula von der Leyen in ‘Towards a new Commission (2019-2024)’ in *The European Commission*. Available from [<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/interim>].

<sup>6</sup> Reinsalu.

of the EU's Member States as well as in Brussels, the EU will need to deliver on that particular aspect.

# The European Commissioner from Hungary

Csaba Moldicz

*After the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019, the newly elected MPs of the European Parliament voted mid-July to elect the German Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission. She is a German politician and she has served in the German government several times from 2005 to 2019. According to the rules, the president-designate is in charge to select the other members of the European Commission, who are nominated by the national governments, thus 28 commissioners are selected this way. After being endorsed by the president-designate of the European Commission, the commissioners-designate must attend a series of parliamentary committee hearings – basically there is a legal committee, which investigates whether the commissioners-designate had any conflicts of interest, and there is another committee to whom the candidates must show their abilities and competences in the policy field they are supposed to manage in the next 5 years. These hearings usually take place in September and October after the May European Parliament elections, and then after endorsing the commissioners-designate one by one, the European Parliament must vote on the full college of the European Commission once again.*

*At this moment, we are in the phase of the parliamentary committee hearings, and this briefing will look at the Hungarian aspects of this procedure, and its media coverage. Immediately we must add that the process for the Hungarian candidate is not finished yet, since the first Hungarian commissioner-designate failed to receive the support of the legal committee, this way the story is not full, still we can draw some conclusions from certain aspects of the selection process.*



### **(1) The first Hungarian candidate**

In the first round, Hungary's former justice minister, Mr. Trócsányi was selected and nominated by the Hungarian government to serve as a commissioner for 5 years. According to the previous negotiations, he was supposed to lead the Neighborhood and Enlargement field, which is one of the most prestigious fields. At a press conference, Ursula von der Leyen told the media, the policy to be pursued by the Hungarian government in this field, is clear regarding the integration of Western Balkan, and it is very much in line with the objectives of the European Commission.

We can also add that the Hungarian foreign policy vehemently and consequently has made significant efforts for speeding up the negotiation process of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania over the course of the recent months. In our earlier briefings we argued that both economic and political reasons can easily be the reason why Hungary would greatly benefit from the reintegration process of this region in the European institutional frameworks (European Union, and in some cases the NATO).

- On the one hand, the reintegration of the Balkans would mean significant financial funds for these countries to improve their infrastructure and strengthen north-south connectivity in the region, thus boost intra-regional trade.
- On the other hand, new member states most likely could be partners to Hungary in its efforts to support intra-governmental cooperation forms in the European Union and counterbalance all those attempts that point out to a more supranational Europe.
- Another argument why to choose this field of policy is that the enlargement policy has been one of the most prominent portfolios of the commission for decades, thus it also means more prestige.

The Hungarian Prime Minister explained before the committee hearings why he finds it important the Hungarian commissioner-designate to be elected. Besides the personal skills and merits of the Hungarian

candidates, he argued, if the EU had been quicker and accepted the EU membership of Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro earlier, illegal migrants would not have caused chaos in Germany in 2015.

The European Parliament President informed Ursula von der Leyen September 30, 2019, that the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee voted on the Hungarian commissioner-designate László Trócsányi and declared him and the Romanian commissioner-designate unable to exercise their functions. They argued that there would be conflicts of interest they allegedly found when they examined their declarations of financial interests.

The Hungarian government pointed out that the decision of the Legal Affairs Committee is not about the conflicts of interest of financial nature, but rather a political one since the former Hungarian Justice Minister was one of the key figures, if not the most important one, in drawing up the legal border security fence constructed in 2015.

When Ursula von der Leyen requested the Hungarian Prime Minister to nominate another candidate for the commissioner's position, he did not refuse this request, however, he explicitly told the media, he cannot accept anybody, including the European Parliament selecting among Hungarian politicians who were elected and endorsed by the Hungarian voters earlier. This way, he referred to the strong democratic legitimation the MP candidates of the Fidesz-KDNP received this year.

We should also not forget Mr. Trócsányi was the first candidate on the Fidesz-KDNP list in May 2019. That is the reason why the Hungarian Prime Minister selected and nominated Mr. Várhelyi, who can be considered as technocrat or being a carrier diplomat.

## **(2) The second Hungarian candidate**

Mr. Várhelyi started his career in the Office for European Affairs of the Ministry for Industry and Trade in 1995. After several positions in EU institutions, he has served as Ambassador of Hungary to the European Union since 2015. Though he is technocrat, several offensive articles were already published about him since his nomination. Since his performance

is excellent, his personal style was criticized in those articles. Politico, the influential American news portal puts it this way: “EU diplomats as well as current and former Hungarian officials describe Várhelyi, a career diplomat and former Commission official, as highly intelligent and extremely knowledgeable on EU issues. But multiple former Hungarian officials also describe an abrasive leadership style that has included screaming, yelling and swearing at staffers.”<sup>1</sup> Another line of criticism, published in one article of the Hungarian 444.hu news portal, is that he maintains very good relations with the Prime Minister.

The first critique seems not to be authentic since he has worked in several jobs and positions in Brussels for around 25 years, where the skills of an EU expert were required, and this time it would not be different. The second critique (maintaining good relations to the Prime Minister) is not serious, since good relationship to the government is the first step to be nominated by the government.

When the Prime Minister announced his second candidate, he also told the media, that there won't be any changes in the portfolio of Mr. Trócsányi, he too is supposed to lead the Neighborhood and Enlargement field.

However, Mr. Újhelyi, the MSZP member of the European Parliament told the media, that there were ideas circulating in Brussels that the transport field would be assigned to the Hungarian commissioner designate while the Romanian candidate would be responsible for Neighborhood and Enlargement. Though the Hungarian MP also indicated that he knew about negotiations between Budapest and Bucharest regarding the swap of portfolios, his information cannot be confirmed yet. The question arises at this point, what and how the Hungarian foreign policy would benefit from this change.

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<sup>1</sup> Lili Bayer: “Hungary’s ‘incredibly rude’ Commission pick” Politico, October 3, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-orban-european-commission-oliver-varhelyi-criticism-management-style-verbal-abuse/>

### **(3) Summary**

On the one hand, the person of the commissioner and the managed policy field are always important for the sending member state, however, later he or she cannot represent the interests of the sending member state. The commissioner serves the interests of the European Union as a whole, as it is specified in the EU treaty, that is also the reason why the former commissioner sent by Hungary, disappeared from Hungarian politics.

All the adverse circumstances both Hungarians must cope with show that Hungary's position won't be easy in the coming 5 years either. The manner of how the members of the European Parliament treated the first Hungarian commissioner-designate vividly shows, that the previous hopes of the Hungarian government that it would be easier to cooperate with the new European Parliament and later the European Commission might be unfounded, and the government is to face other and new challenges in the cooperation as it did until 2019 elections.

In our understanding, cooperation in the field of common foreign and security policy might be one of the challenging areas. According to the German Spiegel, there is a disagreement between Hungary and the rest of the EU member states in the way how EU member states should approach Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria. (Turkey unleashed airstrikes and artillery barrages at the Kurdish forces controlling the region, then it started ground operations too.)

The Spiegel article stated, though the Hungarian government had voted against the EU declaration, the country gave up on its resistance, when the news about the ground operations made the headlines. Given this story it is easy to point out that the Neighborhood and Enlargement field belongs to foreign policy where cooperation seems to be less efficient and that might be the real underlying reason, why a Hungarian commissioner could not be endorsed by the committee-hearings yet, and why there are rumors about swapping the fields too.

# **Lithuania's Delegated New Commissioner in Brussels**

Linus Eriksonas

After the hearing of Lithuania's nominated Commissioner-designate in the European Parliament in Brussels on 3 October, it became evident (though yet to be officially confirmed by the Parliament) that a 28-year old Virginijus Sinkevičius, the Minister of the Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania, would become the youngest EU Commissioner and the first one, as Sinkevičius himself put in his speech during the hearing, "born after the fall of the Berlin Wall".

The feedback on the hearing by both the Members of the European Parliament and the EU policy watchdogs was very positive. Politico.eu, an influential EU policy and politics news service based in Brussels, gave Lithuania's candidate a four out of the five-star assessment. Such high rating was given only to the political heavy-weights, the candidates for the positions of vice-presidents of the EU Commission such as Phil Hogan (Ireland), Helena Dalli (Malta), Elisa Ferreira (Portugal), Paolo Gentiloni (Italy), Jutta Urpilainen (Finland), Margaritis Schinas (Greece) and others. Within the ranks of the Commissioners-designated from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, only Slovenia's current and the designated Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič (who has been a member of the European Commission for ten years already) was given by Politico.eu a similar mark (four stars) as Sinkevičius, who is, contrary to Šefčovič, a newcomer to Brussels' politics.

Below is a brief description of the main ideas and the statements made during the hearing by Virginijus Sinkevičius, which found rapport with the European legislators and EU policy commentators, ensuring his smooth path to become the Commissioner with a significant portfolio in terms of visibility and social impact.

According to Rule 118 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure, which specifies the procedure for holding hearings, a Commissioner-designate was requested to appear before the appropriate committees according to the portfolio he has been assigned. In the case of Virginijus Sinkevičius, who was designated to take over the Environment and Oceans portfolio, the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee (ENVI), and the Fisheries Committee (PECH) formed a joint committee to hear the candidate's answers to the written questions provided to the Commissioner-designate before the hearings. Also, the Committee of Agriculture was associated with these hearings. The hearing was co-chaired by Chris Davies (Fisheries Committee Chair) and Pascal Canfin (Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee Chair).

Thus, given the scope of the agenda covered and the respective number of the Parliamentary committees involved (three in total), the task Lithuania's Commissioner-designated faced in Brussels was indeed quite challenging. After the hearing, which was scheduled to last three hours, the chair and coordinators of the Joint Committee responsible for this hearing met behind the closed doors to evaluate the candidate and issue a single evaluation statement. However, the reports suggest that the overall assessment of the candidate was more than positive and that Lithuania's candidate met with appreciation across the political spectrum.

One can identify at least two aspects which made the candidacy of Sinkevičius such a success case, as has been demonstrated through the appreciation and support gathered both at the national and the EU political levels so far, those being the bi-partisan political stance and the undoubtedly proven communication skills of Lithuania's Commissioner-designated.

Although Sinkevičius is a member of the governing Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, having been elected to the Parliament on its electoral roll and having been in charge of the position of the Deputy Leader of the party (since 2016), yet he has been very balanced and politically shrewd on the political front. Furthermore, he has shown the

flexibility and the political acumen in calibrating his political views according to the electoral preferences.

Thus, according to the results of the political values survey manobalsas.lt, which Sinkevičius took before the 2016 elections, his position was leaning towards the center-right. For example, he expressed his support for the unregulated free market, confirmed the need to take up a tough position on Russia, and was in favour of ensuring that individual freedoms are given precedence in society. As attested by his answers to this survey,

back in 2016 Sinkevičius was not favouring the policies typically associated with the center-left, namely he was against the increase of the minimum wage, against the increase of taxes, and was also against the overregulation of the economy by the government. Curiously, in this survey he even voiced a disagreement that the government should make more efforts to use public means to address climate change. Judging the position held at the time of his appointment as the Commissioner for Environment and Oceans, Sinkevičius has moved towards the European consensus that climate change needs to be addressed proactively indeed.

