

Where is the food in the new Commission's plan?

WITH eagerness and expectation, we are looking forward to the new cycle in Brussels. The ESA team is busy setting up meetings with newly elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). We are also sifting through key documents that set the milestones and objectives for the next five years. These efforts will help us to identify the direction the new political elite is taking and how we can best play a productive part in the process of developing new laws and regulations. Our goal, as always, is to provide the best science-based evidence from our industry to help policymakers achieve sensible solutions that reflect the reality of doing business in today's tough climate.

Among the first things to hit our desks are the *Political Guidelines 2024-2029*. These demonstrate a strong focus on farming, but food is only mentioned at the periphery, despite having a turnover topping a trillion euros and being the biggest industry in Europe when it comes to employment. It is a pity that the food industry as a whole has not been recognised as a strategic pillar for the next five years, but ESA will make sure that the views of the savoury snacks sector reach the right ears, and that our industry receives the understanding it deserves.

Based on the Guidelines, the Commission will present a Vision for Agriculture and Food in the first 100 days. It will look at how to ensure the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of our farming sector within the boundaries of our planet. In essence, the aim appears to be for Europe to support the competitiveness of the entire food value chain chiefly through investment and innovation in farms and cooperatives.

There is also a pledge to expand the European Green Deal with an ambitious



Sebastian Emig wonders whether the EU's latest crop of politicians is giving Europe's biggest manufacturing sector the prominence it deserves

2040 emissions target, a plan to prepare the European Union for the impact of climate change and a programme to boost clean technology in manufacturing. In other words, we should expect a more moderate approach towards the EU Green Deal, but not its burial.

As well as paying more attention to farmers, the bloc looks set to consider the possibility of adopting firmer positions on international trade and permitting the re-nationalisation of certain policies, even though this may pose a threat to the integrity of the EU Single Market.

Another early indicator of the likely direction of travel is Mario Draghi's report on the future of European competitiveness. This tries to address the challenges EU industries face, proposing strategies to finance and coordinate policies to maintain global relevance. Draghi recommends a strong emphasis on innovation, decarbonisation and reducing dependencies,

advocating for a robust EU industrial strategy, public investment to stimulate growth, reduced business energy costs and streamlined governance.

The report outlines 10 strategic sectors, focusing on energy, clean technologies and critical raw materials. Disappointingly, it largely overlooks the food and drink sector.

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

Looking at the Commissioners designate, at the time of writing we see that the team von der Leyen is gathering for her second term will include fewer strong, independent politicians capable of challenging the Commission President. There's no sign of anyone to step into Frans Timmermans' shoes, for instance. The current line-up is more focused on economics and fiscally conservative, with 14 of the 27 Commissioners belonging to the moderate-right European People's Party. This mirrors Europe's recent political shift to the right.

Climate protection will remain important but will be managed to avoid harming European industry. Environmental policies will likely focus more on supporting the agricultural sector and car manufacturers. The buzzwords in Brussels now are 'competitiveness' and 'security', with the European People's Party securing key areas such as the economy, agriculture, migration, defence and climate.

The choice of candidates generated some criticism in Brussels. Green MEP Sergey Lagodinsky speaks of a 'solar system commission', in which it is clear who is the Sun and who are merely the planets in her orbit.

There is also criticism about the designate Commissioner for Health, Olivér Várhelyi. Previously in charge of ►

EU enlargement, he has been reassigned to health and animal welfare, which is seen as a demotion resulting from Hungary's controversial ties with Russia under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Várhelyi's lack of experience in health policy has raised concerns about his approval by the European Parliament. But if Várhelyi is rejected, key health policy initiatives, including the European Health Union and cancer prevention efforts, could face delays. He will also handle animal welfare and food safety, including authorisations for pesticides and GMOs, potentially overlapping with the Agriculture and Food Commissioner.

HOW ARE THE RELEVANT TOPICS DISTRIBUTED?

Yet more criticism surrounds the blurred lines of responsibilities between the different DGs, which will make it harder for stakeholders to engage with the Commission in a timely and effective way. Some DGs seem to share topics, and an unsolicited report has come to light suggesting that DG SANTE could suffer a remarkable loss of influence in favour of its farm-focused rival, DG AGRI. If the draft is confirmed, DG SANTE will hand over its powers on pesticide approval, animal welfare, animal and plant health, plant varieties and

new genomic techniques to AGRI. It could also lose control of some other food safety issues to DG JUST, which handles justice and consumer policy.

DG AGRI is currently responsible for the bloc's massive farm subsidies programme, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which amounts to a third of the EU budget. A strengthened AGRI could become a fully-fledged food department, looking at food systems as a whole, rather than just primary production. Even so, SANTE would likely continue to shape, if not coordinate, policies in some sectors.

Alongside more traditional tasks related to food security, the Commission's agriculture office would also take the lead on policies currently managed by other services related to the agri-food industry, agricultural trade and food waste.

DG SANTE would then focus solely on public health, taking a prominent role on global health issues, such as the World Health Organization's pandemic accord and the roll-out of new legislation on health data.

A reinforced DG AGRI may presage the creation of a senior official responsible for the food system – a portfolio that could prove enticing for Italy, which, like other Member States, needs to appoint a Commissioner to serve in the next five-year mandate.

After an article revealed details of the

draft report, an EU executive's spokesperson confirmed its existence but denied that it corresponds to a restructuring of the Commission's services.

According to the spokesperson, the document is an "exercise of preparing briefing materials" launched by the Commission's Secretariat General and "organised in a transversal way in order to ensure that DGs collaborate on all dimensions relevant to their policy field".

"The administrative organisation of this exercise bears no relation to the future organisation of the Commission," the spokesperson concluded.

So it remains to be seen where we - as your representatives in Brussels - should focus our efforts to get the best results. Rest assured that whatever the composition or allocation of topics, we will make sure your business interests are protected.

On to the next five years! ■



Director General Sebastian Emig*

*in his capacity as permanent representative of Prime Consulting BXLBCN SL




Culinar
Taste for results.

www.culinar.se