

11 - 15 November 2024

## I. Political and Policy Developments

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### I. Political and Policy Developments

#### 1. Political deadlock leaves new European Commission in limbo

EU political leaders hit a roadblock on the new Commission after the confirmation hearings in the Parliament, as a deal to endorse all six Executive Vice Presidents (EVPs) and Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi (Health and Animal Welfare) fell apart.

The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) blocked socialist EVP Teresa Ribera (Clean, Just and Competitive Transition) over the floods in Valencia, while the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) opposed Raffaele Fitto (Cohesion and Reforms) to prevent his European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group from gaining top leadership. Várhelyi, affiliated with the far-right Patriots for Europe (PfE), also remains in limbo. Centre-left groups are pushing to scale back his portfolio, targeting his bioethics, biotech and reproductive health competences.

Negotiations are scheduled to resume on 20 November. If a two-thirds majority cannot be secured for each commissioner, the European Parliament will hold secret votes to decide on the nominations. While Fitto and Várhelyi could gain confirmation through additional support from far-right groups, this would likely strain the relationship between the EPP and its centre-left partners.

MEPs must vote by 28 November for the new Commission to begin on 1 December. Failure to meet this deadline could delay the Commission's start date into 2025.

#### 2. Trump's incoming Health Secretary makes headwaves in Europe

US President-elect Donald Trump has announced his intention to appoint Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Health Secretary. If confirmed by the Senate, Kennedy's appointment could reshape US health policy.

Kennedy, an outspoken critic of corporate influence on regulation, has vowed to overhaul US food production, ban pesticides and genetically modified crops (GMOs) and introduce more restrictions on food chemicals and additives, including artificial sweeteners. Additionally,

Kennedy has pledged to re-examine government vaccine safety data and to communicate his findings to the public.

Kennedy's potential appointment is already making waves in Europe and could have a significant impact on businesses on both sides of the Atlantic. It is also likely to reignite calls for a more robust mandate for the European Health Commissioner, especially as Commissioner-designate Olivér Várhelyi faces widespread opposition.

### **3. New Commission spokesperson appointed**

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has appointed senior EU civil servant Paula Pinho as the chief spokesperson for her second term, succeeding Eric Mamer. A Portuguese lawyer, Pinho is currently serving as Director for Just Transition, Consumers, Efficiency and Innovation at the Commission's Directorate-General for Energy (DG ENER). She has also held roles in cabinets of several former European commissioners.

As chief spokesperson, Pinho will represent the Commission at press conferences and briefings, ensuring the coherence of its political messages.

### **4. von der Leyen's reputation at risk with 'PfizerGate' trial**

On 15 November, the European Court of Justice took up a case brought by the *New York Times* against the European Commission. The newspaper is challenging the Commission's refusal to release text messages exchanged between Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla during negotiations for a significant COVID-19 vaccine deal. The Commission supports that such "short-lived" communications are not subject to EU record-keeping rules and claims it does not retain them.

While von der Leyen is not directly named in the lawsuit, a ruling favouring the *New York Times* could significantly undermine her credibility, intensifying criticism over transparency within her administration. The case could also pressure the incoming Commission to adopt stricter accountability measures.

### **5. Germany set for early election in February**

Germany is set for snap elections on 23 February, a date agreed upon by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD) and the centre-right Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). This decision is based on Scholz's anticipated loss in a no-confidence vote scheduled for 16 December, after which President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will have up to 21 days to formally dissolve the Bundestag, triggering early elections within 60 days.

In the latest polls, the CDU/CSU leads with 32%, followed by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) at 17% and the SPD at 15.5%. Other parties, such as the Greens and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), lag behind at 11% and 5% respectively. To secure a majority, the CDU/CSU will likely team up with the SPD, though the CDU/CSU has also stated it could consider the FDP if it secures at least 6% of the vote.

## II. Key institutional milestones

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
27 November (exp)	European Parliament vote on the new Commission
1 December (exp)	New European Commission takes office
1 December	New European Council President takes office