During the hearings in Brussels, Lithuania's candidate-designate based his presentation on the policies rather the political content associated with environmental agenda. He used the issues listed in the Mission Letter addressed to him by Ursula van den Leyen as the main tasks envisioned for his brief. In the he Mission Letter to Sinkevičius the President-elect of the European Commission Ursula van den Leyen indicated the following priority areas and tasks that she expected the Commissioner for Environment and Oceans to address:

- The full implementation of the reformed Common Fisheries Policy, including the landing obligation and multiannual management plans and ensuring effective control and enforcement and respecting the maximum sustainable yield objective will remain top priorities.
- To evaluate the Common Fisheries Policy by 2022 and identify how to address issues not sufficiently covered in the current

policy, such as the social dimension, climate adaptation, and clean oceans.

- To contribute to the ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy on sustainable food drawing on the potential of sustainable seafood as a low-carbon food source and the potential of the aquaculture sector.

- Leading the way on international ocean governance and playing a prominent role in discussions in the United Nations, notably at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon in 2020, as well as in other regional and international forums.

- To take a zero-tolerance approach to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, supporting others in improving their methods but being prepared to use all of the tools at our disposal, including a ban on fisheries imports as a last resort.

- To ensure (with the Commissioner for Trade that Europe leads discussions in the World Trade Organization on finding a global agreement to ban fisheries subsidies that contribute to overfishing, illegal fishing, and overcapacity.

- To develop a new approach for a sustainable blue economy bringing together everything from marine knowledge and research to maritime spatial planning, marine renewable energy, blue investment, and regional maritime cooperation to support Europe’s blue economy, which plays a crucial role in supporting coastal communities and in decarbonizing our economy.

The bi-partisan, fact-driven policy approach approached worked very well at the hearing; all EU Parliament groups except one (Identity and Democracy which represent the right-win populist and Eurosceptic voice) almost unanimously endorsed the candidacy. “Sinkevičius is a man with huge potential,” said Peter Liese MEP and Francisco José Millán Mon MEP, EPP Group Spokesmen for the Environment and Fisheries Committees, respectively, following the hearing of the Commissioner-designate for Environment and Oceans. “He is the first representative of the millennium generation in the European Commission. A good signal for the young. His



background as Minister for Innovation will be helpful when we address environmental problems”, commented Liese.

The opening remarks of Sinkevičius captured the imagination of the European legislators. “It's a great honour for me to be here as the first commissioner designate, born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's a sign of trust in my generation, a generation with a European ideal in its DNA. To me Europe means freedom and fairness, openness and opportunity. At the same time it means taking responsibility”, - declared Sinkevičius in his introduction at the hearing.

“The latest wave of climate strikes shows that Generation Y and generation Z are ready to take responsibility. Being a tiny part of this young generation and a father I am determined to take this path. For us 2050 it's not just a target on a piece of paper, we will have to live it”, - said the Commissioner-designate at the parliament.

During his introductory 15-minutes speech, Sinkevičius listed three priorities for environmental matters: biodiversity, the circular economy, and zero pollution. He spoke strongly in favour of working at a global level to achieve the equivalent of the Paris climate agreement for biodiversity. He also proposed extending circular economy policies to new sectors, such as textiles, food, and the information and communications technology sector. To fight pollution, Sinkevičius announced he would focus on the challenges of hazardous chemicals, endocrine disruptors, as well as the runoff of nutrients, pharmaceuticals, and microplastics in water.

Regarding fisheries, he expressed his commitment to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy and its upcoming evaluation. He added that the EU must remain a global leader for sustainable fisheries and ocean governance. He also mentioned the importance of healthy oceans to ensure healthy fish stocks and thriving fishing communities. MEPs put forward several questions on how EU environmental policies can enhance the role of forests as carbon sinks and biodiversity reservoirs, tackling air pollution from agriculture and industry. Members also questioned the Commissioner-designate on plastic pollution, over-packaging, and eco-design.

Fisheries-related questions touched upon the desired reciprocal agreement to access waters and resources in the event of Brexit, employment, and youth matters for small fishing communities, multi-annual fishing plans, as well as the future of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

It was noted by media commentators that Sinkevičius deftly dealt with all questions and quickly captured the attention of the audience in the European Parliament by presenting himself as a connector between the new generation of Europeans and politics and thus becoming a political figure of compromise and moderation.

He ended his introduction with the following words: “Honourable members, we face new challenges. Success will depend on our working together. You will see me regularly in your corridors and meeting rooms. I will be here for bilaterals, debates and dialogues. We need more direct exchanges. I will visit your countries not only the capitals but also the regions and the coastal communities as well. My thanks for invitations I have already received. As I said at the beginning we have to be close to our citizens. You are the legitimate representatives. I would place my trust in you. I would relish the opportunity to work closely with you for the next five years. Thank you very much and I look forward to your questions and I will answer the best I can”.

The Prime Minister of Lithuania Saulius Skvernelis extolled the virtues of Sinkevičius and mentioned that Lithuania’s Commissioner could make a difference also in relation to the CEE countries, becoming an example to follow in encouraging the CEE countries to do more for climate change and environmental protection, thus moving from the more passive position on climate change (the one which was also held by Sinkevičius just a few years ago) to a more proactive and informed role. “If we deal with those challenges, it will be a huge and important contribution to our future and the future of our children,” Lithuania’s Prime Minister concluded.

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# Poland and the New European Commission

Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska

*On September 10, 2019 Ursula von der Leyen presented the composition of the new European Commission divided into each portfolio. The future EC president assured that the members of the new Commission will stand on the European side and listen to the citizens. In Poland, the composition of this EC was received with a relief - mainly due to shuffling in the most important positions. On the one hand the well-known politician Janusz Wojciechowski is to take over a significant portfolio of the commissioner for agriculture, and on the other hand the current EC first vice-president Frans Timmermans will not be in charge of interinstitutional relations and the rule of law anymore. For the past five years, Timmermans has been investigating violations of the rule of law in Poland, infringement of which has recently been an area of great tension in Poland's relations with the Commission.*

## **Commission structure**

Ursula von der Leyen has been thinking about how to change the structure of the European Commission since her candidacy for the presidency of the European Commission was presented publicly in spring. The well-known problem of the EC is *de facto* too many commissioners who are envoys from all member states. According to the EU treaties, all EU commissioners - although their candidatures are nominated by governments of individual countries - should represent in Brussels not their countries (let alone their governments), but the interests of the entire Union.

However, the line separating the transnational nature of their work from their particular attention to topics important for countries of origin can be very blurred. Knowledge of home countries, contacts and political

experience in solving and perceiving problems from the position of member states are the reason and excuse to strongly represent the point of view of the origin country of the commissioner and not the whole Community interests.

The division of files among EU commissioners is, as a result, subject of a sharp political lobbying by member states. And although, according to the Lisbon Treaty, the EC should generally have 18 commissioners (equal to 2/3 of EU countries), none of the countries want to give up the principle of “commissioner for each state” (a total of 27 people after Brexit). This is possible because of the treaty clause, which allows the leaders of the EU countries to unanimously change the number of commissioners.

### **Perception of the new EC in Poland**

Yet, the composition of the European Commission proposed by Ursula von der Leyen introduces many changes. The Commission will remain in a similar quantitative composition as recently, but only a few commissioners will perform their functions once again (nonetheless, in other areas), for the vast majority it will be a debut in this function. That is why it is believed in Poland that the future EC contains many strong points, thus far a lot more those uncertain ones. Certainly it will not be easy for the new Commission to realize the ambitions set by its president. Ursula von der Leyen announced herself, that the new EC “will be a geopolitical commission”, meaning the scale of challenges which will face the new institution. It can be seen with sureness, that the key task for the coming years will be reconciling the internal aspects of the Union’s activities with the needs arising from international politics. Von der Leyen emphasized moreover, that the EC should focus on tasks, while hierarchy ought to be less important.

In Poland, the proposed by von der Leyen composition of the Commission is accepted by both politicians and experts as very promising. It is emphasized that after years of focusing on EU internal affairs (under

the influence of subsequent shocking crises, like the euro crisis, migration or rising populism), the Union is just realizing that its future depends primarily on whether it manages to find itself in the dramatically changed conditions of global competition. It can be assumed that the next five years (Commission's term of office) will be the time when Europe should find its own place in the new balance of power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenges of the current times – i.e. the United States, which are increasingly coming their own way, the growing position of China, the still strong and unpredictable Russia, the getting poorer Africa, a very difficult exit of Great Britain from the EU, the necessity of increasing EU sovereignty in defence and economic matters, the environmental, social and economic challenges - are to be reflected in the composition and tasks of the new Commission.

Particular attention of Polish experts is drawn to the strong emphasis on economic departments of the new EC. Frans Timmermans as the first deputy head of the Commission will be responsible for the “new green order”. Behind this formula lies efforts in the sphere of economy, ecology and technology aimed at shifting economies to low-carbon and meeting the requirements of the fight against climate change. The second key role will be played by Margrethe Vestager, whose task is to provide the Union with clout in the digital age and to adapt EU competition policy to the realities of the modern world (i.e. crisis of multilateralism, unfolding trade war). These two politicians will be supported by Sylvie Goulard, commissioner for the common market and defence industry; and Phil Hogan, the commissioner for trade.

It is underlined in Polish media, that this team is a clear signal for other global partners that the Union will not disregard the issues of climate change or trade challenges posed by the US or China. Timmermans himself is well-known for his tenacity, as demonstrated by his conflict with the rule of law with Polish government of the PiS party. Vestager on the other hand is a symbol of uncompromising clash with large concerns, including the

American enterprises.

From the Polish point of view, the most important thing and the most often emphasized issue is taking away Timmermans' portfolio. But this is only a cosmetic change, because the experienced vice-president of the European Commission in the previous term Věra Jourová and commissioner for justice Didier Reynders will stand guard this policy. The latter's mandate very clearly includes "closer implementation [of the rule of law] using as a basis recent judgments of the EU Court of Justice showing the effects of violations of the rule of law on EU law". This reference shows that, while protecting the rule of law, the Commission will be ready to use the court path before the EU Court of Justice, which has been already actively involved in the dispute with the PiS government. The interest in the rule of law in Poland will certainly be supported by the fact that in the new EC more than half of commissioners are representatives of the left, green and liberal parties, for whom matters of protection of the rule of law are of particular importance.

### **Future Polish commissioner in the EC**

In the new Commission, the portfolio for Poland will change from internal market (area for which Elżbieta Bieńkowska was responsible in the last term) to agriculture. Already at the end of August 2019, the mass media spread the information that Poland would be responsible for this sector of European policy. In the first version, this portfolio was to be taken over by Krzysztof Szczerski (present head of the cabinet of the President of Poland), but Szczerski renounced this proposal in favor of Janusz Wojciechowski.

