



The Future of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework: Challenges and Opportunities in a Volatile Geopolitical Context

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The Future of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework: Challenges and Opportunities in a Volatile Geopolitical Context

The outcome of the European Parliament elections in June 2024, the rise of populism, waves of immigration, the lack of a Community defence infrastructure in the European Union, the war in Ukraine and its possible inclusion in the EU... in short, the current geopolitical context is marked by a combination of factors that are pulling the European Union to the point of maximum tension.

While Member States (MS) are immersed in debates, worried about how the current circumstances will affect their domestic markets - especially agriculture - the EU is still silent on its multi-annual financial framework. Can we be confident that the next framework will support the EU's needs, or should national governments marshal their own strategies and resources?

THE MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

The European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework (hereafter MFF) is a reflection, in the form of a budget, of its priorities over a period of 5 to 7 years. Today, it amounts to the equivalent of 1% of the EU's gross domestic product (GDP), and is expected to cover initiatives, developments and needs at EU level, irrespective of the budgets that the governments of individual Member States may have.

At each renewal, the amount of the budget to be invested per objective and/or sector is determined. Despite having the ability to allocate funds differently each year, the fact that the final say on approval rests with the European Parliament - whose decisions are defined by the political ideology of its members during each institutional cycle - reveals how little flexibility and adaptability the MFF has.

The real magnitude of this 1 % of the EU's GDP should also be highlighted, and "as a reference we can use the figure for the Spanish budget, which amounted to 46.4 % of our GDP in 2023. In other words, Europe is a dwarf in terms of its budget" (Azcarate, 2024). With this comparison in mind, can such minimal resources be relied upon to counter the current economic and geopolitical landscape?

The current financial framework, which opened in 2021 and runs until 2027, focuses on rebuilding the economy after the Covid-19 pandemic, through the *Next Generation EU* funds and the *Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan* (PERTE). It also underwent a recent revision in order to show support for Ukraine, approving an expansion of the budget, which now assigns 50 billion euros to Ukraine and another 14.6 billion euros to

improve defence, neighbourhood, and border control, among others (European Council, 2024).

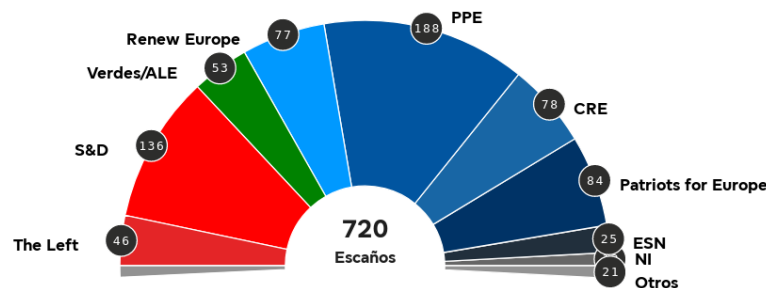
European Parliament elections 2024

Given that the European Parliament has the final say on the adoption of the financial framework, the elections of 9 June, the make-up of the parliamentary groups that will be established on the basis of the election results and the subsequent alliances are crucial in determining the political approach that will inspire not only the next MFF, which will enter into force in 2028, but also all the decisions that Parliament will take during those years of governance. However, narrowing down our attention to the financial framework, what can be deduced from the election results?

Provisional results of the 2024 European Parliament elections:

