

EUROPEUM ANALYSES

European Elections: A Year In Review

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The experts of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy weigh in with analyses in their respective fields – climate, multiannual financial framework, migration, geopolitics and EU enlargement – of the first year since the European elections. It is our hope that this review of the first year of unprecedented upheaval will be an opportunity to reflect both on the past year, but also the challenges of tomorrow.

Contents

Foreword	2
Kateřina Davidov: EU Climate Policy – A Year Of Unprecedented Changes.....	3
Vt Havelka: A Year In Vain – No Development In the MFF Negotiation.....	5
Jana Juzov: EU Enlargement Under the New Commission – Reason For Optimism?.....	6
Christian Kvorning Lassen: Migration Remains a Contested Issue With Key Reforms Stagnant.....	7
Danielle Piatkiewicz: One Year On, the Urgency For a Geopolitical EU Is Greater Than Ever	9
About the Authors	11
About EUROPEUM	11

Foreword

A year has passed since the 2019 European Parliament elections. Since then, Ursula von der Leyen was sworn in as the first female President of the new European Commission, promising to tackle climate change through launching the ambitious European Green Deal, break the deadlock on migration without breaking humanitarian obligations, and create a truly geopolitical Commission enabling the EU to challenge the rising influence of Russia and China amidst waning US engagement on the global stage.

However, 2020 has not followed the script. COVID-19 has disrupted not only the European economies but also the policy agenda for the foreseeable future. The pandemic amplified existing fault lines between Member States in the area of de-carbonization, the urgent reforms to the Common European Asylum System have not materialized, the negotiations for the upcoming Multi-Annual Financial Framework have been forced back to the drawing board in light of the pandemic, and the Transatlantic relations deteriorate ever faster under President Trump. A small, fragile glimmer amidst the gloom is the invigoration of the EU Enlargement process.

The pandemic, more than anything, has exposed the necessity for a stronger EU unified around the realization that no country can thrive in isolation. The roadmap by the Commission remains valid even though the pandemic has caused massive upheaval. Climate change is still an existential and far larger crisis, which will also amplify migratory waves. The budgetary negotiations are essential to balance the ambitious policy agenda with the newfound economic reality. With transatlantic relations frayed, the EU needs unity more than ever.

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Kateřina Davidov: EU Climate Policy – A Year Of Unprecedented Changes

More has happened in the domain of EU climate policy in the one year since the European elections in 2019 than in several decades prior to that.

Climate change played a major role in the decision-making of European citizens when they went to the polls one year ago and the results of the often-called “climate elections” lived up to their name. The number of Green MEPs increased to its all-time high and climate action has become an important issue also for the more mainstream factions, such as S&D or Renew Europe. Climate-skeptical voices within the assembly are now in a minority.

The European Parliament has thus retained its position as the most progressive of EU institutions when it comes to ambitious climate policy. It was an MEP who first put on the table the proposal to increase the EU’s emissions reduction target to 65 % by 2030 (compared to 1990)¹ – a target that is necessary to keep the global temperature increase at 1,5°C according to the IPCC. The European Commission, meanwhile, is proposing the new target to be 50-55 % and the Member States are split in their positions depending on many internal factors.

Furthermore, the new Commission was formed with a strong mandate from the people to act on climate change and this has been reflected in the unprecedented number of green policy proposals that the Commission published during its first year.

Under the umbrella of the European Green Deal, the von der Leyen Commission proposed a package of legislative and non-legislative changes pertaining to areas such as energy, transport, industry, agriculture, trade, circular economy, biodiversity, air and water pollution, and socially just transition. The aim of the European Green Deal is to swiftly and sustainably decarbonise the EU and make the bloc climate-neutral by 2050. Furthermore, within the first 100 days, the Commission cemented the climate-neutrality goal in the EU’s Climate Law. What was only a guiding strategy a year ago is now a binding target for all of the EU.