However, it should be openly admitted that the candidacy of Janusz Wojciechowski (from the PiS party) for the post of commissioner for agriculture has aroused controversy from the beginning. After the publication of the new Commission members by Ursula von der Leyen, the Pole was at once described as one of the favourites to be rejected by the European Parliament. He was burdened with the matter of alleged

irregularities in the reimbursement of travel expenses while being a member of the European Parliament. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) has even initiated proceedings in this case. The legal committee in the European Parliament also had doubts about him, asking for additional clarifications regarding his property declaration and living in Brussels.

Yet, Wojciechowski managed to get out of the battle unscathed. Firstly, the Polish candidate provided the JURI committee of the European Parliament with the required documents and others MEPs decided that the financial statement did not indicate a possible conflict of interest. Without this, Wojciechowski could not attend the hearing before the committee on agriculture. Secondly, OLAF also informed that it had ended the proceedings against the Polish politician and did not issue any disciplinary or court recommendations. At the same time, however, he demanded that Wojciechowski gives back to the European Parliament the money wrongly collected (EUR 11.000).

These two decisions meant that Wojciechowski could prepare for hearing before the agricultural committee. After the hearing, a decision on the final recommendation was to be made. However, the hearing did not go well. The committee members were dissatisfied with the “evasive and general answers”. Coordinator of the European People’s Party in the Committee on Agriculture Herbert Dorfmann claimed that “Wojciechowski was not convincing, and the EU (...) needs a clearer strategy regarding the future of farmers”.

As a result, Janusz Wojciechowski was not approved by the committee coordinators. MEPs sent additional questions to which Pole was to answer in writing. This was also not enough in the eyes of the committee and it became clear that another hearing would be needed. In the meantime, there was information that the Polish government had to introduce a new candidate, because Janusz Wojciechowski, after this badly assessed hearing in the European Parliament, has little chance of acceptance.



All in all, the second hearing in the EP was successful for Wojciechowski. Already at the beginning he declared that he wanted to present his vision of European Common Agricultural Policy in detail and presented a wide spectrum of ideas. During the speech, he declared support for organic farming, opposition to excessive member states' intervention in agricultural policy and promised to equalize payments for all European farmers - so that the level of direct payments for all farmers in the EU is alike.

Given Wojciechowski's extensive professional, political and personal experience, he may prove to be a good commissioner, caring for the interests of farmers from all EU member states. This politician held many responsible functions for the past years. He is a lawyer and judge and served as the President of the Supreme Audit Office (1995–2001); moreover he was a long-time deputy in Polish and European Parliament, and is currently an auditor at the European Court of Auditors (2016-2022). Wojciechowski himself repeatedly emphasizes that he grew up in the countryside (his parents were farmers), and therefore he has personal experience of the hardships of working on the farm. He also dealt with the issue of agriculture for several years – in the years 2004–2006 he was vice-chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

### **Conclusion**

Janusz Wojciechowski's path to becoming the EU commissioner for agriculture was not easy. He had to deal with the doubts of the Anti-Fraud Office, the legal committee of the EP, and finally appear twice before the agriculture committee. There were also voices that his fate was a foregone conclusion and that Poland would have to indicate a new candidate. Ultimately, he left unharmed, what is seen by the Polish government and the media as a good prognosis for Poland's relations with the EU.

On the other hand it has to be stated, that agriculture – although important - is certainly not a key portfolio in the European Commission. Still, the idea to give it to a Polish politician is assessed as a favourable gesture that would be an attempt at a new opening in relations between Brussels and Warsaw.

The commissioner for agricultural affairs will manage huge money for agricultural policy, while at the same time he will face a reduction in agricultural funds already announced in the EU draft budget for 2021-27. It has to be kept in mind that the sums, that the Commission will get for direct agricultural subsidies, will not depend on the commissioner, but on the outcome of negotiations on a new 7-year budget between EU countries, which will most likely end next year. Wojciechowski, however, announces a hard fight and promises that farmers throughout the Union will not be left alone.

# **Romania's Chronicle on the Nomination of the European Commissioner for Transport**

Oana Cristina Popovici

*Romania obtained the portfolio of European Commissioner for Transport in the new structure of the European Commission, a key portfolio if we look at the objectives assumed by the new EU leadership. However, in the second week of October, the nomination for this position is still open, as the first candidate from Romania was rejected by the JURI Committee and the second one was not accepted by the elected president Ursula von der Leyen. Given the recent fall of the Government in Romania, a new nomination is expected to be submitted following consultations between the Presidency and the political parties.*

The elected president of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, assigned the portfolio of Transport to the representative of Romania which will take the position of European Commissioner. In a period in which climate change, digitization, protection of the European spirit are among the priorities of the new European leadership, the Transport portfolio will be a key one. The deeper integration also leads to higher requirements for transport services, which is a subject of both opportunities and challenges.

As the elected EC president assumed the launch of Green Deal – a set of actions to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions – in the first 100 days of taking office, the contribution of the Transport Commissioner will be essential. One of the most important projects involving the field of Transport in the Green Deal package is related to the extension of the

carbon taxation system to cover the maritime sector and the reduction of the free carbon allowances for the aviation industry.

Ursula von der Leyen has already sent to the Romanian candidate for the chair of the European Commissioner for Transport a letter with the expectations and objectives subsumed to the mentioned field. The major aim is to ensure a sustainable, safe and accessible transport in the EU in the following five years. There is the need for the elaboration of a comprehensive strategy for sustainable and smart mobility by supporting alternative fuels that can be used for road, maritime and air transport and the elimination of the subsidies for fossil fuels.

In addition, other objectives target the compliance with the passenger rights, the maintaining of high security standards, as well as the implementation of dual use of infrastructure projects to improve military mobility, with the support of the funds available under the Europe Interconnection Mechanism and the completion of the TEN-T transport network.

The portfolio of Transport is challenging for Romania, but its assignment was negotiated by the representatives of all the EU member states. The Romanian Commissioner will have to support the utilization of alternative fuels although Romania highly relies on the use coal and natural gas for energy production, while the countries in Eastern Europe are still far from the targets regarding the use of electric vehicles as compared to Western and Northern countries. In addition, Romania is one of the EU countries with not a very favourable quality of both road and rail infrastructure.

Nevertheless, in the second week of October, the nomination for the position of European Commissioner from Romania is still open. In the same situation are Hungary and France, while other 23 candidates for the portfolio of European Commissioner were accepted. Romania seems to have a long history with the proposal for the position of European

Commissioner in the new structure of the EC, as two nominations were already declined. Romania's first proposal for European Commissioner, Rovana Plumb, was rejected in the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee (JURI), due to conflict of interests. The second nomination, Dan Nica, was rejected by Ursula von der Leyen.

Rovana Plumb was the first proposal of the Romanian Government for the portfolio of Transport. With a professional background as a former minister of the Climate Change and an interim period as a minister of Transport, it represented a favourable nomination for the announced objectives of the new EC President. However, the problem that caused her rejection was the incongruence with the provisions of the EU Treaties and Code of Conduct. The cause was the loan of EUR 170,000 (RON 800,000) which Plumb contracted from another person, which was further used to borrow the Social Democratic Party (SDP) for financing its campaign in the European elections. Some of the JURI members also invoked some differences between the declaration of wealth filed in Romania and the one sent to the European Parliament. Soon after this notification Rovana Plumb sent a letter to JURI for appraising the payment of the loan which generated the conflict of interests, by offering her lender two apartments she owned. In this way, the debt was completely cleared. However, the Committee final vote was against Romania's candidate for EU Commissioner.

Romanian Prime Minister, Viorica Dancila, regarded the incident as a conflict between the Romanian and the EU legislation, as Rovana Plumb's situation is not considered to be a conflict of interests under national rules.

Rovana Plumb previously had several different portfolios in the Government, being former minister of the European funds (2017, 2018-April 2019), of Labour (2014-2015) and of Environment and Climate Change (2012-2014). She is also a member of the European Parliament and the Vice-President of the Social and Democrats Group. She was formerly targeted in a corruption investigation related to the illegal privatization of an island on the Danube, but the investigation against her could not be

started as she managed to maintain the privilege of legislative immunity as a member of the Parliament.

President Iohannis insisted upon a new nomination that will gain the approval of both the Parliament and the Presidency, meeting the integrity and professionalism criteria, but the Prime Minister opted for a political nomination. Criticism towards the Government was launched by both the opposition parties and the President.

Dan Nica was the second of the two proposals forwarded by Romania for the portfolio of European Commissioner for Transport. However, after the refusal of Rovana Plumb, the EC president-elect Ursula von der Leyen asked for “a suitable nominee”, indicating towards a female candidate. Therefore, the selected back-up solution was a state secretary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gabriela Ciot. Still, it seems that this proposal was not officially sent to Bruxelles, therefore Dan Nica remained the only candidate. In addition, the candidacy of Dan Nica was confirmed by his party, as he was elected in SDP’s Executive Committee, following the refusal of Rovana Plumb.

Dan Nica is a member of the European Parliament (MEP) since 2014 and he was appointed as the minister of Communications during 2000 to 2004 and minister of Interior during the first 10 months of 2009. Following this period, he was targeted in a National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) investigation, together with other 7 ministers. The investigation was considering a corruption case related to Microsoft overpriced licenses, but Dan Nica was never officially prosecuted as the investigation was not finished in due time.

It is possible that the decision regarding the refusal of Dan Nica to be connected with the events on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October in Romania, when a no-confidence motion initiated by the opposition parties against the Government was voted in the Parliament. The motion was credited with the highest chances in the last years for changing the Government, but no one could have guaranteed the result of the vote. The leading parties had a

strong majority in the Parliament until the end of August. Only recently, the junior governing party decided to withdraw from Government and disturbed the equilibrium in the Parliament. Therefore, even the voices inside the party criticizing the Government exploited the moment and voted against the leading team. As a consequence, the no-confidence motion passed with 238 votes, more than the minimum of 233 required, and the Government was officially dismissed.

The rejection of Dan Nica was officially confirmed, based on the fact that the letter containing the second proposal of the Romanian Government was a candidate already interviewed and not accepted by the EC elected president. Some of the liberal members of the European Parliament stated that the EC President will not accept any candidate from a government in process of dismissal. In any case, there were again high chances for Dan Nica not to pass the hearings in the specialized committees, due to its controversial background.

The political crisis underway in Romania generated by the fall of the Government hardens the procedures for appointing a new candidate. On one side, given the division in the Parliament, it would be probably hard for the President to come up very quickly with a proposal of a Prime Minister that will meet the expectations of all the political parties and to gain their approval in the Parliament. On the other side, the new composition of the EC should be voted by the European Parliament by the end of October. However, a nomination for the chair of the European Commissioner is expected to be established following consultations between Presidency and political parties.