Parlamento Europeo 2024-2029

Resultados provisionales



Provisional

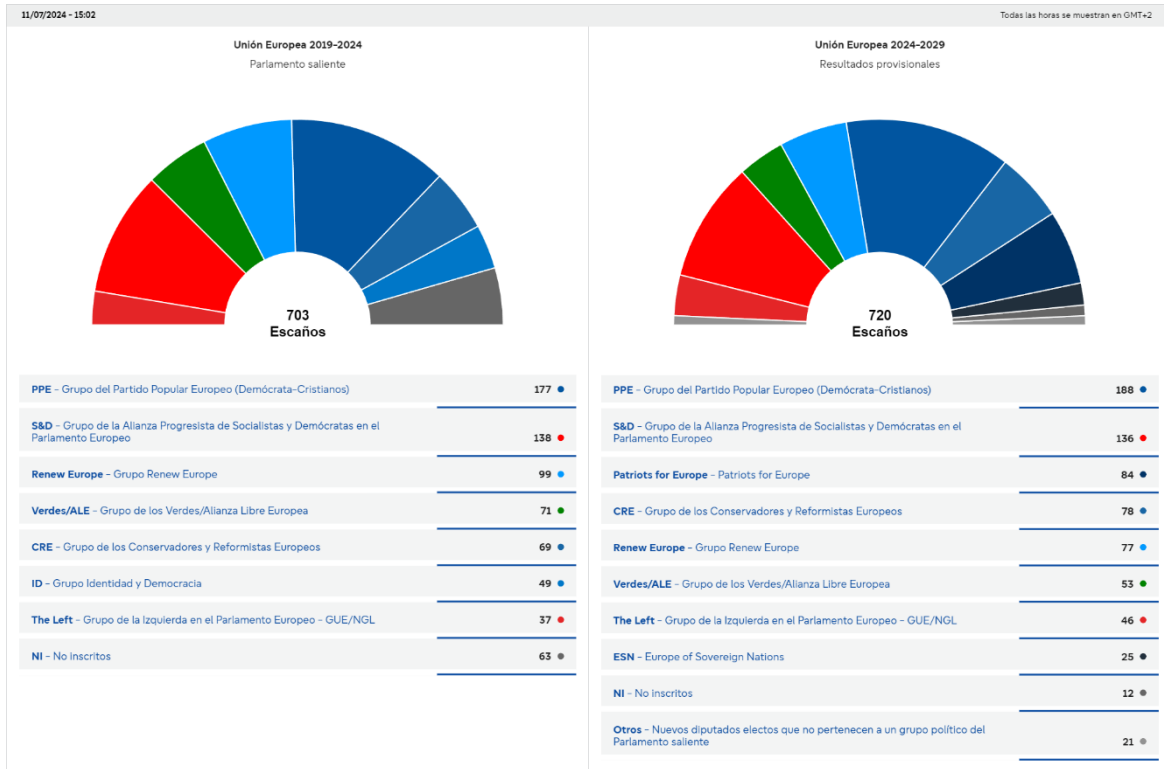
Composición del Parlamento Europeo basada en los resultados nacionales provisionales o definitivos publicados tras haber concluido las votaciones en todos los Estados miembros, a partir de la estructura del Parlamento saliente.

De acuerdo con el Reglamento interno del Parlamento, todo grupo político deberá constar de un mínimo de 23 diputados electos correspondientes a, como mínimo, siete Estados miembros.

Fuente: Datos facilitados por Verian para el Parlamento Europeo



Comparison with the previous European Parliament (2019 elections):



Fuente: Datos facilitados por Verian para el Parlamento Europeo



However small the changes from 2019 to today may seem, a slippage of seats from one group to another or a rearrangement of groups can lead to significant changes in the approach to the drafting and adoption of laws, proposals and the content of the next multiannual financial framework.

The first thing that jumps out is that the two main groups in 2019 - the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) - remain so now (although the latter has lost two seats since 2019). Moreover, the EPP has grown by 12 seats.

Another party that has grown is the European Conservatives and Reformists (ERC), moving up the scale from fifth to fourth force (previously with 69 seats and now with 78).

In addition, novel parliamentary groups are forming on the right, including *Patriots for Europe*, which has been joined by Vox and Le Pen, and *Europe of Sovereign Nations*, presented by the German group *Alternative for Germany* and with only 25 seats.

Regardless of their weight in the Parliament and their differences on EU integration, both groups (*Patriots for Europe* and *Europe of Sovereign Nations*) promote similar ideals to the ERC in terms of strong opposition to both the Green Deal and irregular migration, as well as a deep sense of identity and religion.

The polarisation is no surprise; for many years now, public opinion has been shifting towards both ends of the political spectrum, a phenomenon that has also been mirrored in national elections across the European region, and in the extremist parties that have consequently raised to power. Although each political party is different, there are areas where their objectives coincide, and the case of the above-mentioned is no exception.

Parties on the right of the political spectrum are often characterised by protectionist measures, by prioritising private over public investment, and by wanting to limit the powers and capacity for action of European institutions - which they sometimes accuse of interfering too much in the functioning of their home countries.

This is relevant if one considers the aforementioned fact that today the MFF amounts to the equivalent of 1 % of the EU's gross domestic product (GDP), and that "The legal texts allow this percentage to be raised to 1.4 %" (Azcarate, 2024) (Delasnerie, European Parliament, 2024). The right-wing ideology explained above points out that, if an increase in the MFF budget from 1 to somewhere up to 1.4 percent were to be proposed in order to cover the needs that have arisen as a result of current world affairs, it cannot be taken for granted that the US - and thus the European Parliament - would vote in favour.

