EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION 2024

– A citizen's guide to the EU elections

Table of contents

Foreword

You can rightly call the election period from 2019-2024 the most dramatic in the history of the EU. The Union became directly involved in the lives and health of EU citizens for the first time when the Corona pandemic hit in March 2020, and the Commission took the lead in joint procurement of vaccines and coordinated shutdowns. In the attempt to deal with the economic consequences, the EU countries reached an agreement on the historic decision, without the treaty, to take on common debt of up to 800 billion euros. The shock was only about to subside when Russia brought war back to European soil with the invasion of Ukraine. From the outset, the EU announced its unreserved support for Ukraine. The member states managed to achieve something so rare as to agree on foreign policy. However, the new security situation led to major changes in the EU's internal policy, but also in foreign policy, where the war in Gaza has most recently emphasized the need for a new and rethinking of the EU's role as a geopolitical actor as well as the policy in its own immediate areas. The return of war in political reality is necessarily a shock wave through a union that springs from the idea that democracy and open market economies together will ensure a lasting peace. An expectation that has largely succeeded, but perhaps for the first time has really had its weaknesses exposed, resulting in several significant political questions.

There is no doubt that security policy, defense cooperation, foreign policy, and expansion of the Union with new member states will play a major role in the run-up to this summer's European Parliament elections. But one topic that undoubtedly follows and can be decisive to the highest degree is the green transition. At the beginning of February, the Commission set out its 2040 targets for a 90 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. It happened in the wake of extensive protests from agriculture. One can therefore expect political fights over precisely the cavalcade of issues linked to the climate, environment and green transition. It is perhaps especially here that the battle ground between the right and the left shows itself, and that the right-wing nationalist movement, which is predicted by many to make significant progress in the election, will assert itself.

It is therefore decisive which new Parliament is formed after the election and which Commission is appointed with the support of the new majority. 720 seats must be filled in Parliament. 15 of them are to be elected in Denmark, 22 in Belgium and 12 in Croatia. These are the three countries represented in the Erasmus + project, a three-year partnership between the organisations Democracy in Europe from Denmark, Crosol from Croatia, and Europahuis Ryckevelde from Belgium, which is the basis of this book. The book prepares the reader for the election and delivers an overview of the central aspects of the EU and its institutions based on the three different countries – an old member of the EU, a middle-aged member, and a new member.

Historically the EU has had difficulty seriously engaging the European electorate and struggles with a tarnished reputation for bureaucratic deadlock, opacity, and democratic deficit. It can be said that the EU's institutions are more open than many think, but less transparent than they pretend to be. It can be said that the citizens' democratic influence in European cooperation has better conditions than it is usually attributed, but still leaves much to be desired. In other words, the EU is characterized by gray areas. In these, the formal and informal division of power, the national interests vis-à-vis the Union's are broken. This book sheds light on the various actors and puts a sharp focus on how decisions are made in the enormous political machine room, which we refer to daily as the EU.

1. Is the European Union democratic?

1.1 Participation – a demos in the democracy – what does your vote mean?

There can be no democracy without active participation from the demos (people). At a minimum, voters must use their voices in democratic elections and choose politicians who can represent them in decision-making bodies. In 2024, European voters will have the opportunity to vote in the European Parliament election.

The EU is a kind of federation or state formation where elected politicians are co-legislators in the European Parliament. Therefore, it is of great importance how the new parliament is composed. The EU functions somewhat like other federations, where the power of the parliament is shared with representatives of the

Image: Polina Kovaleva. Source: pexels.com

member states. In the EU, it is the Council of Ministers where the approval of individual countries' ministers is a prerequisite for adopting a legislative proposal. But the EU is also a developing collaboration. This development is governed by the heads of state and government from the member countries who meet at a series of annual summits.

Regarding content, there are plenty of problems and challenges to address in the EU. There is a looming euro crisis, refugee flows, security challenges, and climate upheavals, to name just a few. But there is also a governance crisis or a democratic crisis that may be equally important. Is there support for EU cooperation from citizens? Do ordinary people in Europe feel that we can influence the political course? The prerequisite for influence and engagement is that we as citizens and voters understand the political system.

