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IL PRESIDENTE

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AT WORK...
IS ALL THAT GLITTERS GOLD?

The second European Commission chaired or, rather, governed by Ursula von der Leyen went to work after having sworn allegiance to the treaties its role as 'guardian' before the European judges in Luxembourg.

Even European policy wonks will have some difficulty juggling the European Commission's priorities for the year that has begun between '*flagship*' initiatives, strategies, tactics and the legislative agenda.

The difficulties will be greater if one looks at the medium term of the entire legislature or if one compares the strategic agenda adopted, in solitary autonomy, by the European Council at the end of June 2024 - according to the confusing working method imagined by the ineffable and unrepentant President Charles Michel, now updated by the new President Antonio Costa on the basis of a thematic calendar made known to his colleagues and the public at the beginning of this year - with the priorities that President Von der Leyen presented to the European Parliament in the July 2024 session and that were approved by the European Parliament closed-box and by a majority in the subsequent November plenary session.

These priorities are, moreover, part of the instructions that Ursula von der Leyen wrote to all the members of the 'College' in her mission letters, adding for each commissioner specific competences that, in some cases, translate into precise mandates to act in the first hundred days of the legislature and that are often subject to the direct control of the President and no longer to the role of the so-called executive vice-presidents whose power is therefore in this European Commission only a formal and irrelevant medallion.

Surprisingly, President von der Leyen instead broke the pause she had been forced to take for health reasons by setting up no fewer than fourteen '*project groups*' on 9 January, which we briefly describe '*to ensure, without prejudice to the decision-making process, the coordination of topical issues, major cross-cutting initiatives and horizontal policies*'.

The objective of the '*project groups*' is '*to ensure the preparation and political orientation of initiatives, from their design to their implementation*'.

Each '*project group*' '*has its own mandate, composition, duration and working methods*'.

Each group will be chaired by one or, in the first case, several members of the College of Commissioners appointed by the President.

The fourteen '*project groups'* are in the version released by the European Commission on 10 January:

- Clean Industry Pact (co-chaired by Executive Vice-Presidents Teresa Ribera and Stéphane Séjourné and Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra);
- Artificial Intelligence (chaired by Executive Vice-President Henna Virkkunen);
- External Action (chaired by High Representative Kaja Kallas);
- Skills, Labour and Social Rights (chaired by Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu);
- Economic Security (chaired by Commissioner Maroš Šefcovic);
- Defence Union (chaired by Commissioner Andrius Kubilius);
- European Savings and Investment Union (chaired by Commissioner Maria Luís Albuquerque);
- Preparedness Union (chaired by Commissioner Hadja Lahbib);
- European Internal Security (chaired by Commissioner Magnus Brunner);
- Water Resilience (chaired by Commissioner Jessika Roswall);
- Affordable Housing (chaired by Commissioner Dan Jørgensen);
- European Democracy Shield (chaired by Commissioner Michael McGrath); Start-up (chaired by Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva)
- and Vision for Agriculture and Food (chaired by Commissioner Christophe Hansen).

Sixteen out of twenty-six commissioners are thus involved in the role of coordinators, and ten commissioners have been excluded from this coordination work, probably imagining that the issues for which they are responsible will be absorbed by one of the 'project groups' such as cohesion (Fitto), productivity and simplification (Dombrovskis), the Mediterranean (Suica), health (Varhelyi), enlargement (Kos), international partnerships (Sikela), fisheries and oceans (Kadis), the budget (Serafin), transport (Tsitzikostas) and generational equity together with youth, culture and sport (Micallef).

In some cases, this exclusion could be justified and understandable in a logic of simplifying the political orientation of programming, but it is striking that, out of six executive vice-presidents, only executive vice-president Raffaele Fitto has been excluded from this coordination work and, above all the fact that the topic of ecological transition that is limited to green industry, enlargement and the Mediterranean or migration policies whose holistic visions cannot and must not be enclosed in external action or internal security or culture and education that have appeared from the outset as the Cinderellas in the European priorities do not appear.

Absent above all is the budget as an essential instrument for guaranteeing European public goods that are both innovative and solidaristic, which will be one of the central issues of the European Commission's work and interinstitutional dialogue or conflict in the coming weeks.

In the latter case and taking into account what is written in the mission letter to Commissioner Serafin, it is very likely that a fifteenth '*project group*' will be coordinated by the President herself.

Together with the constitution of the '*project groups*', the European Commission informally circulated its programmatic and legislative agenda for 2025-2026, which we summarise here, and which expands on or complements the six or seven '*flagship initiatives*' announced by the European Commission or the seven priorities generically and '*solemnly*' announced at the beginning of the mandate:

- the plan for sustainable prosperity and competitiveness,
- the new era of defence
- the social model,
- the quality of life,
- the protection of democracy,
- global Europe
- and finally an ambitious budget to achieve the first six priorities.

Here, in brief, is the agenda that the European Commission will submit to the European Parliament and the Council in February and that will be anticipated on 29 January by the Communication on Competitiveness (LINK) as a partial implementation of the Draghi Report where the European Commission seems to want to limit the first measures to the simplification of the regulatory environment and the coordination of national and European policies.

