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CeRSP Article:

The EU's Journey into an Uncertain Future

James F. Downes and Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa argue that next June's 2024 European Parliament Elections are poised to profoundly influence the trajectory of the EU's upcoming endeavors. Most importantly, they argue that the EU's future, as well as its subsequent leadership, rests on five pivotal questions.

The Rise of Far-Right Parties in Europe

The EU faces an uncertain future, approaching the crucial juncture of the 2024 European Parliament Elections. This article explores five key questions shaping its uncertain future. Firstly, the surge of populism and nationalism has fundamentally [reshaped](#) politics in Europe. Exploiting economic discontent, immigration fears, and anti-establishment sentiments, these political parties now wield great influence across Europe. The rise of far-right parties has clearly tested the EU's core principles of both unity and cooperation.

Power Struggles in the EU

Secondly, how will the actions of EU leaders shape the Union's effectiveness and global reputation? The underlying power struggles amongst the EU's triumvirate — Ursula von der Leyen representing the European Commission, Charles Michel on behalf of the European Council and Josep Borrell, serving as the EU's top diplomat, have big implications for the EU's future governance. [Disunity](#) amongst the trio is rife and is underscored by different stances on critical issues, such as the EU's China policy. This is leading to fragmentation inside the EU's key institutions.

This [dissent](#) has caused a lack of internal co-ordination within Brussels, with conflicting messages, weakened policy directions and a diminished global influence. Over the past two decades, EU internal disputes have ignited policy divisions and hindered [emergency responses](#) — be it the Eurozone crisis, the Refugee crisis, the Brexit, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, trust in the EU project has been undermined, precipitating a political backlash jeopardizing support for the EU.

The Next EU Commission President

A third and highly important question is who will emerge as the next European Commission President in 2024? A new leader looms on the horizon. Ursula von der Leyen's second-term prospects faces several institutional [hurdles](#), most notably due to the lack of robust support, particularly from Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Germany. Von der Leyen's tenure has been largely influenced by the [United States](#), which has sparked questions about European strategic autonomy and its influence on the EU's foreign policy platforms.

Major countries such as Germany and France are unlikely to entrust this role to a political outsider. The exception here may be the European Parliament's current President, Roberta Metsola. Her cross-party consensus skills, adept handling of the [Qatargate](#) corruption scandal management may very well play into her hands. However, the fact that Metsola represents a less influential country - Malta - creates a large bump in the road.

Prominent contenders from Germany, France, Italy, and Spain emerge. Germany's Manfred Weber's grand ambitions clearly elevate his odds. French President Emanuel Macron, former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and even current Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez may all stand a chance. Careful assessment of these candidates' backgrounds, relationships, and potential EU influence will likely shape the agenda.

The EU & Global Affairs

Fourth, what implications arise for the EU's next leadership team and their engagement with [global affairs](#)? The choice of new European direction will significantly shape the EU's international relations, especially concerning ongoing trade negotiations, such as the Mercosur, or even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Current EU engagement with these regional trade blocs involves a combination of diplomatic, economic, and strategic cooperation.

Approaches to security and strategic partnerships will directly impact joint efforts against non-traditional threats. Commitment to climate action will also likely guide collaborative policy initiatives for sustainability and clean energy. Human rights and democracy considerations will shape discussions on norms and governance.

EU-China Relations

A final crucial question is how will the upcoming European Commission influence the vision about EU-China relations? Europe acknowledges the pressing need for a united stance towards China. Yet, crafting a cohesive policy has proven difficult, often resulting in [disagreements](#). The 2019 [Strategic Outlook](#) sought clarity by classifying China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. Regrettably, this approach failed to foster unity within the EU's framework, with institutions pursuing individual agendas despite coordination mechanisms, and in turn has led to an inconsistent policy approach.

The EU's interactions with China have taken two distinct routes: one marked by pragmatic engagement and the other shaped by the influence of the United States. Recent strategies such as the [Indo-Pacific](#), [Global Gateway](#) (2021), [Compass](#) (2022), and [European Economic Security](#) (2023) have demonstrated ongoing policy efforts. However, such initiatives have arguably fallen [short](#). The next EU Commission team will play a pivotal role in shaping the EU's vision, marking a decisive moment in determining China's role in Europe's future.

Implications for the Future

As the June 2024 European Parliament elections loom ever closer on the horizon, the EU stands at a crossroads. More fundamentally, traditional EU policy approaches are no longer fit for purpose in addressing the complex policy challenges that Europe faces today.

Of paramount importance is devising a comprehensive restructuring of how decisions are made and implemented across the EU institutions. This is where the concept of specialized, fast-track task coordination units comes into play, focusing on accelerating crucial projects and reforms, cutting through policy paralysis, and advancing the transformational changes that Europe requires.

Amid today's geopolitics, the future political role of the upcoming EU Commission holds immense importance, particularly in navigating intricate US-China economic dynamics, whilst simultaneously leveraging innovative governance approaches to transform Europe's forthcoming trajectory. However, such solutions will not be easy to implement and will take time, due to the complexity and diversity of both EU member states and the wider EU institutions.

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