1.2 What is the EU? – The powers of the EU

The European Union (EU) is a political and economic union of 27 European member states. It began after World War II as a project to foster economic cooperation and prevent future conflicts among European nations. The EU has evolved over the years, expanding its scope beyond economic considerations to encompass a wide range of policies and institutions.

The EU functions as a single market, allowing for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across its member states. This integration has increased economic interdependence and prosperity for many nations within the union. The common currency (EURO) adopted by most member states, further enables economic collaboration.

The EU is characterised by its unique institutional structure, which includes the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union. These institutions work together to shape and implement policies, legislate, and ensure adherence to common rules and values.

The EU does not only deal with economic aspects but has expanded its policy areas to address various challenges, including environmental issues, social policies, and foreign affairs. The EU also promotes fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law among its member states.

In recent years, the EU has faced significant challenges, including debates over its future direction, enlargement, migration, and security. Nevertheless, the EU remains a unique experiment in regional cooperation, aiming to provide stability, prosperity, and shared values for its diverse member states.

1.3 Brief introduction: The EU institutions and the division of power

The decision-making processes of the EU may seem distant and opaque. Still, it's quite simple to get an overview of the power distribution and the most common decision-making processes. If we set aside intricacies and focus on the political bodies, there are four key stops in the European political process.

Summits

Member states' heads of state and government meet at least four times yearly for summits formally known as the European Council. The numerous crises in recent years have led to more meetings than the required four. The summits are led by a chairman chosen by participating leaders for two and a half years by a qualified majority. The current chairman is Charles Michel, former Prime Minister of Belgium. After parliamentary elections, a new chairman must be appointed. Summits make decisions by adopting conclusions, mostly achieved through consensus. They cannot enact EU legislation, but they set the overall framework and priorities for cooperation.

EU Commission

The Commission is the EU's executive power, functioning like a government working for EU interests. Each member state's government appoints a commissioner for five years, with a specific portfolio similar to a minister in a government. Each commissioner is associated with a Directorate-General. The Commission

has the right of initiative, meaning it has a monopoly on proposing legislation. The position of Commission President is one of the most powerful in the EU, currently held by Ursula von der Leyen. After the election, a new Commission President is chosen through the so-called Spitzenkandidat process.

The Council of the European Union

Legislative power is shared between the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. Virtually all legislative proposals must be approved to become law. The Council comprises one minister from each country representing their interests in the EU legislative process. The Council makes decisions usually by a qualified majority, requiring support from a majority of countries representing at least 65% of the EU population. The rotating presidency leads the Council every six months, setting political goals for the period.

European Parliament

The 705 members of the European Parliament are directly elected in each member state. In the 2024 election, these members will be elected or re-elected, this time for 720 seats including 15 from Denmark. Members align with party groups representing similar roles to parties in national parliaments. Parliament members are elected to represent the interests of European citizens based on their ideological stance.

If everything were as straightforward as the formal power distribution suggests, there wouldn't be a need for a handbook for voters. However, the devil is in the details - and often in the informal grey areas where decisions find their way around the outlined power distribution.

1.4 Accountability

Accountability is, along with transparency and integrity, one of the essential prerequisites of a democracy based on the rule of law. Necessary tools to ensure accountability of EU's public institutions encompass monitoring and oversight. Formally, the European Parliament is the only EU Institution that is directly accountable to the European citizens as they are elected by the voters.

The EU describes itself as one of the least corrupt regions in the world, and the EU institutions have several rules and tools for transparency, integrity, and accountability, and thus to combat corruption. In general, there are shortcomings of these prerequisites within the institutions, identified by the European Ombudsman. This has resulted in increased efforts to close transparency gaps and tighten requirements of integrity in both the Parliament and the Commission. These include disclosing information on interactions with lobbyists, codes of conduct with specific rules for MEPs and Commissioners, and access to documents and transparency of the legislative process.

The combat against corruption became highly relevant because of the corruption scandal, dubbed Qatargate, from December 2022. The scandal came to light when several MEPs were arrested on preliminary charges of corruption, money laundering and membership of a criminal organisation. Leaked documents have revealed that MEPs have recorded alleged attempts to manipulate the Parliament and wider policy debates. It is suspected that paymasters in Qatar, Morocco and Mauritania have spent around €4 million to influence decision-making inside the Parliament.