# Slovakia and the New European Commission

Peter Csanyi

*On September 10, 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, President-elect of the European Commission, presented her new team. If approved by the European Parliament, they will take over from the Juncker Commission on November 1, 2019. The new President of the Commission was confronted with the same problem as her predecessor: each Member State sends a Commissioner to Brussels, but there are not 27 substantive portfolios to dole out. President von der Leyen has only slightly modified the Commission's structure, and focused on restructuring the various Commissioners' competences to fit her "political guidelines"—the new Commission's policymaking priorities. One of the important members of this new team is Maroš Šefčovič, the long-time European Commissioner for Slovakia, who remains the vice-president of the European Commission in the next five years.*

## **The procedure to take office for members of the 2019 European Commission**

Unlike the EU Council and the European Parliament, where members are directly elected, the members of the European Commission must follow a complex procedure to take office. After the European elections in May 2019, the EU parliament elected Ursula von der Leyen to replace Jean-Claude Juncker as the leader of the European Union's executive branch.

Von der Leyen is the first-ever woman president of the Commission. She is set to take office on 1 November 2019 for a five-year term with a team of 26 EU commissioners. The Finnish EU presidency's deadline for commission nominations elapsed on August 26, 2019. However, not every candidate proposed or interviewed will eventually form part of the final



team that the President-elect will present to the EU parliament. Von der Leyen's target of having at least 13 female commissioners (including herself) became possible when France announced Sylvie Goulard as its nominee, bringing the total of female candidates to 12.

Before the new European Commission can take office, the EU parliament organized public hearings to evaluate the candidates from September 30 to October 8, 2019. Each candidate must attend a three-hour long hearing in front of the parliamentary committee or committees responsible for the portfolio they have been assigned. These proceedings can lead occasionally to the withdrawal of a candidate or a change in their portfolios. Following the hearing, the responsible committees send their evaluations to the president of the EU Parliament, David Sassoli.

Once the hearing process is finished, the full "college" of 27 new commissioners, including the vice-presidents and high-representatives of foreign affairs and security policy, will be approved in a single vote of consent by the EU parliament, during its October session in Strasbourg. If the EU parliament does not approve the commission, changes need to be made before voting takes place again.

However, in practice the parliament does not vote the endowment (of the new commission) unless there is absolute certainty that it will succeed. If during the hearings, there is a problem accepting any of the commissioner's candidates, the changes will be requested at that time. Once parliament has given its consent, the European Council officially appoints the European Commission by a qualified majority - 72 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU population. Normally a month later, all members of the European Commission are required to swear an oath at the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg pledging to respect the treaties of the EU.

The Commission's work is steered by a team of 28 Commissioners - one Commissioner from each EU country (this time only 27 Commissioners due to Brexit). This team, officially known as the College, is led by the Commission President. Commissioners are members of project

teams, which are led by Vice-Presidents. These teams focus on particular policy areas.

The role of the Commissioners: Though there is one Commissioner from each EU country, their job is to defend the interests of the EU as a whole – rather than national interests. Within the Commission, they are the decision-makers. For example, collectively they:

- make decisions on the Commission's strategies and policies
- propose laws, funding programs and the annual budget for discussion and adoption by Parliament and the Council.

The composition of the College:

- The President
- The first Vice-President
- The Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Policy
- 4 Vice-Presidents
- 21 Commissioners

### **Ursula von der Leyen's possible administration:**

European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has unveiled who will do what job in her administration, insisting hers will be a “geopolitical Commission”. Nominees are now being grilled by Parliamentary committees ahead of a final confirmation vote by MEPs in October.

Von der Leyen's Commission will have three executive vice-presidents in Frans Timmermans, Margrethe Vestager and Valdis Dombrovskis. They will also serve as regular Commissioners, not just coordinators. There will also be five regular vice-presidents: Josep Borrell, Věra Jourová, Margaritis Schinas, Maroš Šefčovič and Dubravka Šuica.

Parliamentary hearings began on September 30, 2019, with the three executive VPs set to conclude proceedings on October 8, 2019. A vote on the entire Commission will be held on October 23, 2019. Time has already

been allotted for more hearings before that date if candidates are rejected or more questions have to be answered.

The Commission President-elect confirmed she wanted it to be a well-balanced, agile and modern Commission. This team will now have to gain the Parliament's confidence. But, it is not certain that it will be an easy path to confirmation. As it was mentioned the Parliament would conduct hearings and vote on the commissioners before they can take office.

Von der Leyen, who will replace the outgoing Jean-Claude Juncker, was elected by a slim majority in the European Parliament: 383 MEPs voted in favor of her nomination to 327 against and 22 abstentions. Now it's up to the European Parliament to vote on the college of Commissioners and evaluate their fitness for the job.



Source: European Commission Official Website

The way how the European Parliament votes in a new Commission is the following. The 26 commissioner candidates, one per EU member state excluding the UK, have to face EU parliamentary committees based on their portfolio subject.

Before the hearings started, the legal affairs committee scrutinized the commissioners' financial declarations and could ask for more information about potential conflicts of interest. The picks for commissioner also answer written questions on issues like their competences and European commitment (At the end of September, the legal affairs committee blocked two proposed commissioners — Romania's Rovana Plumb and Hungary's Laszlo Trocsanyi—because of inconsistencies in their financial statements. The Committee on Legal Affairs held an extraordinary meeting on September 30, 2019 to assess Plumb and Trócsányi's "actual or potential conflicts of interest").

Each commissioner then attends a public hearing with one or more parliamentary committees to assess whether or not they are fit for the job. Each three-hour hearing is streamed live and each candidate makes an opening statement. The parliamentary committees can request more information in writing and eventually evaluate the candidate, sending summary letters to committee chairs.

Based on these evaluations, the Conference of Presidents, made up of political group leaders and the president of the European Parliament, decide whether or not to close the hearings or request further action. The European Parliament then votes on the college of commissioners as a whole.

The hearings started on September 30, 2019 and the first hearing was in the constitutional/legal affairs committee for the Slovakian commissioner-designate Maroš Šefčovič.

### **Maroš Šefčovič from Slovakia continues as vice-president of the Commission**

Maroš Šefčovič, the long-time European Commissioner for Slovakia, will remain the vice-president of the European Commission in the next five years. However, Šefčovič will no longer deal with the energy union

portfolio. In the Commission of Ursula von der Leyen, he will cover the portfolio of interinstitutional relations and foresight.

Nearly three months after Maroš Šefčovič lost the presidential election in Slovakia to Zuzana Čaputová, he had a reason to celebrate. The Slovak government agreed on Šefčovič, who has served as the European Commission Vice-President for the Energy Union, to be Slovakia's nominee to the European Commission again.

Even Maroš Šefčovič, Slovakia's European Commissioner for the past two terms, had an ambition to become the president of the European Commission this year. He declared his intention to seek the nomination of the Party of European Socialists (PES) as lead candidate for the position of the Commission President. He later withdrew his nomination to endorse the outgoing Commission's First Vice-President, Frans Timmermans (PvdA, the Netherlands), as the party's lead candidate. Although Maroš Šefčovič did not become the president of the European Commission, he may still play an important role in the next term of the Commission as one of its commissioners.

Slovak Prime Minister, Peter Pellegrini, made a similar statement after his meeting with the future European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, on September 4, 2019. Slovakia supports Maroš Šefčovič and since he is one of the most successful commissioners, the Slovak political leaders believe this nomination is good not only for Slovakia, but also for the European Commission itself. The Slovak Prime Minister considers Šefčovič to be an experienced diplomat and professional, whose work has been highly appreciated and respected. Slovakia has high expectations of the new European Commission and believes its work will be beneficial for each EU member states, including Slovakia.

Maroš Šefčovič will be Vice President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight. The President of European Commission in her mission letter to Šefčovič asked him to lead on implementing the new “one in, one out” policy for regulatory measures that she announced alongside her new team. He will also coordinate the Commission’s work on the European Battery

Alliance (with the Internal Market Commissioner)—his legacy from the Juncker Commission.

In continuation of recent initiatives, Maroš Šefčovič is expected to support the Commission President in further strengthening the 'special partnership' with the European Parliament, including ensuring that the 2010 Framework Agreement between the two institutions is upheld and the 2016 IIA implemented. He is also charged with leading 'interinstitutional discussions on annual programming'. Maroš Šefčovič will be in charge of relations with national parliaments, and is expected to work closely with other Commissioners on Parliament resolutions calling on the Commission to submit legislative proposals. Further, he is entrusted with coordinating the Commission's work on better regulation, including ensuring respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has charged the Vice-Presidents with a steering and coordinating function. Maroš Šefčovič will work under the President's guidance, and will be supported by the Secretariat-General in his coordination work.

Maroš Šefčovič in the European Commission:

2009-2010 European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth,

2010-2014 Vice-President of the European Commission for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration,

2014-2019 Vice-President of the European Commission for Energy Union,

2019-2024 Vice President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight.

# **The New European Commission and Slovenian Candidate**

Helena Motoh

## ***Summary***

*After Ursula von der Leyen was elected the new European Commission President in July 2019, the selection process started for the candidates for the Commissioners of the new European Commission. The selection of the Slovenian candidate was partly surprising due to his background. His future portfolio also became a topic of political debate. Although the conclusions of the hearing are still not final, the first reactions were mostly positive. The final composition of the Commission is still not finalized due to the rejection of several other candidates.*

## **History and background: selection of the Slovenian representative in the Juncker Commission**

When the current European Commission was being composed by Jean Claude Juncker in 2014, one among the candidates proposed by Slovenia was Alenka Bratušek, at that time the Prime Minister. This was seen by many as a highly problematic move, despite the fact that the candidature technically followed the elections Prime Minister Bratušek was only in position until a new government of Miro Cerar was formed in September the same year. The candidature was supported by the President of the European Commission Juncker who allegedly expressed the intent to make Bratušek the vice-president of the Commission, assigning her the energy portfolio.

The hearing took place on the 7th of October in front of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy and the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Safety. The overall impression given by

Bratušek was disappointing, with many Members of the Committees evaluating her presentation and answers as seriously deficient. The vote on her candidature confirmed that, since only 13 votes supported her candidature, while 112 were against it and 2 abstained. After the failure, the vice-president position and the energy portfolio were assigned to the Slovakian Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, while Slovenia had to propose a new candidate. Violeta Bulc, at that time Minister without Portfolio responsible for Development, Strategic Projects and Cohesion and Deputy Prime Minister in Miro Cerar's government was more successful in the process and became the was Commissioner for Transport in Juncker's Commission.

### **Proces of constructing von der Leyen Commission**

In July 2019, European Council selected and proposed Ursula von der Leyen to the European Parliament. Seen by many as the surprising decision, the selection of von der Leyen went against the established practice of choosing a previously identified »spitzenkandidats«. Despite this, the selection of von der Leyen was a good compromise, since the proposal of the European Council was confirmed with a majority of 383 votes, slightly above the required 374. She managed to secure support of the three main political groups in the European Parliament, European People's Party (EPP), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe (consisting of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and European Democratic Party). Some other political parties offered their support in the process.