Based on the ideology that will guide the next MFF, it is possible to foresee the scope of the responses that will be given to address the events that currently star the headlines.

AGRICULTURE

Despite the fact that agriculture is the cradle of the food chain, the only activity that can ensure food security, and an essential tool for strategic autonomy, its not safe to say that investment it received from the MFF 2021-27 is as significant. In fact, there were cuts (Delasnerie, European Parliament, 2024) in the amount of money earmarked for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2021-27.

The parameters are similar to those of past financial frameworks: CAP support to (1) farmers through the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), and (2) their progress through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). However, waves of protests have shown that farmers are in need of a much larger investment. This has been manifested across social, institutional and economic spheres: from the protests by

farmers earlier this year, to the frequency with which regulations and directives are proposed and reformed - such as the Green Deal, regulations on the use of fertilisers, or the 'Farm to Fork' initiative - not to mention the instability of their income as opposed to the price rises in supermarkets.

In figures, current support to the sector from the MFF is as follows (data obtained from the official websites of the [European Commission](#)):

- Total budget: EUR **387 billion** of which:
 - **72 % = 291 billion €** going to **EAGF (Pillar I)**
 - 270 billion as an addition to farmers' income
 - **25 % = 95.5 billion €** go to **EAFRD (Pillar II)**
 - **8 billion €** for the *Next Generation EU Funds* (in pursuit of sustainable and digital agriculture)
 - 35% is dedicated to climate change measures
- In total: 40% of the CAP is earmarked for sustainability.

Who to protect?

The role of the European Parliament and the debt to agriculture clash with the ongoing talks on Ukraine's accession to the EU. Trade barriers have already been opened, and the spotlight lays on the agricultural sector.

The crossroads arise once looking at the data; 71% of the Ukrainian territory (Cantone, 2024) is covered by the most fertile land in the world and used by more than 8.3 million farmers (Tarassevych, USDA, 2024). For reference, Spain has approximately 800,000 farmers (European Commission, 2023), and it alone consumes 27% of the aid distributed by the CAP.

The budgetary conflict is obvious: if the number of farmers increases, but the money available for the EAGF (Pillar I of the CAP) does not, each farmer will receive less support. And if we consider how significant the addition is, it is easy to conclude that households currently dependent on this sector will suffer considerable income losses.

Equally of concern are the payments per hectare guaranteed by the CAP. To put the context in figures: Spain, the Member State with the second largest utilised agricultural area (UAA), has 23 million hectares of UAA (MITECO, Government of Spain). In comparison, 33 million hectares in Ukraine are classified as UAA (Torres, CoCampo, 2024). The imbalance that the sector would suffer is abysmal and undeniable. Multiplying the CAP budget would alleviate the problem. But if this does not happen in the next multiannual financial framework, we will have to prioritise and cut back. The question is, where will the cut be? Based on the results of the European elections, it is possible to estimate its extent.

Indeed, the parliamentary groups' programmes and proposals for the next parliamentary term on agriculture can be consulted, and while this does not mean that the focus of the next MFF will exactly trace those of one group or another, the results indicate that support is unlikely to be significant in terms of competitiveness and Ukraine's access, as the weight would be placed on other issues, such as ecological progress. Below are the proposals broken down by the three most powerful parliamentary groups:

1. EPP. European People's Party

Guided by the points that make up its programme (official website of *EPP For Farmers*, 2024), it can be seen that, despite having numerous goals for agriculture and farmers, it does not allude to competitiveness or focus on Ukraine's inclusion.

2. S&D. Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

The only mention of agriculture is in the framework of sustainability and initiatives such as the Green Deal or Farm to Table (Commission for Agriculture and Rural Development | Socialists & Democrats, 2024).

3. Patriots for Europe. It follows Orbán's aforementioned ideology.

On the other hand, the European Council, under the presidency of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, has already taken the first steps, following a proposal from Austria. On 15 July this year, at the presentation of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, Orbán announced that the Council will strengthen support from the CAP to member countries so that competitiveness will not be negatively affected by the introduction of the Ukrainian agricultural sector when trade barriers are opened (*Agriculture and Fisheries Council Press Conference*, 2024). Numbers have not been specified, nor is the extent to which these measures will resemble those of the MFF in four years' time known, but it does provide an overview of the concerns of both the MS and the European community.

