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**VON DER LEYEN FACES CRITICAL TEST AS EU COURT DECIDES ON SECRET TEXTS** ■■■■■■■■■■

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Elisa Braun and Mari Eccles

Ursula von der Leyen's legacy as European Commission president will face a huge challenge this week when the EU court rules on secret text messages she exchanged with the boss of a drug company that agreed a multibillion-euro vaccine deal with Brussels.

In what's set to be a reputation-defining judgment, the Court of Justice of the EU will decide whether by refusing to release the contents of her text conversation with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla the Commission breached transparency rules.

Not only will Wednesday's "Pfizergate" decision in the lower-tier General Court have sweeping implications for how the bloc's top officials conduct business behind closed doors, it could also cast a shadow over von der Leyen's second five-year term at the helm, which only started on Dec. 1. As she battles to keep the Commission relevant amid nationalist rhetoric growing around the bloc, she has already attracted criticism for her tendency to centralize power and for rowing back on green-friendly commitments.

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