Now comes the time to fill up the empty box that is the European Green Deal with concrete strategies. Some strategies have already been published, such as the Industrial Strategy, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy or the Biodiversity Strategy. Others are in the pipeline, although there might be delays due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the Commission has reiterated that it remains committed to delivering its ambitious climate policy. With the new stimulus package being based on the concept of “green recovery”, it is likely that the importance of EU’s green agenda will not wane, but rather grow even stronger.

Likewise, the vast majority of Member States² have expressed their ongoing support for the implementation of the European Green Deal in a circulating open letter. The Czech government initially refused to sign this letter and at first held a negative stance towards the green plan, arguing that the EU should now focus its attention solely on the economic recovery after COVID-19. However,

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/eu-lawmaker-puts-65-emissions-cut-on-the-table/>.

² <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/20/four-eu-nations-back-green-post-coronavirus-recovery/>.

even Czechia changed its stance recently, when it became clear that the distribution of the recovery funding will be tied to green conditions.³

Upholding ambitious climate goals is also in line with what the majority of European citizens perceive as a priority. Despite the ongoing pandemic, more Czechs currently view the effects of climate change as a more serious threat than an economic recession.⁴

Thus, it can be concluded that the trend set out last year during the European Parliament elections has persisted and even intensified. Climate change has been brought to the forefront in the EU and from a long-term perspective, even the pandemic has not overshadowed it.

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/in-political-u-turn-czechs-back-eus-green-recovery-plan/>.

⁴ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/pruzkum-median-koronavirus-sucho-ekonomicka-krize_2004260702_dok.

Vít Havelka: A Year In Vain – No Development In the MFF Negotiation

The first year since the 2019 European Elections proved to be disappointing for the MFF negotiations as no significant progress has been made. During the second half of 2019, the European Union was predominantly occupied with Brexit negotiations and constitution of the new European Commission, meaning that only very little time was left for budgetary issues. Simultaneously, the Finnish presidency did not manage to introduce a proposal that would have overcome the dividing lines between Member States as well as the European Parliament. After several failures of national state presidencies, the European Council finally assigned its president to further coordinate the negotiations in December 2019 while expecting to reach a unanimous decision by June 2020.

In the meantime, however, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the European Union, leaving the Member States no other option but to temporarily suspend their economies, and causing significant economic downturn as a result. The negotiators suddenly face a fundamentally different reality, which effectively made the original EC negotiation box from April 2018 obsolete. The European Commission decided to rewrite its old proposal, essentially pushing the negotiations back to the very start. As a result, the past negotiations seem to be in vain, the only takeaway being that Member States and the European Parliament only managed to identify dividing lines.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a major challenge for the negotiations as it further strengthens old dividing lines between European institutions and Member States. Although French and Germans introduced their proposal for a fund aimed at tackling economic ramifications of the pandemic, it is very likely that the Frugal Four⁵ will retain their position and will try to minimize their contribution to the EU budget. Simultaneously, stretched budgets of net recipients will further intensify their effort to increase their national envelopes, and Southern states such as Italy or Spain, who were traditionally net payers to the EU budget, will not be willing to subsidize cohesion states as their own national debt will significantly increase due to hard economic downturn. The President of the European Council will have to demonstrate excellent negotiating qualities so that the strengthened divisions between Member States can be overcome.

Lastly, another battle will be waged over the inclusion of the Green Deal in the new MFF. More developed states desire to utilize the upcoming economic crisis and the MFF to innovate and transform EU economy to a less carbon-intensive model. Eastern states, among them also Czech Republic, stated that the pandemic should limit green investment and the MFF should more concentrate on short-term recovery rather than investing in ecological and long-term transformation, even though these investments possess the highest return.⁶ Although it is true that the past few days meant a significant shift in the position of Green Deal sceptics,⁷ the extent of Green Deal inclusion and details of funding conditions will surely remain at the centre of the V4 negotiation efforts.

⁵ States that strive to minimize the size of the EU budget – Denmark, Austria, Netherlands and Finland.

⁶ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54ff9c5ce4b0a53deccfb4c>

[/t/59244eed17bffc0ac256cf16/1495551740633/CarbonPricing_Final_May29.pdf](https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/in-political-u-turn-czechs-back-eus-green-recovery-plan/)

⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/in-political-u-turn-czechs-back-eus-green-recovery-plan/>

Jana Juzová: EU Enlargement Under the New Commission – Reason For Optimism?