DEFENCE

Agriculture is not the only issue when the debates over the multiannual financial framework and Ukraine's EU membership come together. If the EU not having an EU-wide defence base had long worried political scientists already (Michta, 2024), the tension is exacerbated now that Ukraine's inclusion is on the table, as it would involve member states directly, and would mean bringing Putin closer geopolitically. The US would be compromised by the seventh point of Article 42 of the [Union Treaty](#):

7. If a Member State is the object of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall give it aid and assistance by all the

means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. This is without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2010)

If this already sets alarm bells ringing, given that the EU is almost defenceless against Putin's threat, and therefore cannot assume that it will emerge victorious from the situation, the increasingly isolationist policy in the United States is perhaps even more cause for concern. Donald Trump is warning other NATO members that, should he win the US presidential election, he will no longer allow Western countries to continue to rely on their military and armaments 'as easily' as they have done so far, in his view (Petrenko, 2024). Even if the US were to give up all its military resources, Western Europe cannot afford to let its guard down, as it has been estimated that Russia manufactures three times as much military artillery as the US and Europe combined (CNN, 2024).

Thus, if Ukraine's accession to the EU is to move forward, it is crucial to increase the defence share of the MFF. This is the view of the European People's Party (EPP), the largest force in the European Parliament, which promotes the creation of a *Defence Union* (EPP Group, 2017) at the EU level.

But, according to the previous analysis, it is also important to increase the agriculture envelope. Taken together, the total investment would be of significant size. Can the MFF cover this? We are rounding back to the questions posed above: following the political trend in the European Parliament elections, would it be realistic to propose a substantial increase of the MFF?

Before speculating, all points of interest must be taken into account, such as the fact that the enlargement situation requires not only a review of agricultural and military policies, as outlined above, but also of migration.

MIGRATION

Migration with Ukraine

It is irrefutable that opening wide the borders with Ukraine - a country at war - would inject an influx of vulnerable migrants into other member states. To catalyse this reality and not create systems to deal with it would be irresponsible on the part of the EU. If barriers with Ukraine were to be lowered, a review of existing migration policies would be urgently needed, as well as investment in building systems to ensure that the reception and reintegration of all those in vulnerable situations is possible and feasible.

Moreover, it would be quite possible that such a wave of immigrants would evoke a negative social reaction or worsen the social narrative on immigration in general, as has already happened in other countries in the EU, regardless of how positive or negative its

actual economic impact is. This logic is known as the 'Polish plumber'. The typical example is that of the United Kingdom, which did not hinder Eastern European countries from immigrating, after which it received a strong influx of people of Eastern European origin, consequentially creating social backlash and anger towards the diaspora, despite the fact that the impact of this community on the British economy was actually positive (UCL, 2022).

The review of this issue is vital.

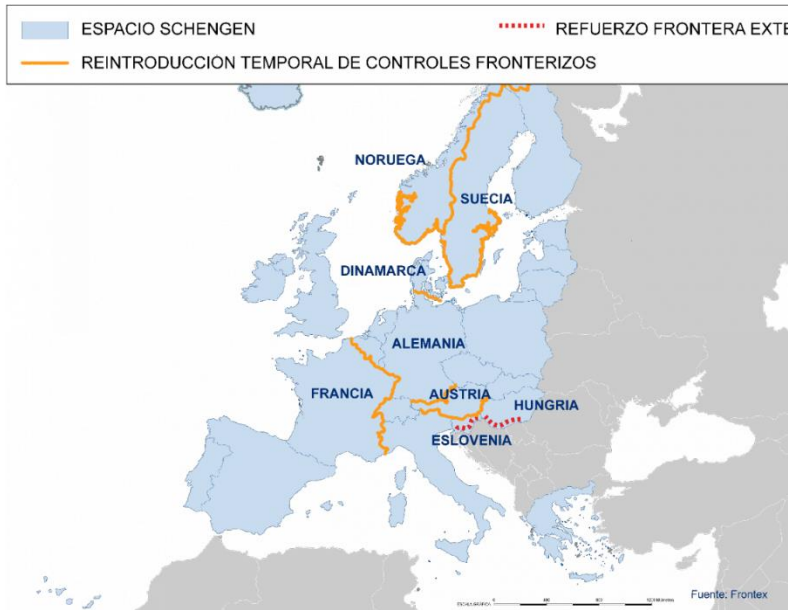
Classic migration

Even if Ukraine were not in the field of vision, migration would still be a crucial point for the next MFF, as an issue of concern to the population and national governments in the EU. Indeed, Citizens' Europe explains: "The European Commission has presented the results of the spring Standard Eurobarometer measuring citizens' attitudes towards European policies and institutions.