Upon being elected, von der Leyen prolonged the position of Frans Timmermans as the First Vice President and made Margrethe Vestager one of the leading candidates of the Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE) Vice President as well. She also requested the member states (except for Germany and United Kingdom) to propose candidates for the future commissioners. According to the first schedule,



the hearings before the respective committees were scheduled to start on the 30th of September and continue until the 8th of October with the whole process being concluded by a plenary vote in the European Parliament on the 23rd of October. The Commission was then scheduled to start its mandate on the 1st of November.

Three candidates for the future European Commissioners, however, were rejected. Hungarian candidate Laszlo Trocsanyi and Romanian candidate Royana Plumb were rejected already in the preliminary procedure due to the conflict of interests. The French candidate Sylvie Goulard did not pass the hearing before the committees, the Internal Market committee and the Industry, Research and Energy committee.

### **Slovenian candidate, the designated portfolio and the reactions**

In mid-July Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Šarec announced his proposal for the Slovenian commissioner at the European Commission. The candidate was Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, currently the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Slovenia to the European Union. Since Šarec decided on a non-political candidate, the selection was a considerable shock for the political circles in Slovenia and provoked a lot of criticism. Šarec's arguments were that Lenarčič is an experienced diplomat with a deep knowledge and understanding of the institutions of the European Union and that he was one of the leading representatives of Slovenia during its first presidency of the Council of Europe. Lenarčič was also active in several previous Slovenian governments, a State Secretary in Drnovšek government from 2002 in Janša government from 2006 and in Cerar government from 2014. In 2016 he became the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Slovenia to the EU in Brussels.

Lenarčič was confirmed as a candidate by a government vote where only the Ministers from the Social Democrats' Party voted against him. He also was criticized by political parties outside the government as being a

safe and unambitious choice due to the negative experience with Bratušek hearing in 2014.

The portfolio assigned to him, Crisis Management, also immediately became a topic in media and political circles. Some interpreted this assignment as a reflection of Slovenia's decision to pick politically less profiled candidate. Many opinions on the assigned portfolio assessed that it reflects Slovenia's relative unimportance within the EU, since it was seen as a peripheral portfolio. Partly the choice was also seen as a result of his career qualifications since Lenarčič was indeed active in these areas of expertise. As a country, Slovenia is also recognized for its efforts establishing the ITF Enhancing Human Security (ITF) organisation. Originally named International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, this is a humanitarian, non-profit organization established by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in March 1998 with the initial purpose to help Bosnia and Herzegovina in the implementation of the peace agreement and to provide assistance and support in post-conflict rehabilitation.

The assigned portfolio was understood as partly a disappointment also when compared to those assigned to the two neighbouring countries, Croatia and Hungary. Croatian candidate Dubravka Šuica was assigned the portfolio of demography and democracy, what was generally interpreted as a more important portfolio, and was also given the position of the (non-executive) vice-president. The Hungarian candidate was initially assigned the portfolio of European Neighbourhood and Enlargement, but this is still unsure due to the rejection of Trócsány before the hearing.

### **Hearing before the Committee**

Hearing of the commissioner-designate Lenarčič took place on the 2nd of October before the Development Committee and the The Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee. The unofficial feedback of the committee members and the president of the Development Committee Tomas Tobe were very positive. The assessment criteria range

from overall competence to area-specific and EU specific knowledge to the communication skills.

In the hearing, Lenarčič stressed the importance of the key humanitarian principles that AU should also stay true to the values of humanity, neutrality, objectiveness and independence. Candidate stressed three priorities that EU should adhere to in the Crisis Management field: (1) fast and efficient help, (2) strengthening the mechanisms for disaster prevention, (3) enhancing the recognisability of EU crisis management.

### **Conclusions**

Due to the rejection of three of the Commissioners-designate of the initial commissioner list proposed by Ursula von der Leyen and the subsequent repeating of the process of their selection, the new Commission has not yet passed the vote in EU Parliament as was initially scheduled. The Slovenian candidate, however, seems to have skilfully passed the hearing before the Development Committee and The Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee. Despite the initial criticisms of the choice of the candidate and of the portfolio assigned to him, the choice made by the Prime Minister Šarec has proven to be successful.

# **Albania and the New European Commission**

Marsela Musabelliu

## **Introduction**

On September 10<sup>th</sup>, European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has presented her proposed team and the jobs she wants her Commissioners to carry out; by introducing the new structure of the next European Commission she stated: *“I want a Commission that is led with determination, that is clearly focused on the issues at hand and that provides answers. I want it to be a well-balanced, agile and modern Commission. My Commission will be a geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies. And I want the European Union to be the guardian of multilateralism. Because we know that we are stronger by doing together what we cannot do alone.”* As the expectations are high on performance and outcome, the new Commissioners will start their work on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, after the European Parliament (EP) have granted confirmation for the candidacies, however, even without going to the EP differences and debates sparkled on the newly nominated.

## **Implications and impact of the European Commission (EC) for Albania**

The Commissioners are expected not to work for their country but for the EU as a whole, and as whole they decide on the future of the Enlargement Process. For Albanians, the two key figures of the EC are the Commissioner in charge ‘Neighborhood and Enlargement’ as well as the ‘High-Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Policy’.

The two outgoing Commissioners holding these positions - High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission, Federica Mogherini, and Commissioner for European

Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn – are both very well know personalities in Albania. With their frequents visits to Tirana and their presence in almost every crucial political moment (going from the protests to parliamentary boycott, from the Justice Reform to electoral issues), public opinion has come to know them as determined supports to the county’s EU perspective. Indeed, in their last declarations on the issue they stated: “[...] *The Western Balkans are Europe and will be part of the EU's future, of a stronger, stable and united European Union. The past year has been a year of positive change, across the region. Albania (and North Macedonia) have shown a strong determination to advance on the EU path and achieved results that are concrete and must be irreversible. The European Union's enlargement policy is an investment in peace, in security, in prosperity and in the stability of Europe...*

*Albania has embraced the opportunity and delivered on reforms, in particular in the areas identified as crucial by the Council one year prior. In light of the significant progress achieved and the relevant conditions being met, the Commission recommended that the Council opens accession negotiations with Albania.”*<sup>1</sup>

A promising detail, confirming that this line of thought with Albania is projected also into the new Commission arrived on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, when a joint letter by Presidents Tusk, Sassoli, Juncker and President-elect Von der Leyen on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania was made public.

The letter indicated that the EU stands in front of a strategic choice and whether the EU decides now to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania is a test of the Union’s ability to deliver on its promises and look to the future.<sup>2</sup> By admitting that Albania has done what

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<sup>1</sup> Annual assessment recommendations, delivered June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Available at: [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-19-2752\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-2752_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Full text of the letter available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/03/joint-letter-by-presidents-tusk-juncker-sassoli-and-president-elect-von-der-leyen-to-the-eu-heads-of-state-or-government-on-the-accession-talks-with-north-macedonia-and-albania/>

the EU asked it to do, they all believe that now is the time to open accession talks with both countries.

This was perceived as a very positive sign in the country and while the opposition was diminishing its meaning, the ruling force was appraising the content and started to use it as another achievement of theirs.

However, besides the political discourse in, what the majority of Albanians hope for the new Commissioners holding these positions is for them to have the same positive inclination as they predecessors did.

*Josep Borrell*, incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain, is about to take over as Europe's chief diplomat, and it is said that he will strive to make the EU a heavyweight in international affairs. The next high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice-president of the European Commission, at age of 72, is to become the chief diplomat for 500 million Europeans, with 4,000 civil servants under his command.<sup>1</sup> This outspoken Spanish socialist has been claimed in the media for his colorful and pungent comments like criticizing the Trump administration, saying America was acting 'like a cowboy'; he has also called Russia an 'old enemy' that has 'returned as a threat'; or stating that while Brexit felt like 'an epidemic' for the European Union, it has ended up 'a vaccine'.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the action plan for the Western Balkans will be, it is expected that the narrative and the style will be way more different than the ones of Ms. Mogherini.

During his introductory speech, in the Parliamentary hearing Mr. Borrell stressed his intention to engage in reforms in the Western Balkans, support democracy and the integrity of Ukraine, address the challenges in the southern neighborhood, develop a new strategy towards Africa, work on political relations with Asia, step up cooperation with Latin America

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<sup>1</sup> Close-Up: Josep Borrell. *Berlin Policy Journal*. Available at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/close-up-josep-borrell/>

<sup>2</sup> Can an Outspoken Spaniard Give Europe One Voice in the World? *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/09/world/europe/josep-borrell-fontelles-eu-spain.html>

and reinstate transatlantic relations (US-EU). He stated: *“The world has changed for the worse...There are few agreements, more vetoes”*<sup>1</sup>

László Trócsányi (Hungary) is the former Minister of Justice of Hungary. He was designated by Von der Leyen to lead the ‘Neighborhood and Enlargement’ portfolio. However, on September 30<sup>th</sup>, the Legal Affairs committee confirms Trócsányi rejection and his hearings suspended. As second assessment from MEPs confirmed that the Hungarian Commissioner-designate is unable to exercise his functions on the grounds of conflict of interest, following the examination of his declarations. The government of Hungary is expected to come up with alternative candidates to replace Trócsányi. The assessment of the Legal Affairs committee has raised criticisms both in the European Parliament and from the Commissioner-designates themselves. In Albania this news was perceived with plenty of confusion: as soon as analysts and public opinion started to scrutinize the new Commissioner-designate for Enlargement, his candidacy was rejected.

Since the Enlargement process is the focal point for Albania and the main institutional branch of the EC that deals with the Western Balkans, the suspense is high.

An important aspect of this new Commission that was widely praised in Albania is the gender equality; the fact that Mrs. von der Leyen's executive team will be the most gender-diverse in EU history, with 13 women and 14 men, was the other most discussed topic in Albanian commentaries.

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<sup>1</sup> EP. Hearing with High Representative/Vice President-designate Josep Borrell. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190926IPR62260/hearing-with-high-representative-vice-president-designate-josep-borrell>

## **The report**

The narrative from Brussels is that a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans <sup>1</sup>. This firm, merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. <sup>2</sup>

Adopted by the European Commission on 6 February 2018, the "Enlargement package" - a set of documents explaining its policy on EU enlargement - includes a Communication on enlargement which sets out the way forward and takes stock of the situation in the candidate countries and potential candidates. In addition to this communication, the package contains the Reports in which the Commission services present their detailed assessment of the state of play in each candidate country and potential candidate, what has been achieved over the last year, and set out guidelines on reform priorities. <sup>3</sup>

The last report on Albania (June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019) introduced a full picture of the political and socio-economic landscape of the country by summarizing that it has continued to make progress on its EU reform Agenda; notwithstanding, a strong polarization persisted in the political sphere making the issue of the parliamentary boycott one of the most delicate domains to be dealt with.

