

Ursula von der Leyen's 2024-2029 EU Political Guidelines

The [earlier released guidelines](#) by Ursula von der Leyen for the European Union's political course from 2024 to 2029 set the stage for key policy areas that will impact migration, the rule of law, labour practices, data protection, and broader issues of security and gender equality. Below we highlight what the guidelines address on these issues, important for the work of La Strada International, our members and other CSOs that aim to support victims of trafficking and those vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Migration

In her guidelines, von der Leyen stands 'fair and firm on migration' and commits to ensure that the Pact on Migration and Asylum will be fully implemented, continuing the EU's migration response with its focus on strict border control, increased surveillance, detention, and swift returns of migrants. The guidelines further foresee increased strategic partnerships with non-EU countries, including a new Pact for the Mediterranean, to manage migration flows and security. A move aiming to prevent irregular crossings and human smuggling, as we have seen earlier with the Turkey deal, which has big impact for (the support for) people seeking safety and protection.

The guidelines acknowledge the EU's international obligations to human rights, stating to respect and to ensure that those that have the right to stay in the EU can do so and will 'receive essential support to integrate into communities.' A claim is further made that 'the Pact will help to protect people, to secure borders and to manage migration in an orderly way with solidarity at its heart'. This raises concerns and questions on how this will work in practice with the strong emphasis on security and preventing irregular migration, especially also with the increased surveillance capabilities and more funding for Frontex and Europol.

Civil society's critiques of the pact, particularly its law enforcement-heavy approach, appear to remain well-founded with these guidelines' clear lack of proposals, on how to enhance the rights of migrants aiming to work in domestic household or other sectors, for which there are strong demands for workers. The suggestion made that this firm migration management shall enable the EU to 'open up legal pathways' seems mainly related to opening the borders for high skilled workers.

Rule of Law

Strengthening the rule of law should according to von der Leyen's vision for the EU, be focussed on continued attention to monitoring and reporting across member states. The consolidation of the EU Rule of Law Report is intended to foster dialogue and address corruption and governance issues.

While this approach at first sight aligns well with civil society's calls for robust checks and balances within EU institutions and member states, the success of these measures will depend on consistent enforcement and the political will to hold all members accountable, ensuring that democratic principles are upheld equally across the Union. Von der Leyen affirms the EU's commitment to this, while addressing the issue of an upsurge in right-wing populist parties across the EU and the rise of more authoritarian leadership styles

Due Diligence and Prevention of Labour Exploitation

The guidelines say little about accountability of the business sector, while they promote making business easier and reducing regulatory burdens for small to mid-sized companies to boost economic competitiveness. Public procurement is mentioned, but this mainly relates to 'enabling preference to be given to European products', however, it is not addressed how public procurement can be used for sustainable or fair business conduct. The guidelines make no references to businesses' responsibilities for preventing harm, or to the recently adopted Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and its role in preventing labour exploitation.

The Forced Labour Ban, which is still under discussion and should prevent businesses to import products with forced labour into the EU, is not mentioned either. However, it might be that this falls under 'preference to be given to European products'. It should furthermore be noted that current legal loopholes, used by businesses to avoid compliance with labour rights standards such as abusive subcontracting practices and making use of letter box companies to deny responsibility for the exploitation and abuse, are also not mentioned.

The EU president pledges to disrupt the exploitation of migrants in the EU labour market and to ensure good working conditions among others by putting forward a 'Quality Jobs Roadmap' to support fair wages, good working conditions, training and fair job transitions for workers and self-employed people, notably by increasing collective bargaining coverage'. It can be questioned whether this will be sufficient to address the severe exploitative practices we currently see in the EU that especially (irregular) migrant workers face. Often without safety net and little possibility to safely report exploitation and abuse.

The emphasis on enabling businesses to fill labour market gaps without sufficient safeguards risks fostering environments of exploitation, unless appropriate monitoring is introduced, or other measures are taken to prevent such exploitation. Especially as we see how difficult it is, even with stricter EU legislation, to hold companies accountable. Moreover, there is a risk that the aim to foster EU competitiveness and strengthen economies, could lead to further weakening of labour standards.