Quatargate serves as a current shortcoming in the accountability of EU institutions, and especially the Parliament's role as the EU's foremost democratic body.

1.5 Openness and transparency

The EU has several rules and tools to ensure more transparency. This includes the European Transparency Register, which aims to disclose information on interactions with lobbyists. Through this register, citizens are provided with information on those seeking to

influence law-making, whom they represent, their mission, and their funding sources. Another crucial element of transparency is the access to documents. Consequently, EU treaties grant citizens of EU Member States the right to access documents from the Union's institutions. Officially, this means that citizens can access documents from each main institution - Parliament, Commission, and Council - via a public register available online. With the Parliament being the only institution with members elected by the EU voters, this institution is considered the most open. Plenary sittings and most committee meetings are held in public and web streamed.

Despite the initiatives, the EU is still considered to lack transparency, which is also reflected in the growing distance between the EU and citizens, as demonstrated by the steady decline in voter turnout at the European Parliament's elections. An insufficiency of the Transparency Register occurs, as it is voluntary to register dialogues with stakeholders, such as lobbyists.

A concrete example of the lack of transparency in EU institutions, despite meetings being streamed and publicly available, is the case of trialogues. The EU Parliament has the opportunity to close the doors at certain meetings and negotiations, particularly in trialogues with the Commission and the Council. The three institutions do, in some cases, convene to find compromises between different viewpoints at these informal trialogues. The main purpose of these trialogues is to expedite the legislative processes due to their shorter duration. Formally, legislative proposals should undergo multiple processes, resulting in a lengthy process before the legislation is enacted.

The EU institutions' use of experts and lobbyists is also a less transparent element, as it is not entirely clear to the public how much influence they have on policies. Although it is evident that EU legislation is adopted not only by the Ministers in the Council or MEPs but by a larger group of people. This does include officials who are employed at the EU institutions and external expert groups, comprising scholars, trade associations, firms, unions, and authorities.

1.6 Legitimacy and efficiency

In connection with accountability and transparency, legitimacy versus efficiency encapsulates the balance and trade-offs that the EU institutions must navigate to uphold democratic principles, ensure public trust, and effectively address the pressing challenges faced by the EU. The equilibrium requires finding ways to maintain legitimacy by engaging citizens, while simultaneously optimising the efficiency of decision-making processes to tackle complex issues in a timely and impactful manner.

Legitimacy in the context of the EU refers to the exercise of governing authority that must be acceptable and credible to those it governs. It is evident that governing authorities that can draw on legitimacy are more likely to secure compliance of their decisions and are more likely to obtain the resources necessary to tackle the problems they are supposed to address. Citizens' perception of the EU as legitimate relies on the ability to exercise due voice over political decisions and hold power wielders to account and ensure that governing authorities are responsive to citizens' preferences. A way for the EU to accommodate this is through the Parliament as a representative institution. The EU's democratic legitimacy is, however, impaired as several protest parties and Eurosceptic movements are growing. This indicates that a large share of the European population is not satisfied with results of the EU.

Other recommendations to improve legitimacy include making the EU more prominent in public debates, also between the elections. The media can play a crucial role in ensuring better coverage of EU matters, thereby informing voters. In the case of lobbying, it can also be beneficial to have broader representation to strengthen the interests of civil societies.

As legitimacy is obtained by following the rules, serving the interests of the citizens, and providing transparency, this can have a negative effect on EU's efficiency. The aforementioned trialogues are a tool to ensure a more efficient legislative process. A reduction in the processing time of legislative proposals results in more legislation being enacted, supporting the efficiency of

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and Charles Michel, President of the European Council.

EU institutions in addressing complex challenges and making timely decisions. Efficiency is important and closely linked to EU's legitimacy and accountability, as it contributes to the EU's ability to respond to various issues, such as economic crises, security concerns, and environmental challenges.

1.7 Commissions' strategy for the coming five years

The European Commission has outlined six priorities that form the basis of the Commission's strategy the coming years.