First Quarter 2025

- Clean Industrial Deal and Affordable Energy Action Plan: two initiatives to lower energy costs, improve access to renewable and promote electrification of European industries. Instruments will be introduced to incentivise long-term contracts and new tariff methodologies to reduce system costs.
- Strategic Dialogue on Automotive: On 30 January, the strategic dialogue with the European automotive sector will start to address the challenges of transition, access to raw materials and global competitiveness. The dialogue will lay the foundations for an industrial plan for the sector.
- Union of Skills: a plan to fill skills shortages in strategic sectors, focusing on lifelong learning, skilled migration and improved cross-border recognition of skills.
- White Paper on European Defence: a strategic document to improve coordination between Member States in the defence sector, strengthening European industrial capacity and technological innovation.
- Preparedness Union Strategy: a plan to strengthen the EU's resilience against future crises, with close public-private cooperation to prevent critical disruptions in supply chains.

- Vision for agriculture and food: a plan to ensure long-term competitiveness and sustainability within planetary limits for the agriculture and food sectors, ensuring thriving rural areas, food security and resilience.

Second Quarter 2025

- Start-up and Scale-up Strategy: the plan aims to overcome the obstacles holding back the birth and growth of European start-ups by improving access to funding, university-industry collaborations and talent mobility.
- Eu Quantum Strategy: an initiative to consolidate European leadership in quantum technologies, such as secure computing and communications. Joint programmes between Member States and the private sector will be created.
- New State Aid Framework: a revision of state aid rules to allow more targeted interventions in key sectors for the green transition and to support industrial competitiveness.
- Water Resilience Strategy: a set of measures to improve the management and sustainability of water resources, crucial for tackling the impacts of climate change.
- European Savings and Investment Union: a plan to mobilise private capital and direct it towards strategic and innovative investments, also addressing the fragmentation of the European financial market. A Single Market Strategy is also planned. Also planned - between Q2 and Q3 - is the establishment of a platform for the joint procurement of critical raw materials.

Third Quarter 2025

- European Strategy for Research and Technology Infrastructures: a platform that will support the construction of high-level research infrastructures, also accessible to SMEs and start-ups, to stimulate large-scale innovation.
- Apply Artificial Intelligence Strategy and Data Union Strategy: actions to promote the use of artificial intelligence in industry and facilitate the sharing of public and private data. Tools are key to accelerate digitisation and support new business models.
- Sustainable Transport Investment Pact: strategic investments to develop sustainable transport infrastructure, with a focus on low-emission fuels and charging systems.
- Space Act: a law to boost Europe's space sector, harmonising regulations between member states and attracting investment to support the growth of a key sector for the future.

Fourth Quarter 2025

- Artificial Intelligence Continent Initiative: artificial intelligence factories ('mega Artificial Intelligence factories') will be set up to improve the EU's computational capacity and support start-ups and research.
- European Biotech Act: a regulatory framework that will stimulate innovation in biotechnology, with applications ranging from healthcare to sustainable agriculture.
- Chemicals Industry Package: a package to improve the competitiveness of the chemicals industry, addressing complex regulations and supporting the green transition.
- Digital Networks Act: measures to improve digital connectivity in Europe, with a focus on 6G and network infrastructure integration.
- Quality Jobs Roadmap: a plan to improve working conditions, promote gender equality and reduce the employment gap in strategic sectors.

On the calendar for 2026

- Circular Economy Act: a plan to create a single market for recycled materials, reducing dependence on virgin raw materials and stimulating the circular economy.
- Advanced Materials Act: A strategy to promote innovative advanced materials, crucial for the EU's industrial and technological future.
- European Climate Adaptation Plan: A set of measures to strengthen climate and infrastructure resilience, addressing extreme events such as floods and droughts.
- Revision of Public Procurement: A revision of the Public Procurement Directive to protect strategic supply chains and simplify rules for innovative start-ups.
- 82nd Enterprise Regime: will simplify applicable rules and reduce costs, including aspects of insolvency, labour law and tax law.

In this long list of twenty-four announcements of initiatives, there are significant silences concerning in particular the topics of the guidelines for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2032, which is also absent in the '*project groups*', the completion of the Area of Freedom and Justice and the Economic and Monetary Union, or the geopolitical dimension that is to be the focus of the EU-African Union summit in the second half of 2025, just as the European Commission's response to Donald Trump's announced implementation of his election promises, which immediately took the form of a hundred executive measures, appeared irrelevant and surprisingly inadequate.

Last but not least, the European Council had mandated the European Commission to present a report on the reform of the European Union at the June Summit, covering not only policies but also governance and the strengthening of the democratic dimension as a response to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe and in line with

what the European Commission itself stated in view of the enlargement of the Union to the candidate countries.

The deafening silence of the European Commission and the European Council on the much-needed reform of the European Union confirms the need for the European Parliament to abandon the dead end of the intergovernmental method of the Convention, which the governments have enshrined in Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union, and to embark on the federalist path of a constitutional process.

So it is not all gold that glitters in the announcements of the European Commission!

Rome, 30 January 2025

Pier Virgilio Dastoli