The progress report is a very important statement from the EU Commission which is often taken as a base record from members states when deliberating on whether to give the "green light" or not to an aspiring member state. However, in many believe that the integration process of Albania is more political than technical. While the technicalities may

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<sup>1</sup> Full text available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> European Western Balkans Strategy: Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en)



sometime bend, the political will of the member states, especially the sceptics appears unshakable.

### **Conclusions**

Mrs. Von der Leyen is a widely known integrationist who has called for a “United States of Europe” and supports an “Euro army”. At a press conference following the announcement of the commission nominees, Von der Leyen stated that “the Western Balkans are very important” and that she wants the countries in the region to be “as close as possible to the European Union”. This further brought into question the possibility of any of these countries joining the EU during her mandate. Western Balkan countries need more development and technical assistance to speed up their economic growth and accelerate reforms. Is the new Commission ready to create new support instruments in the near future?

A strong and united Europe could mean a more cohesive attitude towards Albania and its integration path to the EU. Unfortunately, recognition of Albania's progress through the opening of accession talks is still certain because the final step requires unanimous support from all EU governments to begin the discussion.

Mrs. Von der Leyen most quoted phrase since she became President of the EC was *"Protecting our European Way of Life"*, and while in EU member countries this sparked a debate on what this *way* really is, it is only wished that this *way* will soon include Albanians as well.

# **BiH and the New European Commission**

Ivica Bakota

## **EU stagnation for over a year**

Putting bluntly, there seems no EU member or member-aspirant country being less concerned about the election and nomination of new European commissioners as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only country (among realistic EU member-aspirants) that can be said is relatively farther than BiH in the process of EU integrations, Kosovo is and ought to be far more concerned how the new commissioners lineup (especially new Foreign & Security Policy Commissioner and Enlargement Commissioner) would impact its dialogue with Belgrade and the EU minded reform processes. BiH, according to widely shared professional opinion, has virtually frozen its EU integration processes at least from May 2019 when the outgoing European Commission sent Opinion on BiH. This means that BiH politicians and government officials did nothing to initiate discussion and due diligence, let alone implementation of proposed recommendations. In the hindsight, this is to say that “official” BiH has been mute about everything concerning the EU and the “positions, standpoints and concerns” should be harvested from EU-minded watchdog institutes and agencies. Their response on the current stillness in the EU integration is simple: no progress in forming BiH central government means no progress in the EU integrations.

Stakes on the BiH integration processes and obtaining a ‘green light’ for a start of accession negotiations, however, do change as a new “EU government” is about to come on the stage. It is only to see how farther the EU candidacy and opening of negotiations will become during the protracted “wuwei” stance from official Sarajevo.

### **Where exactly is BiH on its EU path**

In early 2016, BiH submitted an application for EU membership. In May 2019, the EC issued an Opinion on BiH's application for membership, without a clear deadline for when this country could obtain candidate status.

Since May this year, when the European Commission published Opinion on the progress the countries in Western Balkan (including BiH) made in the EU integration process, BiH leaders rarely have made any statement to show the EC Opinion is given due consideration. The fourteen points (mentioned in one of the previous political reports) identified by the EC for BiH as priorities on its path to candidate status and the opening of negotiations, were to be analyzed and implemented by the newly elected authorities after the general election held a year ago (7 October 2018). Since then, BiH entered a full year of the government crisis and despite some indications suggesting otherwise, is far from forming central government as it was half a year ago.

As BiH political analysts claim, if one thing is certain it is that the current ethno-political elite has no real commitment to pursue any integratory framework that aims to solve permanent political deadlock in BiH and ultimately render them expendable. At the first glance, as Denis Carkadzic of the NGO "Why Not" comments, there is a certain difference between commitments of the key political actors for the Euro-integration process, but soon, as the stagnation period prolongs "all masks will soon fall." Just as in case of NATO integration, which is blocked by RS Parliament resolution and SNSD opposition, "conditionality" from BiH regarding the EU accession negotiations arrived when some MPs from Republika Srpska (RS) demanded the application of the so-called "entity-voting principle" for all decisions regarding the EU accession negotiations. This demand was rejected by Brussels, but shows awry thinking from BiH. - It is for the EU to adopt BiH standards first.

### **New EC Commissioners**

While this situation continues in BiH, by September EU has started with the election of the new European Commission. No matter how distant

it may seem to the current BiH political reality and relevant to its application for candidate status, some political alignments regarding the appointments of the EU commissioners have emerged.

Already in August, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell has been announced for the post of EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security, scheduled to succeed Federica Mogherini in November. Although Serbian media was more vocal about his appointment, mostly because he is coming from one of four EU member states refusing to recognize Kosovo's independence, his "national background" would also have some implications for BiH, especially for secessionist aspirations in RS. This experienced diplomat and EU-bureaucrat has made no suggestions indicating radical changes in policy towards the Western Balkans. He has announced to visit Prishtina in an effort to resume a dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina and said to put the Western Balkans on his priority list should he be elected for the post. In overall, Bosnian media commented his nomination as continuing 'business as usual' as far as BiH candidacy is concerned, allowing some personal and party differences to occur if this "old-school socialist" is about to share a table with "domestic nationalists".

Nomination of Laszlo Trocsanyi, official Hungarian candidate for EU Commissioner, which was on EC President-elect von der Leyen's initial ticket for the post of EU Commissioner for Enlargement policy provoked significant outcry in Bosnian media. Faktor.ba portal in the headlines put "This is a provocation!", describing him as merely "executing the Orban's will". He was claimed to be the "architect" of the Hungarian justice system, which has been vehemently criticized within the EU for limiting the powers of the judiciary. Also, he introduced a series of laws that triggered legal conflicts with the European Commission, and gained many enemies in Brussels. For his prospective position of Enlargement Commissioner, the most concerning fact was not his assumed conservative stance regarding the WB enlargement as it was his connections with "deficient and illiberal democracy" back home in Hungary. He oversaw laws criminalizing non-governmental organizations to assist refugees and set up Hungarian container camps for asylum seekers, as well as measures forcing the Central

European University to leave Budapest. These are all alarming signals for European MEP's when sending someone sharing too much same-mindedness with some leaders in the Western Balkans".

Moreover, Bosnian analysts agree that the nomination of Fidesz candidate or any Victor Orbán's wingman is not motivating for BiH's European aspirations, especially because the latter in addition to his controversial views, is also known for making quasi-state receptions to the RS President (current Serb MOP) Milorad Dodik and was photographed with the ethnic map of BiH. Bosnian media reported quite jubilatory when by the end of September, the EP Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI) rejected Trocsanyi's nomination on the grounds of the conflict of interest.

Next to be discussed on the ticket for Enlargement Commissioner were Janez Lenarcic and Dubravka Suica, official candidates for commissioners from Slovenia and Croatia. Both candidates were elected by their respective governments as experienced EU bureaucrats with "top-notch references in the field of international and European affairs." Janez Lenarcic was Slovenian Ambassador to the EU and was suggested to assume Enlargement policy, Regional policy or Trade & Energy. Dubravka Suica, on the other hand, is HDZ politician and long-term mayor of Dubrovnik, serving as Croatian MEP for two consecutive terms. Lenarcic and Suica are both capitalizing on their country's position, historical, cultural and linguistic proximity to the Western Balkans. As a HDZ candidate (and Croatian), Suica's proximity could be troubling for Sarajevo-based politicians who fear Croatian asymmetric bilateralism looming over EU-BiH relations.

### **New Head of EU Delegation Arrives in Sarajevo**

In August the EU has appointed new Head of the Delegation of the European Union (EU) to BiH and EU Special Representative. His name is Johann Sattler, experienced Austrian diplomat who already served in the Western Balkans (leaving his post as Austrian Ambassador in Albania) and in September replaced Swedish diplomat Lars-Gunnar Wigemark. In his first official address in BiH he has mentioned the current political and

economic problems BiH is facing, referring to remarks about BiH as a "lost case" and a "country where the situation would never improve", in down on earth tone said that "it might be possible, but much remains to be done in BiH."

His appointment is too fresh even for first hand analysis. Besides the 'opening address' he went so far on few inaugural meetings where he expressed commitments for BiH's EU integration. Countering the objections that the EU is slowing down with the WB enlargement agenda, he emphasized that the EU is not retreating from the Balkans; however, given the circumstances it is believed that the impact of EU's downsizing its commitments in the region would be the least worrisome for 'permanently blocked' BiH.

Indicative to this is mentioning substantial socio-political problems of BiH rather than current political issues in Sattler's address. In his words, the most important is the implementation of comprehensive socio-economic reforms. The second issue is the rule of law, he believes, is a fundamental issue. Only with a functioning judiciary would be possible to start accession negotiations, which implies tackling all constitutional (Sejdic-Finci law) and procedural hurdles. He also singled out public administration reform, emphasizing that citizens "are investing a lot of money in public administration and, in turn, expect less nepotism and more efficient administration".

On the EU-BiH dialogue level, the EC's opinion represents five key priorities that the country must address. One of the first things the EC expects to see is the development of an action plan for implementation of the opinion. "That would send a clear message to the EU that there is a commitment to move forward." For the most crucial question, should the EU keep BiH integration path aligned with standards for whole WB region or relent to any sign of progress from BiH, the Head of the EU Delegation temporarily "passed the ball" to BiH side saying that for now everything depends on BiH authorities.

# **Macedonian Debates on the New European Commission**

Anastas Vangeli

## **Introduction**

*As an aspiring candidate for membership in the European Union (EU), the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) paid close attention to the formation of the new European Commission (EC) for the period 2019-2024. A significant part of the debates on the new Commission were shaped by the discourse in the mainstream European media – focusing on the negotiations and bargaining between the top leaders on who gets which position, while also discussing the key challenges for the forthcoming commission – the projected exit of the United Kingdom from the EU being the most burning one. At the same time, Macedonian media paid significant attention to the issue of EU enlargement, and in particular, the attitude of the new Commission towards the EU membership candidacy of Macedonia, as well as the appointment of a new Commissioner in charge for enlargement negotiations. Once it turned out that the Directorate General (DG) dealing with enlargement would be assigned to a Hungarian official from the ranks of Fidesz, the discussions on the new Commission and its enlargement agenda became more politicized – as the future of the relations between Macedonia and Hungary remain a big unknown in the aftermath of the escape of the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to Budapest, where he has been granted political asylum. This paper therefore discusses the two aspects of the Macedonian debates on the new EC – the general discussion, and the discussion of the Enlargement Portfolio.*

## **General Expectations and Analyses**

Very few Macedonian policymakers and experts have thorough inside knowledge of European politics and the strenuous negotiation processes through which the most powerful governments on the continent agree on the line up of the EC. While the negotiations between European power elites cover a wide range of issues (e.g. stances on trade, migration, climate change, external relations, and so on), what interests Macedonian policymakers, experts and media is whether a given political figure is perceived to have a friendly attitude towards Macedonia or not. This is greatly a result of the prevailing political culture and (lack of) understanding of EU politics, which is still perceived as somewhat distant and “off limits” for Macedonians to comment on substantial issues. Therefore, while the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the French President Emanuel Macron and a range of other political leaders from the region in the period after the EU elections discussed a number of political and policy issues that will shape the future of Europe on the medium and potentially long term, Macedonian elites were on the sidelines not even probing into the substance of the core issues of discussion; their major interest were the various perspectives on EU enlargement and the perceived “friendliness” of the proposed new EC officials towards Macedonia.