The European Green Deal is centered around the Commission's initiatives and ambitions within climate and environmental policies. Due to climate change and environmental degradation being an existential threat to Europe and the world, the Green Deal was initiat-

ed to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy. The Commission has adopted a set of proposals to make the EU's climate, energy, transport, and taxation policies fit for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. The overall goal is to be the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Of a current highlight within climate and environment, a deal was reached at the COP28 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai to accelerate emission reductions towards net zero by 2050. This includes an agreement to transition away from fossil fuels and to reduce global emissions by 43% by 2030. The deal was reached in December 2023.

A Europe Fit for the Digital Age is the EU's digital strategy aiming to make a digital transformation that works for people and businesses. The Commission is determined to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty

and set standards, rather than following those of others – with a clear focus on data, technology, and infrastructure. The strategy includes €250 billion to boost digitalisation from NextGenerationEU, and 80% of EU population should have basic digital skills by 2030.

An Economy that Works for People is the ambition of creating an economy that ensures social fairness and prosperity, where economies can grow while reducing poverty and inequality. In 2023, the EU is facing several important challenges, such as high inflation and high energy prices, where the Commission aims to improve the EU's competitiveness. For 2024, the Commission is recommending removing bottlenecks to private and public investments, supporting a favorable business environment, and developing the necessary skills for the green and digital transitions.

A Stronger Europe in the World is the Commission priority on security and defense. The objective is to reinforce the EU's global leadership through a more active role and a stronger voice for the EU in the world. Strong European leadership also means working closely with neighboring countries, introducing a comprehensive strategy on Africa, and reaffirming the European perspective of the countries in the Western Balkans. The Commission has a current focus on EU enlargement and, thus, recommends opening negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, and presents €6 billion Growth Plan for Western Balkans.

Promoting our European Way of Life aims at protecting European citizens and values. The Commission has the ambition to respond to threats to the rule of law, which challenge the legal, political, and economic basis of the European Union. The Commission will launch a comprehensive European Rule of Law Mechanism under which it will report every year, objectively, on the condition of the rule of law across the Union. This is especially to ensure that lawmakers and leaders are accountable to the same laws as every citizen and institution. Furthermore, a central objective is to secure strong borders, modernise the EU's asylum system, and cooperate with partner countries, which is important to achieve a fresh start on migration.

A New Push for European Democracy focuses on the attacks and threats to democracies on the European continent, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The Commission strives to strengthen Europe's shared democratic values, which include a commitment to fundamental human rights, the protection of a free and independent press, upholding the rule of law, and promoting equality between women and men, rural and urban, young and old. The Commission has put forward new measures to achieve this: ensure transparency of foreign interest representation, strengthen electoral processes in the EU, and ensure citizens and civil society organisations can participate in policymaking.

2. Three country perspectives

BELGIUM - DENMARK - CROATIA COMPARISON

	Belgium	Denmark	Croatia
Population	11.5 M	5.9 M	4 M
Capital	Brussels	Copenhagen	Zagreb
Official Language	Dutch - French - German	Danish	Croatian - Italian
Year of accession	1951	1973	2013
Currency	euro	Danish Krone	euro
State form	Monarchy	Monarchy	Republic
MEPs	21	14	12
Current EC	Didier Reynders	Margrethe Vestager	Dubravka Suica
Next presidency	Ongoing (2024)	2025	2033
Head of government	Alexander De Croo	Mette Frederiksen	Andrej Plenkovic
Part of Schengen	Yes	Yes	Yes
Part of NATO	Yes	Yes	Yes
Voting for EU elections from	16	18	18
Compulsary voting?	Yes	No	No
EU elections on the	9th June '24	9th June '24	9th June '24

Belgium between France and Germany.

2.1 Belgium in the EU

2.1.1 Belgium's 65 years in the EU

From the very beginning of European cooperation, Belgium has played a role. While it's not necessary to know the entire history of the country, some knowledge about its geographic location is important. Along with the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Belgium is situated between France and Germany. Consequently, throughout history, Belgium often acted as a buffer state between the great powers.