As the European Parliament became more diverse after the elections and nationalist and populist parties strengthened their positions, it might have seemed that the prospects for the countries aspiring for the EU membership would be rather dim. This feeling was further enhanced by the absence of enlargement among pre-election topics and the postponed publishing of the annual progress reports on Western Balkan countries to after the elections in order not to stir up nationalist and anti-enlargement sentiments. The doom of future EU enlargement seemed to be definite when, in October, the European Council did not agree on the start of accession negotiations with two candidate countries, Albania and North Macedonia, despite high expectations and promising messages coming from EU capitals.

However, a crucial turn came when the new European Commission started working in December. The new Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, took office in a situation when the EU Member States were deeply divided on the issue of opening accession negotiations with the two countries and France requested a revision of the rules leading the accession process of the candidates into the EU. Following these developments, the European Commission was entrusted with the daunting task of drafting of this new methodology, which would address the diverse concerns of all Member States and would unblock the enlargement process.

Although at the time of the approval of the new Commission, there were few reasons for optimism regarding the possibility of final granting of a green light to Albania and North Macedonia and new

dynamism to the enlargement process as such, the EC quickly demonstrated its resolve; despite the many problems EU itself was dealing with at the time, the new methodology was introduced in early February. The revised rules were adopted by the Member States together with the positive decision on starting the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia at the virtual European Council summit in March.

Despite the increased nationalist tendencies across the EU and the early scepticism regarding the importance of the EU enlargement agenda for the new European Parliament and European Commission, the first year of the new institutions brought much-needed new impulses and dynamism into the enlargement process. This was possible mainly due to the constructive work of the traditionally pro-enlargement institutions, the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the political will of the Member States to discuss their concerns and seek a compromise. This would not be possible without the proactive and appeasing role of the European Commission, which has so far proved that progress in the enlargement policy truly belongs among its priorities. It remains to be seen how far the EU enlargement process can go in the next four years under the guidance of the von der Leyen Commission and whether the ambitious prospect of having at least one future member of the EU ready for accession by 2025 will turn into reality.

Christian Kvorning Lassen: Migration Remains a Contested Issue With Key Reforms Stagnant

One of Ursula von der Leyen's promises for her tenure was to end the deadlock in asylum and migration negotiations during the first half of 2020, making the EU, in her words, a 'model of how migration can be managed sustainably, effectively and with a human approach.'

Then COVID-19 happened.

The wider policy agendas have understandably taken a backseat due to the virus, yet reforms to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) are long overdue; climate change is expected to multiply the global number of migrants and amplify existing migratory movements, conflicts are exacerbated by heightened instability for a variety of reasons, such as ceding US influence, and economic inequality is widening and is only expected to widen further due to COVID-19. As little to no substantial progress has been made in this area since the 2015 'migration crisis', the new Commission correctly identified that an end to the deadlock was essential.

However, progress has been non-existent. In the first quarter of 2020, Greece saw increased migratory pressure, leading the country to call on Frontex to assist. The Commission obliged, deploying Frontex in order to stem the tide and 'manage' the crisis, prompting Ursula von der Leyen to term Greece 'the aegis of Europe.' In the absence of CEAS reforms, there are now thousands of asylum seekers languishing in refugee camps on Lesbos and elsewhere in impoverished conditions. As COVID-19 is now raging across the globe, including in these camps, the EU has thus become complicit in sanctioning an inherently unsustainable and inhumane situation.

Greece has, despite receiving EUR 350 million upfront and an additional EUR 350 million available for infrastructure (such as medical equipment and infrastructure investments designed to help process the asylum seekers and manage the crisis), evidently not managed to follow Ursula von der Leyen's stated objective of 'sustainably managed migration with a human approach.' It is telling that the Commission has supported Greece despite the endemic issues surrounding migration has not been solved, despite being faced with a situation comparable to the 2015-influx that some Member States faced.

