

Quo vadis the European Union?



With the very real prospect of a seismic political shift looming, **Sebastian Emig** wonders what that might mean for our industry and its suppliers

EVERY five years we face the end of a political cycle on the European level. In June, citizens will elect the next European Parliament and we expect that more than half of the members (MEPs) will be new. This is a great opportunity for our sector to inform these new MEPs about our successes in terms of nutrition and consumer information, but also to alert them to challenges that we are facing. We recognise that we need their support to tackle many of those challenges.

A poll from last year concluded that dissatisfaction with EU democracy is increasing. Italy's right-wing Brothers of Italy is expected to have its best electoral performance ever and it is projected to jump from its current seven parliamentary seats to 23, and three parties affiliated with the far-right parliamentary group Identity and Democracy (ID) are leading the polls in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

Voters overwhelmingly perceive the system as biased toward the elite, calling for radical change. Recent national elections highlight the far right's success in fuelling fear, fostering disempowerment and eroding trust in democracy. The risk is increasing that if citizens feel democracy fails them, their drive to engage democratically diminishes; hence, we might see a low voter turnout in comparison to previous years.

A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

Concerning the European election forecast, many voters look set to abandon mainstream parties due to the cost-of-living crisis, a financial crash, refugee influxes, terror attacks and lingering energy issues in the face of war. If the pollsters are correct, the new European Parliament might have a record number of right and far-right MEPs, making up nearly a quarter of the seats. Ranged against them, we could see the big winners from the last election – the Greens – lose quite a lot seats.

Due to misalignment and infighting on the right, this is highly unlikely to lead to stable

right-wing majorities, and a grand coalition of EPP, S&D and Renew Europe can likely form a majority. Even so, far-right figures in Brussels are licking their lips at the prospect of wielding more power on topics from immigration to climate laws, as constantly shifting alliances coalesce vote-by-vote in the EU's legislature.

The current European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has finally decided to run for a second term. However, her centralised leadership style, sidelining commissioners and national leaders outside her close German circle, faces criticism. MEPs remain bitter over the Council's disregard for their system of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2019 elections, where she was confirmed with a slim nine-vote lead.

With a rise in far-right nationalist MEPs poised to oppose her, von der Leyen's re-election hinges on uniting her European People's Party (EPP) bloc with centre-left, Liberal and Green votes. To streamline her campaign, von der Leyen must veer right, like she did recently in appeasing farmers by easing environmental rules in the Common Agricultural Policy.

The incoming 26 candidate Commissioners will face the European Parliament's scrutiny in the so-called "grilling". Parliament often takes this opportunity to assert its influence by rejecting nominees. A right-leaning majority could push for a more conservative Commission and kick out candidate Commissioners who are considered to be too liberal. Despite von der Leyen's likely re-nomination by EU leaders, a right-dominated Parliament could also obstruct climate and progressive laws.

GREEN DEAL IN DOUBT

All this is likely to spell trouble for the Green Deal. The prospects don't look very good when over two-thirds of the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy may remain pending when a new Commission begins in November. The anticipated Sustainable Food System Law, which was supposed to form the backbone of the bloc's flagship food policy, faced repeated delays and ►

is now expected under the next Commission, for example.

The new Green Deal Chief, Maros Sefcovic, emphasises shifting the Green Deal towards an “industrial decarbonisation deal” that blends industrial leadership with a fair, green transition. This rhetorical shift should appease industry, potentially easing environmental commitments, and aligning with von der Leyen’s strategy to secure support from centre-right politicians for her re-election.

TALKING THE TALK

Instead of breathing new life into the endangered Green Deal the Commission chose to bring another horse onto the track by launching the Strategic Dialogue on Agriculture, which is supposed to be a collaborative vision for the agri-food sector. It emphasises socially acceptable climate action and maintaining “agile and strong” agriculture within a competitive, sustainable economy. It is a clear reply to the European farmer protests in January, which escalated the right-wing pushback. It prompted von der Leyen to pledge “more dialogue” between advocates for climate goals and agriculture,

adding that “We need to listen to each other and seek joint solutions and must avoid apportioning blame.” A final report is expected by summer’s end.

Critics argue that three months is insufficient for real progress and the whole process is merely political spin ahead the elections, especially given how closely the announcement of a dialogue aligns with von der Leyen’s second-term presidency aspirations.

Recent sources even say that von der Leyen – due to the abovementioned criticism – might be unfit for another term and national leaders might pull another candidate out of the hat. That would in fact mirror what happened with von der Leyen herself, because she was not a Spitzenkandidat in the last elections.

In a possible move to appease the resurgent right, some have dropped the name Friedrich Merz. Merz is the leader of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, which is also von der Leyen’s party.

In spite of everything, I personally think that von der Leyen will be chosen for another term, despite all the criticism. She managed the pandemic crisis and the war in Ukraine

excellently and is a Commission president worthy of the name.

ESA’s perspective is that we are looking forward to these elections and welcome the opportunity to step up and explain our members’ successes and challenges, and to create a favourable mindset about snacking and our products among incoming legislators. As always, we will aim for sensible and science-based policymaking, while avoiding any kind of discriminatory treatment of the wonderful products that we represent.



Director General Sebastian Emig*
 *in his capacity as permanent representative of Prime Consulting BXLBCN SL



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