So when the surprising appointment of the new EC President, Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, was announced, Macedonian elites were in celebratory mood. Von der Leyen, as a German Minister of Defense, was one of the array of German officials who visited Macedonia in September 2018 to voice her support for the Referendum on the Prespa Agreement. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said that Ms von der Leyen is a proven long-term friend and supporter of Macedonia, who had played a great supportive role for Macedonia's NATO integration; Zaev had voiced his expectations that she will play a similar role in the process of the EU enlargement and Macedonia's accession. The Vice Premier and Minister of Defense, Radmila Shekerinska greeted the selection of von der Leyen arguing a similar point, while also noting that it is a great achievement for Europe to have a female EC President.



Macedonian analysts also interpreted the outcome of the tough negotiations in Brussels, that is the appointment of von der Leyen, as a good sign for the EU enlargement prospects and Macedonia's hopes. Even though during the period of the negotiations, the French President Emanuel Macron had fiercely opposed the idea of EU enlargement in the near future (arguing that what EU needs first is comprehensive institutional reform), Macedonian analysis interpreted the nomination of a German Commissioner as a sign that gives grounds to be more optimistic about Macedonia's candidacy bid (as Germany in recent years has been a major supporter of the enlargement process).

Macedonian policymakers and analysts at the same time focused on the prospects of Macedonia starting its accession talks with the EU in the course of October 2019. In the Macedonian discourse, enlargement is seen as equally important for the EU as Brexit and other burning political issues that are about to be decided upon by the new Commission. The supportive statements by officials from the outgoing Commission, and from officials from a number of member-states (in the first place Germany and Poland), were interpreted as a sign that EC will finally make the way overdue decision on the opening of the accession talks – which was delayed twice so far – in Summer 2018 and in Summer 2019 (see previous papers on external affairs). France's and other countries' remarks were downplayed in light of the nomination of von der Leyen. Therefore, even though not thoroughly grasping the political dynamics in Brussels, Macedonian elites already carved up a general expectation from the new EC.

### **Debates on the Enlargement Portfolio**

As a candidate country, Macedonia primarily deals with two organs of the EC – the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the DG that is in charge for enlargement (in the previous EC, it was DG Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations or DG NEAR). Even though EEAS has a central role in shaping and implementing EU's foreign policy and in that sense is central for the enlargement process, Macedonian policymakers and experts have been primarily concerned with DG NEAR (or its

successor), which will be directly in charge for contacting and monitoring the enlargement process. Thus, the nomination of Josep Borell as a High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy attracted relatively little attention in the Macedonian debates (contrary to the European debates, where Borell has been a subject of a lot of coverage, primarily due to his particularly direct diplomatic style). Nevertheless, the announcement that it will be a Hungarian official assigned to chair the enlargement portfolio attracted much more attention in the country (as well as in the wider epistemic community that deals with EU enlargement).

Hungary has been one of the most committed EU member states when it comes to advancing the enlargement agenda for the Balkans throughout the years, and has therefore fought hard for getting the enlargement portfolio. At the same time, Hungary has been considered as one of the EU member states that has diverged from the liberal governance blueprint over the years, and therefore has been exposed not only to harsh criticism coming from various EU voices across the political spectrum, but also subjected to various punitive measures, such as the triggering of the Article 7 of the EU Treaty. The membership of the ruling party Fidesz in the European People's Party has been temporarily suspended (but not terminated) until further notice. These two disparate images of Hungary – as both a EU enlargement supporter, and as an illiberal EU member state – have shaped the debate on the prospects of a Hungarian official running DG NEAR. The major contradiction in the eyes of liberal commentators was that Hungary, which has been blamed to violate a number of EU norms, would now be in charge of promoting those norms among candidate countries. On the other hand, conservatives claimed that getting a Hungarian to lead DG NEAR was a logical step forward, given Hungary's long-time commitment to the enlargement process.

In the case of Macedonia, the nomination of a Hungarian official to be in charge of the enlargement process had added political weight. Namely, in late 2018, the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (sentenced for unlawfully influencing the purchase of armored vehicle – see previous reports), has escaped to Hungary, and requested – and was promptly

granted – political asylum, claiming that he has been a victim of politically motivated process in Macedonia, and that he has evidence that his life would be in danger if he returns in his home country. Gruevski has been a long time friend with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, while Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE and Orban's Fidesz have historically had close cooperation and shared ideological values. The SDSM-led government protested Hungary's motion to protect Gruevski, framing it as a direct intervention in Macedonia's internal affairs that contradicts EU norms. Experts and media close to SDSM – who had many times in the past criticized the VMRO-DPMNE – Fidesz connection, adopted even harsher rhetoric on Hungary after Gruevski's escape. They had hoped for some kind of intervention by Brussels on the issue. Therefore, the news that Hungary will be taking over the enlargement portfolio under the new EC was perceived as a huge blow to the anti-Gruevski forces in the Macedonia. However, not willing to cause any conflict, Macedonian policymakers remained largely silent on the issue. At the same time, the news that a Hungarian will be in charge of DG NEAR was considered a good sign by VMRO-DPMNE: its Vice President, Aleksandar Nikoloski lauded Hungary's commitment and the example of its own experience (as Hungary joined the EU in 2004), arguing that Hungary is Macedonia's true friend, which will create a momentum to fast-track Macedonia's EU accession bid. However, he warned that the history of critical comments by SDSM and its supporters made in the past may have an adverse effect in the near future.

Initially, Hungary nominated Laszlo Trocsanyi, a former Minister of Justice, to head DG NEAR. However, the nomination of Trocsanyi (along with the nomination of the Romanian Rovana Plumb to lead DG Transport) was rejected by the European Parliament on the grounds of alleged conflict of interest. In the aftermath, Hungary protested the decision as politically motivated, and nominated Oliver Varhelyi, its ambassador to the EU, as its new candidate for the position. Macedonian elites are still awaiting the decision on Varhelyi's candidacy.

# Montenegro and the New European Commission

Vojin Golubovic

*The new European Commission will be an opportunity to test the readiness of the new European administration to get back to a good pace of enlargement policy, ie, further unification of Europe. We have previously witnessed that the commission which had just completed its mandate in the last period had serious stages of slowing down in the implementation of its most successful policy – enlargement policy. This is something that the Montenegrin authorities have been persistently warning and reminding European structures about – continuing good enlargement policy is necessary if the process of unification of Europe, that is, the vision of a modern Europe, should happen and that enlargement would be equally beneficial for the countries of the Western Balkans and the European Union as a whole.*

*It seems that in the upcoming years the European Commission will have to pay much more attention to what the Western Balkan countries have to say. Why? Finally, it became clear that countries in the region could have an alternative policy. That is, the future of a safe Balkans lies in the European Union, but if that European Union is not more sensitive to the needs of the countries of the region, the political scene could become like a free market - the influence will be given to those world powers of which the countries of the region will benefit most.*

## **Montenegro favors the election of a new European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement**

What concerns the candidate countries, including Montenegro, is the increasing volume of the Brussels administration and the new European Commission. The number of departments seems too large and unnecessary, which means only additional administration and new requirements for candidate countries in order to create jobs for such an administration. However, the positive thing is that a Hungarian representative, Laszlo Trocsanyi, has been appointed to the position of European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. By choosing a Hungarian representative as the new EU Enlargement Commissioner, Montenegro wins, not loses. This is a conclusion despite the fact that it is the election of a person who was previously publicly criticized by Brussels for carrying out controversial judicial reforms in Hungary. Although the election of this candidate has not been confirmed because it must also pass through the European Parliament approval (where there is some opposition to this election), a new candidate will be proposed, but again from Hungary seeking the same position. Why this is important for Montenegro?

Hungary has a friendly attitude towards enlargement with the Western Balkan countries, and was a main proponent of the enlargement during recent years. This is probably also because of the potential resolution of migrant issues that it has had many problems with in recent years. Regardless of the reasons for Hungary's affirmative stance on enlargement, what is good for Montenegrin officials is Hungary's official stance on Montenegro's further progress towards the EU. It is not surprising that in early September, a friendly football match between the national teams of Montenegro and Hungary was attended by the Hungarian president himself, Mr. Viktor Orban, accompanied by the Montenegrin

president, while he also had an informal meeting with the prime minister. The premise is that the main topic was EU enlargement policy.

The fact that Hungary has a positive stance on Montenegro's accession to the EU is also evidenced by the fact that recently in one forum the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs said that there was no functional reason that Montenegro was not already admitted to the EU. Also, the Hungarian Embassy in cooperation with the Hungarian Foreign and Trade Institute organized a conference "Current EU Situation and the Future of EU Enlargement Policy" during which, within two panels, the results and next steps of Montenegro in the negotiation process were discussed. The conclusion is that the European Union will only be complete with the accession of the Western Balkan countries, which is why it is important for EU enlargement to remain among the priorities of the new Brussels administration, with the support of current EU member states. The Hungarian Government's positive general position on Montenegro's accession to the EU is also noticeable from other addresses. State Secretary for Security Policy and Political Director of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, stated that EU enlargement is positive, both politically and economically, and Montenegro is a leader in the region in terms of progress in meeting commitments.

So, first of all, Montenegro can expect the Hungarian representative in the European Commission to commit to opening of the remaining chapter in the negotiations in the case of Montenegro. In this context, experience shows that opening a chapter has become a highly politicized issue, and that in previous enlargements it has been a more technical issue, especially since opening a chapter only means the beginning of a process.

The question, though, is how powerful is Hungary to put its enlargement policy at the top of the European Commission's agenda? However, despite the traditional influence on the decision-making of the

old Member States, these countries now seem to realize that the whole European Union is shaken on various grounds, and that the future of this project does not allow suffering from such a kind of elitism or thought. Geopolitical circumstances have now changed significantly and the flirting of potential candidates with other centers of power is ubiquitous. So far, Brussels has been blackmailing countries in the region (including Montenegro) with various demands, as the motive was EU membership as a path of progress. The countries of the region now seem to be at least in the same position - they can ask something from Brussels because there are other pathways, unless the accession and enlargement policy is clearly defined and technically much more effective than during the previous European Commission mandate. It is likely that the Enlargement Commissioner will try to go with the rhetoric that enlargement policy has been recognized in EU history as one of the key mechanisms for strengthening unity, European spirit and cooperation and fostering diversity.

However, it is encouraging that not only Hungary, but also some countries that have traditionally been "rigid" towards a new EU enlargement (such as France) are sending more positive signals when it comes to EU accession options. It is clear that the focus on enlargement policy is being renewed, that a new pace is being announced in the realization of that vision, which creates a space for optimism in Montenegro.