According to this new survey, 38% of Europeans believe that immigration is the biggest challenge facing the EU today, 11 points higher than the second biggest challenge, which is the economic situation". It adds, "Immigration is the main problem for citizens in 20 EU states, with Malta (65% of its citizens think so) and Germany (55%) standing out. Faced with this problem, 73% of Europeans are in favour of a common policy on immigration. 51% are in favour of migratory movements of people from other EU Member States, while 56% are against it if they come from countries outside the EU".

It is clear that there is widespread anger towards immigration (especially irregular immigration) among the population of the European Union, along with dissatisfaction with the way in which the institutions' policies deal with the issue. A number of factors - from geographical location to the support offered by national and European institutions - attract waves of irregular migrants to the EU, turning the situation into a *crisis*.

Asylum seekers come mostly from Syria (24 %), Afghanistan (11 %), and Kosovo (8 %) (data obtained from the Spanish Department of Homeland Security, DSN). The European Parliament announces that the year 2023 ended with the highest flow of irregular migrants recorded since 2016 (355,500 people).



The short-term solution by some member states has been to tighten border controls between Schengen countries, specifically those shown on the left (DSN). That MS have felt compelled to implement these measures demonstrates their lack of trust in the EU's management. Thus, and given that the situation is only worsening (15 EU member states declare the

increase in migrants "unsustainable" (Euronews, 2024)), the MFF will have to strengthen its next plan for migration and border management.

Migration and the MFP

The current contribution of the MFF to this strand consists of financing the following Funds (data below extracted from the Briefing published by the European Parliament):

Fund	Millions of euros earmarked	Target
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)	9,9 thousand	Strengthening social inclusion
Internal Security Fund (ISF)	1,9 thousand	Security management in the EU and at external borders
European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX)	5,6 thousand	External border management
Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation	79.5 thousand	Development of countries of origin
TOTAL		96.9 billion

Although the table shows a sum of almost EUR 100 billion, in reality the heading *Migration and border management* (heading 4) only accounts for almost EUR 23 billion. This is because there are funds under other headings that are relevant to the topic in question and have therefore been included in the table (in particular, *Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation* is part of heading 6, *Neighbourhood and the rest of the world*).

If the current MFF allocates approximately 23 billion euros to border management, and the population is dissatisfied with the circumstances under which they live, it is a sign that perhaps the budget should be increased or the order of priorities shuffled. Add to this the large influx of migrants that will appear if the borders with Ukraine are finally opened, and the need for more investment in border management becomes undeniable.

It is difficult to deny the budget increase if we consider that the aforementioned heading (6) *Neighbourhood and the rest of the world* (in other words, aid to non-member states) has a budget of 98,419 million euros (European Parliament).

The four parliamentary groups with the most power according to the 2024 elections - EPP, S&D, *Patriots for Europe*, and ERC - differ from each other in their attitudes towards migration. The EPP and S&D intend to promote a deployment of the FRONTEX fund to third countries and increase the money allocated (EPP Group, 2023) (*Socialists & Democrats*, n.d.). On the other hand, *Patriots for Europe* and ERC aim to 'harden the borders' (Europa Press, 2024) and abolish irregular immigration altogether (La Gaceta, 2024). All four groups seek an increase in the money allocated, but with different goals.

While the latter have an important influence on the design of the next MFF, the first two groups mentioned above have more seats in Parliament and represent integration values that the EU champions. Given this distribution of power, **it can be expected that the next MFF will further their investment in the integration of vulnerable migrants** and in boosting the development of third countries.

THE DILEMMA

In short, agriculture, defence and migration are three sectors hanging by a thread that the geopolitical context - especially Ukraine's possible accession to the EU - threatens to sever.

- Agriculture, though vital in Europe, has so far not received the necessary investment and faces a potentially unfair competitive landscape with the inclusion of Ukraine.
- Defence, on the other hand, requires an urgent overhaul to ensure the EU's security in the face of external threats.
- Migration and border management remains a divisive issue, with different views among the main parliamentary groups.

In addition, the EU Council has stressed that the next multiannual financial framework must have a significant margin for unforeseen events.