Data Protection

Von der Leyen's Data Union Strategy aims to simplify and increase data sharing among businesses and administrations, while claiming to uphold high privacy and security standards and safeguarding fundamental rights. However, the focus on enabling the flow of data appears to take precedence over robust data protection measures, raising concerns about the potential weakening of privacy rights of vulnerable groups, including victims of human trafficking and those vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

The ease of data sharing must be balanced with strong protections to ensure individual privacy and data security, particularly in an era where personal data is increasingly vulnerable for misuse. The guidelines lack reference to the necessary emphasis on the application of these safeguards, which will be crucial in mitigating the risks associated with expanded data sharing across actors and bodies.

Tackling Organised Crime

Von der Leyen emphasizes the EU's commitment to putting an end to organised crime to 'make Europe safer'. Amongst the measures is the aim to develop a new European Internal Security Strategy and a focus on 'dismantling high-risk criminal networks and their ringleaders', including the revision of current rules on organised crime and 'doubling Europol's staff'. Furthermore, von der Leyen proposes to 'bolster its capacity to support national law enforcement agencies', next to highlighting the need to give more power to the European Public Prosecutors' Office to look at cross-border serious crime, in particular corruption. She also highlights that there will be no impunity for smugglers and human traffickers, promising a 'follow the money' approach to tackle illegal profits, including through enhanced cooperation on asset confiscation.

However, we know that assets recovery within the EU remains low and in fact impunity of perpetrators is high in the EU. The latest Eurostat statistics on human trafficking, published in February 2024, showed a 41% increase in identified victims, while the number of suspected traffickers decreased by 16% and the number of convicted traffickers by almost 17%.

While disrupting criminal operations is essential, we emphasize that a strong focus on a criminal law response alone, will not support victims. For adequate access to justice, the existence of unconditional support, safe reporting and complaint mechanisms is critical in all EU countries. However, policy makers so far refused to embed these aspects in EU law, as we saw with the negotiations on the amendments of the Anti-Trafficking and Victim Rights Directives.

Strengthening Societies and Supporting People

The guidelines do refer to supporting people and strengthening EU societies as well as the social model. They mention the necessity of equal opportunities and quality jobs and highlight the need 'to balance the cost of living, housing and energy to the fairness of incomes'. Together with European trade unions and employers, von der Leyen aims to deliver a new Pact for European Social Dialogue in early 2025, to help people to get access to the essential protections and services they need, along with addressing the root causes of poverty through a first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. Von der Leyen also highlights she will work on safeguarding the rights of people belonging to minorities in Europe and the just appointed Commissioner for Equality will be tasked to update and develop new EU strategies on LGBTIQ+ equality and anti-racism for post-2025.

However, again there are no references made to the vulnerability of especially migrants who work in low-income positions, often lacking access to decent work and income, social inclusion or protection.

Gender Equality

The guidelines also highlight the fight against violence, particularly violence against women (VAW), next to the acknowledgement for the need for gender equality. To strengthen this commitment a new Gender Equality Strategy for post-2025 is proposed, alongside the support for a Roadmap for Women's Rights, which will be presented on International Women's Day 2025. However, highly sensitive issues are not addressed, such as support for a consent-based definition of rape, which EU MS failed to include in the new VAW Directive, or concrete steps to ensure that migrant women facing domestic abuse have access to support, regardless of their residence status.

Extension of the EU and Support to Ukraine

The guidelines mention the future extension of the EU with the Western Balkan and Ukraine, to be steered by the newly appointed Commissioner for Enlargement. The EU's strong commitment to support Ukraine 'for as long as it takes' is mainly addressed in the introduction although the guidelines do mention its geopolitical integration, particularly through economic reforms and integration into the Single Market, reflecting a supportive stance towards the country's rebuilding efforts. There is no further information provided about the possible extension of the Temporary Protection Directive and or the need for continuous support to refugees from the country and or other countries. It is essential that the EU strongly commits to ensuring adequate support for Ukrainian and other refugees across Europe.

Support for Civil Society

Lastly, the guidelines do address the EU's engagement with civil society organisations and recognise the 'expertise and the important role CSOs play in defending specific societal issues and upholding human rights'. A promise is made to ensure civil society is better protected in this work. However, the guidelines only mention the importance of engaging with local councillors', and no other measures are proposed to reduce the shrinking space of CSOs in Europe. There is also no information on how the EU will address the administrative, legal and political measures and restrictions which limit many CSOs ability to conduct their day-to-day activities and access funding.