Undoubtedly, the interest of different power centers (not just the EU) is focused on the region, and therefore on Montenegro. Recently, the US State Secretary also visited Montenegro, and China already has good cooperation with Montenegrin officials, so the European Union must also be activated to expand its influence. Therefore, despite some slow progress on the rule of law, corruption and the like, there should be no delay in the negotiations between the European Union and Montenegro. Moreover, it

seems that the new Brussels administration will have more sense for Montenegro and the countries of the region than the previous one. The powers of Commissioner Laszlo Trocsany would be extended. Namely, unlike former Commissioner Johannes Hahn, who was formally in charge of "enlargement negotiations", the future commissioner will deal directly with enlargement issues.

It is clear that neither the European Commission nor Montenegrin officials believe that in a shorter period (under the mandate of the new European administration), Montenegrin society can be radically transformed. It is primarily meant that by 2025 (which is optimistically referred to as the date by which Montenegro could access to the European Union), there will be no significant changes in institutional, structural, or economic reforms. But what can be significantly changed if promotion policies are to be promoted (as announced) is technical administrative advances. In other words, it is expected that the new European Commission will be more efficient, more motivating and that there will be no delay in negotiations. The very appointment of a Hungarian representative as Commissioner for Enlargement can contribute to a better understanding of the Balkans by the EU and greater agility (compared to previous one) in transmitting messages from the Western Balkan countries. That the EU is more sensitive to Montenegro is also demonstrated by the fact that EU representatives have refuted the rhetoric of triggering the balance clause (which was mentioned recently in media), which applies in the event of stagnation in the progress of the candidate country, and thus stagnation in the negotiations.

To conclude, Montenegro could expect more affirmative attitude regarding Montenegro's negotiations regarding its access to EU. However, the problem is that external motives play a decisive role when it comes to implementing reforms in Montenegro. Independent of European policy, Montenegro should continue its dedicated and responsible advancement in



all areas, establishing standards that will really bring Montenegrin society closer to the ideal it pursues, including the rule of law and better quality of life for Montenegrin citizens.

# Serbia and the New European Commission

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**Abstract:** *Before the European Commission assumes power on November 1<sup>st</sup>, the European Parliament needs to approve each Commissioner-designate. Parliamentary hearings of the nominees have been under way and are expected to be completed by mid-October. During a plenary session in Strasbourg on October 23<sup>rd</sup> it will be decided whether the EC will be elected in its entirety or not. As regards the candidates, some have been “inherited”, some are relatively new in European politics, and a few others have attracted controversies, making the EC formation process more challenging than originally anticipated. Although as a membership-candidate Serbia doesn’t take part in this process, various stakeholders in Belgrade remain interested in the formation of EU institutions. This especially applies to selection of the new Enlargement commissioner (who will again additionally be assigned with Neighborhood policy), as well as the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, who will continue to mediate between Belgrade and Priština.*

On September 10<sup>th</sup> in Brussels, the European Commission President-Elect Ms. Ursula von den Leyen presented the candidates for the Commissioner posts for the next 5-year-term. The first EC led by a female President is expected to assume power on November 1<sup>st</sup>. European Commission will consist out of 27 members - 1 less comparing to the previous mandate (as the UK refused to nominate its Commissioner due to Brexit, inconveniently scheduled already for October 31<sup>st</sup>).

The new EC’s guidelines are outlined in the document “A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe”. These broad political priorities (and VP portfolios) include: the “European Green Deal”, the “economy that works for people”, “Europe fit for the digital age”, “protecting the

European way of life”, “a stronger Europe in the world” and “a new push for European democracy”. Some portfolio names are perceived as compromises of President-Elect with the Visegrad countries and right parliamentarians for securing their support.

This may apply to portfolio “protecting the European way of life”, which wording caused controversies. It is to be led by Mr. Margaritis Schinas, overseeing areas ranging from the problematic aspect of migrations, security, to education and employment. The outgoing EC President, Mr. Juncker noticed that the portfolio’s name implied that “migration is in opposition to the European way of life”, so it should be changed.

Also, to various other actors in political domain, connecting the areas of migration and security in such a context and under such umbrella-term seems archaic and out of place. Still, Mr. Schinas perceives his domain as logically connected, from the protection of EU borders and citizens, over modernizing the asylum system, to advancing the possibilities for the youth. Although his hearing before the European Parliament (EP) went well, the MEPs from leftist groups have called for modification of the portfolio’s name due to its far-right connotations, so the renaming option shouldn’t be excluded.

Likewise, there were also some fundamental concerns regarding certain nominates. Two commissioner candidates have been rejected by the EP’s legal committee even before the official hearings. Mr. László Trócsányi (nominated for Neighborhood and Enlargement policies) and the Romanian designate Ms. Rovana Plumb (Transport) were both rejected due to concerns over a potential conflict of interest. However, despite the discomfort, upon request of EC President on September 30<sup>th</sup> the Hungarian government nominated Mr. Oliver Varhelyi, an ambassador to the EU and a career civil servant, whereas Romania chose Ms. Gabriela Kiot, a state official. There have been some reservations in western Europe, regarding Hungary’s ability to lead that domain due to rule of law disagreements with Brussels and the importance of that field for EU policies, but some

Western Balkan leaders have welcomed this proposition, due to familiarity of Budapest with the processes in the region.

The hearings before the EP started on September 30<sup>th</sup> and the entire procedure is expected to complete by October 23<sup>rd</sup>, when the plenary in Strasbourg is projected to vote on whether to elect the EC in its totality. According to the information available while writing this text, over 20 hearings have completed favorably, whereas 2-3 Commissioner-designates will be additionally reviewed. This doesn't include the new Romanian and Hungarian nominates, whose hearings remain to be scheduled. Although most hearings have finished by October 8<sup>th</sup>, with follow-up hearings for certain candidates expected to take place in mid-October.

Perhaps the most apparent thing about the proposed EC is the gender balance, with 13 female candidates. The Commissioner-designate for Equality, Ms. Helena Dalli from Malta, has passed the hearing, although with a number of reservations, having been asked about the unresolved murder of the Maltese journalist Caruana Galizia, to improving the status of women and minority communities. The Estonian candidate, Ms. Kadri Simson, highlighted the central importance of energy in the European Green Deal, to be presented within 100 days of the new EC.

However, apart from Ms. Dalli who faced MEP criticism, even more challenging was the hearing of Ms. Sylvie Goulard, for the Internal Market domain. Ms. Goulard, an associate of the President Macron, is involved in two separate proceedings (before the French court and in front of the European Anti-Fraud Agency-OLAF), but has denied charges and called on the presumption of innocence. She outlined the necessity for complete integration of the internal market and challenges which need to be overcome. However, at the moment of this text she hasn't yet convinced the legal committee about her suitability for the post, so there is a need for additional written clarifications, and perhaps an additional hearing.

Likewise, OLAF had also been investigating Mr. Janusz Wojciechowski, the Polish candidate for Agriculture, for travel expense inconsistencies. Apart from that, Mr. Wojciechowski's performance was unconvincing for the EP; he was criticized for responding

too vaguely and insufficiently clearly to questions both in domain of agriculture and the OLAF process. Meanwhile, he has received additional questions from the EP, but the Polish media don't consider his chances as solid and even mention the need for withdrawing his nomination, which may upset the Polish government.

Another potentially troublesome candidate, Belgian Didier Reynders (Justice), has been questioned regarding the processes against him on corruption allegations, among other questions ranging from EU passports to enforcing more efficient rule of law mechanisms. His hearing eventually concluded maybe more favorably than projected, so the Belgian sources consider his EC position as fairly certain. The hearing of Ms. Dubravka Šuica from Croatia also went good (despite some provoking questions regarding her financial status since entering politics), so her post as a VP/Democracy and Demography Commissioner has been supported. Italy's efforts to constrain its public debt along EU requirements coincided with Mr. Paolo Gentiloni receiving support as the Economy Commissioner, with comprehensive plans to push through tax proposals and to sketch out the EU unemployment reinsurance plan.

VP hearings on October 7-8th went smoothly. A Dutch VP candidate Mr. Frans Timmermans will monitor implementation of the European Green Deal, aimed at securing EU's „climate-neutral“ status by mid-century, overseeing 5 Commissioners, covering health, food safety, agriculture and rural development, mobility and transport, energy, environment, maritime affairs and fisheries. Latvian candidate Mr. Valdis Dombrovskis will lead the portfolio „Economy that works for the people“ and Danish VP designate, Ms. Margrethe Vestager, will manage the digital age portfolio. Ms. Vestager was nicknamed the „Tax lady“ by the US President Mr. Trump, due to her measures against US tech companies over breaking competition policy rules (as seen in multi-billion-euro fines for Apple and Google's misconduct within EU).

Mr. Josep Borrell from Spain (HR/VP-designate, „A Stronger Europe in the World“) won the backing of the MEPs. In response to questions regarding his homeland's refusal to recognize the so-called

Kosovo, Mr. Borrell highlighted that Belgrade-Priština agreement process will be an EU priority, and Priština will be his first foreign visit. Ms. Věra Jourová („Values and Transparency“) from Czechia promised to put special emphasis on EU media freedoms. She is a current commissioner, like Mr. Johannes Hahn (nominated by Austria, this time for Budget and Administration), Ms. Mariya Gabriel (Bulgarian candidate for Innovation and Youth), Mr. Maroš Šefčovič (Slovakia – expected to remain VP, in domain of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight), and the Irish Commissioner Mr. Phil Hogan, who is expected to switch from Agriculture to Trade.

The remaining candidates include Ms. Elisa Ferreira (Portugal), former MEP, for Cohesion and Reforms segment, Mr. Janez Lenarčič (Slovenia), a career diplomat, for the Crisis Management, Ms. Ylva Johansson (Sweden), a career state official, to lead the „Home Affairs“ domain. Mr. Virginijus Sinkevičius (Lithuania) is to assume the Environment and Oceans domain and Mr. Nicolas Schmit (Luxembourg) is to bring experience from the EP as a (candidate) for the „Jobs“ area. Ms. Stella Kyriakides (Cyprus) is designated to lead the „Health“ domain, whereas Ms. Jutta Urpilainen (Finland), due to her international experience, should lead the International Partnerships domain.

### **Conclusion**

The gender-neutral EC has ambitious plans: introducing a European Green deal within 100 days, preparing a multi-year discussion platform on EU's future, making first convincing steps towards the climate-neutral status, etc. However, the EC will operate in a more polarised political landscape, marked by stronger Eurosceptic sentiments of various stakeholders. The EC needs to prove able to reconcile divergent stances, both within and externally. The first signs may be apparent already before the inauguration of the new Commission, if some portfolio names get changed in order to meet the requests from the MEPs. Additionally, the new EC might instantly be faced with an unrelated great challenge: the uncertainty carried by Brexit (scheduled for October 31st, although the UK

Parliament might pressure the PM to request another prolongation, which is not impossible to imagine). As for Serbia, it awaits the new institutions hoping that its prolonged EU accession process could be dynamized during the next EC mandate.

