

The upcoming European elections

Bringing development policy (back) in the picture

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Bonn, 29 January 2024. 2024 is a critical year for the European Union. In June, European citizens will elect the next European Parliament, which will play a key role in law making and in setting the strategic direction for the next European Commission to enter office later this year. Current polls predict the European People's Party (EPP, the family of conservative European parties) will retain its position as the largest group in the European Parliament.

What remains unknown is whether the other long-established political groups will be large enough to consolidate a majority in favour of the European integration process, or if the EPP will decide to work with Eurosceptic or even radical right groups. Once a new European Commission takes office in the second half of the year, its composition and policy agenda is ex-

pected to also shift considerably in light of the European Parliament elections as well as recent electoral shifts in member states.

To assess the implications of the elections for EU development policy, it is worth looking back at how EU development policy evolved since the last elections and Commission change in 2019. Ursula von der Leyen started her term as Commission President by asking the EU to become a geopolitical player. Development policy was supposed to support the EU in that role. This geopolitical mandate, which was further fuelled by major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, lead to substantive shifts in the focus of EU development policy. Compared to five years ago, development policy is now more explicitly motivated to contribute to the goals of other policy areas such as security, energy or migration policy. It is also expected to promote the EU's visibility, its strategic autonomy and resilience, to support the EU in becoming more autonomous regarding security and defence matters as well as diversifying foreign supply chains.

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Two major initiatives are crucial in this regard: Global Gateway and Team Europe. Team Europe was first introduced as the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It aimed at pulling together financial resources from all EU institutions and member states to increase Europe's visibility and geopolitical clout in addressing the consequences of the pandemic in partner countries. Global Gateway is motivated to counter China's Belt and Road initiative and Chinese omnipresence in developing countries more generally. Global Gateway seeks to promote large-scale infrastructure investments in energy, transport, digitalisation, education and health, claiming that the EU has a different approach than China because it is a union of democratic states. In fact, another key rationale for Global Gateway is to build strategic corridors with partner countries to secure Europe's supply of energy and critical raw materials.

Now, what development policy changes may we expect from the new European Parliament and Commission?

First, an electoral shift may lead to more fundamental and even more polarised debates on the rationale and necessity of EU development cooperation and increased pressure to use the development budget to halt migration flows. Second, regardless of the new political balance of power within and across the EU institutions, we can expect both Team Europe and Global Gateway to continue. The two initiatives and the instrumentalisation of the EU's development policy emerged from earlier strategic considerations on increasing the EU's visibility and stronger focus on pursuing the Union's own interests through development policy.

For now, both initiatives have in some ways contributed to more visibility and strengthening cooperation among the EU institutions and member states. Both are important steps forward.

However, in the next legislative period after the elections in June, the democratic, centrist party families must join hands to set out a direction for EU development policy that reconciles Europe's interests with the needs of its partners and that globally promotes multilateralism, peace and sustainability. Continuing the current direction of assertively and pragmatically pursuing the EU's geostrategic interests for instance through Team Europe and Global Gateway would carry the risk of fuelling conflicts of interest with a more assertive Global South.

Currently, the EU and the Global South are on different wavelengths on a number of key global issues, ranging from migration, extraction of critical raw materials, energy transitions and continued extraction of fossil fuels to questions of democracy and the war in Ukraine and the Middle East. To counter these increasing tensions, the Union's responses should reflect a greater openness for a real dialogue with its partners and greater willingness to address their priorities such as unsustainable debt levels and significantly more support to transform their economies in a socially responsible, climate-neutral way. The next European Parliament and Commission leadership should ensure the EU pursues its own priorities while at the same time listening and learning to and from its partners.