The existing obstacles to CEAS reform continue to persist and have not been addressed or overcome by the EC. Dublin reform is as elusive as ever, a common asylum procedure and uniform rules of asylum applications are impossible to envision as long as numerous Member States derive political legitimacy from restrictive policies, regardless of whether these violate international obligations, and the standardization of reception conditions are, in light of the Greek situation, evidently only a priority on paper.

Given the endemic issues surrounding migration and the EU's lack of competencies in enforcing their desired agenda, the Greek situation could signify a paradigm shift for the EU in regards to migration; the deadlock will remain as long as Member States are invested in their respective stances and as long as the EU does not have additional competences to incentivize or coerce changes. This is unlikely to change due to the ongoing pandemic, as well as the larger crisis of climate change, which will likely determine the policy agenda for the upcoming years. Thus, migration will likely remain mired in the controversy and inertia that has plagued it since the 2015 crisis, inflicting a policy defeat on Ursula von der Leyen and the EP that will likely scar it for its entire tenure.

The ramifications of a lacking framework for asylum and migration are indescribable both in light of the intensifying climate crisis and the current conditions for existing asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. However, as long as certain Member States are recalcitrant in terms of respect for human rights and international law, and as long as the EU has no coercive mechanisms to enforce compliance with rules that Member States have obligated themselves to, migration will remain a Gordian knot for the EU. One year after the EP elections, the EU will likely remain impotent in the area of migration in the years to come while certain Member States continue their violations with impunity.

Danielle Piatkiewicz: One Year On, the Urgency For a Geopolitical EU Is Greater Than Ever

Reflecting back before the pandemic, the challenges that the United States and Europe were undergoing last year almost seem trivial. The US was grappling with the continued rise of populism, questioning their NATO commitments and squaring off with Europe on an array of issues including climate change, trade and migration. Europe on the other hand, was dealing with the Brexit negotiations, the EU were undergoing European Parliamentary (EP) elections that saw a rise in right-wing populist parties - including members of the Visegrad 4 - where Poland and Hungary's right parties took home substantial gains creating divisions within the EU and questioning it's the future.

Last year, one could say that the United States and Europe were on the brink of facing an extensional crisis where for the first time in the history their relationship, "the president of the United States is regularly and openly expressing disdain for the European project."⁸ President Trump and European Commission President von der Leyen made several attempts to move the transatlantic agenda forward over the past year but mounting disagreements - exacerbated by external pressures from geopolitical players such as Russia and China - have only made the relationship more strained. Fast forward a year, these differences have not disappeared, and to some extent, many have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

What is certain, is that leadership has and will play a key role in the future of the transatlantic relationship

⁸ <http://www.german-times.com/the-eu-us-relationship-is-in-crisis/>

post-pandemic. While President Trump ends his term soon with anticipation for a re-election, the EU saw new leadership under Ursula von der Leyen as the new Commission President last year. President von der Leyen pledged to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' which would reinforce the EU's role as a relevant international actor, while shaping a "better global order through reinforcing multilateralism" and become 'A stronger Europe in the world'.⁹ Clashing in ways with President Trump's 'America first' isolationist rhetoric, the US's further retreat from the global stage, has left the EU poised to fill the geopolitical vacuum that the US is leaving. While this may change with new US leadership, the United States' mishandling of the pandemic will cause unforeseen economic and political damage that may cause the next administration to focus on domestic issues, rather than international.

Meanwhile the EU will also have to look internally as their fragmented approaches to tackle the crisis unveiled underlying fractures in the European Union. However, through the drastic measures taken earlier on - especially in the Central and Eastern European countries - the EU stands to hopefully recover faster than other regions.

Despite the mounting differences, a stronger and more cohesive transatlantic relationship is needed now more than ever. After undergoing multiple world wars, joint economic recovery and collaborative polices - especially when handling the current pandemic - has been fundamental in redeveloping the regions (i.e. Marshall Plan) and relationship. As external powers such as Russia and China further enter the global space, the US and EU will need to get

⁹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)646148)

over their differences in order to rebuild and strengthen the transatlantic relationship. Hopefully the pandemic will bring the partnership closer, rather than further apart.

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