Is it possible to focus on all three sectors simultaneously, or should one or the other be prioritised? After studying the results of this July's European Parliament elections, it is

possible to discern the broad outlines for the 2028 MFF. It seems that the main parliamentary groups agree on building a Defence Union, and those that do not agree intend to implement conflict avoidance measures. On migration, although there are groups with a strong determination to strengthen border control, the two most voted groups prefer to focus on increasing aid to third countries to boost their development. On agriculture, some parliamentary groups show more interest than others, and they differ on the most important issues. While *Socialists and Democrats* seek ecological transition and sustainability, *Patriots for Europe* (PfE) is aware of the threat Ukraine poses to EU markets, and prioritises softening the blow as much as possible.

How each sector survives will depend on how the next MFF is organised in 2027. As outlined above, several sectors require an increase in the money allocated, and the MFF cannot cover this spending unless the budget is increased. The EU's ability to adapt and respond effectively to these challenges will depend on the political will of its members and the ability of the European Parliament to balance different priorities and concerns, thus ensuring the stability and prosperity of the European Union for the foreseeable future.

The analysis of this report also allows us to assess the different possible scenarios depending on whether the parliamentary arithmetic tends to the political right or left. If the left side of the spectrum gains greater representation, it would be in the hands of the *Socialists and Democrats* (S&D) group and the focus would be on social aid for irregular immigrants, followed by the ecological transition in the agricultural field. Defence is mentioned, but only vaguely (S&D, 2024). On the other hand, if the right were to win key parliamentary seats, it would be with EPP at the wheel and ECR and *Patriots for Europe* on the passenger's seats. It is likely that this synergy would pay attention to all three sectors in question at once, but within them concentrating resources on protecting borders: reinforcing both physical (border control, restricting irregular immigration) and commercial (protecting EU agricultural markets) barriers. The creation of the Defence Union would be launched but targeted as a long-term project.

What all three sectors are asking for are significant budget increases. If Ukraine were to be included in the EU in the short term, it would be completely impossible to meet all the costs, as it would add to the list of problems. However, given the circumstances, it **is unlikely that Ukraine's accession will be advanced in the short term. Instead, progress will be made progressively, starting with the opening of trade barriers.** We therefore understand that agriculture will be put first on the MFF's list of priorities, followed by migration, and finally defence, as the agricultural sector is most immediately affected by market linkages, and migration is of concern to the EU and public opinion. Defence, although mentioned by several groups as an urgent project, is a more arduous process and not as imminent if Ukraine's EU membership is postponed.

What can the agricultural sector expect?

Even if there is opposition to the 2020 strategy of the *Green Deal*, or the *Farm to Fork* strategy has been kept under scrutiny, sustainability remains one of the main objectives of the European institutions, with the goal of zero GHG emissions by 2050. As a result, those directives and regulations that require activity to be conducted in parallel with the ecological transition, as is often the case in this sector, may be modified, but they will certainly not disappear. Moreover, there is increasing talk of companies measuring the ecological footprint of their business activity (carbon footprint and water use, among others), and although the standards required by the EU have not yet been established, it is a reality that will come, and for whose compliance the MFF will have to provide some budgetary provision.

This is not to say that the sector's needs will be overlooked; the narrative that more care is needed for its members has spread throughout the European institutions. Indeed, the EU Council aims to directly support farmers and avoid market damage from lowering barriers with Ukraine, as do several of the main parliamentary groups, especially those further to the right of the political spectrum. Although they have less strength, they are growing in number, and so will represent a greater weight in decision-making. Also, Ursula Von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, is set to relax CAP policies and requirements to give greater flexibility to the sector (*European Commission Press Release, 2024*).

Conclusions

Given the plurality of needs that the geopolitical framework presents, it is unfeasible not to increase resources in the next MFF. It is expected that the priorities and strategies will be as mentioned, but without such a budget increase, the sectors analysed will have to reorganise their structures and/or receive strong support from national governments, because the needs are such that they can no longer be supported by the MFF alone.

There are therefore major unknowns to be resolved before the current Multiannual Financial Framework runs out.

First of all, how are the resources for the MFF being expanded? And in the case of scaling up, where do these resources come from? This means assessing whether they would represent an increase in national budgets, cuts in other funds and/or sectors, or an overall redesign of the funding infrastructure. Finally, there is the dilemma of prioritisation, the repercussions of which can be deciphered by studying the struggle between countries, sectors and political actors to position economic needs. Could players in the affected sectors enter the game and strategically position themselves to benefit from the prioritisation?

In the face of all the unknowns, and following this report, one thing is clear: with the resources currently available, the EU cannot meet the challenges ahead.

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