It's not surprising that after Robert Schuman's press conference on May 9th, 1950, Belgium also sent a delegation to the negotiating table. Originally, the Belgians weren't quite sure what to expect, but one thing was clear: if both France and Germany were designing a plan to collaborate, Belgium could not afford to stand on the sidelines.

As a result, Belgium was involved in the initial official negotiations that later led to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community. Netherlands and Luxembourg also sent delegations, not coincidentally, as these countries had already established a customs union with Belgium and worked closely together. In 1958, the European Economic Community was established, modelled after this existing customs union.

Current European President, Charles Michel (BE).

Not only in the early years but also throughout the further integration of Europe, many Belgian politicians contributed to the Union's development. The then Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene served as the vice-chair of the convention that led to the creation of a European constitution. Although this constitution was later rejected, the most recent Treaty of Lisbon is almost an exact replica of it. Additionally, the very first European President, Herman Van Rompuy, was Belgian. Just like the current European President: Charles Michel.

In addition to Belgium's presence in the very first European cooperation and the fact that many Belgians hold top European positions, the country has another

significant European dimension: Brussels as European capital.

2.1.2 Brussels as European capital

Many people worldwide recognize Brussels as the capital of the European Union. The city is home to the most important European institutions, and sometimes it is even more famous than Belgium itself. The connection between the city and the European Union is so strong that the two are often intertwined, and even in Belgian media, you will frequently find statements like, "Brussels has decided that…"

However, the establishment of European institutions in Brussels did not proceed smoothly. In 1952, during a discussion about the headquarters, the then Belgian government proposed Liege (the heart of Belgian coal mining industry). After extensive negotiations, the final agreement temporarily designated Luxembourg as headquarters. However, there was a logistical problem: Luxembourg lacked a venue large enough to accommodate all parliament members. For this reason, they established themselves in Strasbourg, in the hemicycle used by the Council of Europe.

In 1958, Belgium had a second opportunity. After the Treaty of Rome, Brussels was put forward as an additional location for the Commissions and Councils. They would commute between the main headquarters in Luxembourg and Brussels. The number of civil servants grew, and primarily for practical reasons (good accessibility), meetings gradually shifted to Brussels. The Court of Justice remained in Luxembourg, and it was not until 1992, when the parliamentary building in Brussels had just been constructed, that the current arrangement for the operation of the European Parliament was established. Plenary sessions take place one week per month in Strasbourg, while all other meetings occur in Brussels.

Many years and negotiations later, Brussels officially received recognition as the European capital only in 2001, with the signing of the Treaty of Nice. Today, both the European Council and the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the European Parliament are located in Brussels.

For the residents near the European district, the establishment of European institutions was a source of both

Construction works at the EP buildings in Brussels.

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hope and frustration. In the 1960s to 1980s, many residential buildings in the area were demolished to make room for both the institutions and offices for all EU officials. This administrative enclave made the neighbourhood unattractive. Through local citizen actions and protests, pressure was put on the Belgian government to develop a clear vision for the EU district. Over the years, new apartments were built (right next to or even between the EU institutions), and more and more initiatives (such as replacing parking lots with cosy squares with restaurants) have made the neighbourhood liveable again. In short: slow but steady progress. In this sense, it can also serve as a metaphor for European integration.

2.1.3 Flanders, Wallonia, or Belgium?

Belgium has approximately 11 million inhabitants and, in terms of land area, is smaller than Denmark or Croatia. It's a relatively small EU member state, where one might not expect much complexity in its political system at first glance. However, the opposite is true. Ask a Belgian to explain the Belgian state structure in 5 minutes, and you'll find that only a few can succeed in this task.

In summary, Belgium is officially referred to as a "federal state, composed of communities and regions". A deeper dive into the Belgian state structure reveals that there are a total of six sub-states: three regions and three communities. Adding these to the federal level, you have a total of 7 parliaments and governments. However, the Flemish community and the Flemish region are represented by a single Flemish parliament

and government, bringing the total to six parliaments and governments in one country.

Distribution of powers
In Belgium, decision-making authority is divided among three different policy levels: the federal state, the communities, and the regions. The federal state is responsible for matters concerning the entire Belgian territory. The communities are responsible for personal matters, and the regions are responsible for territorial matters. Legally, these three policy levels are considered equal.

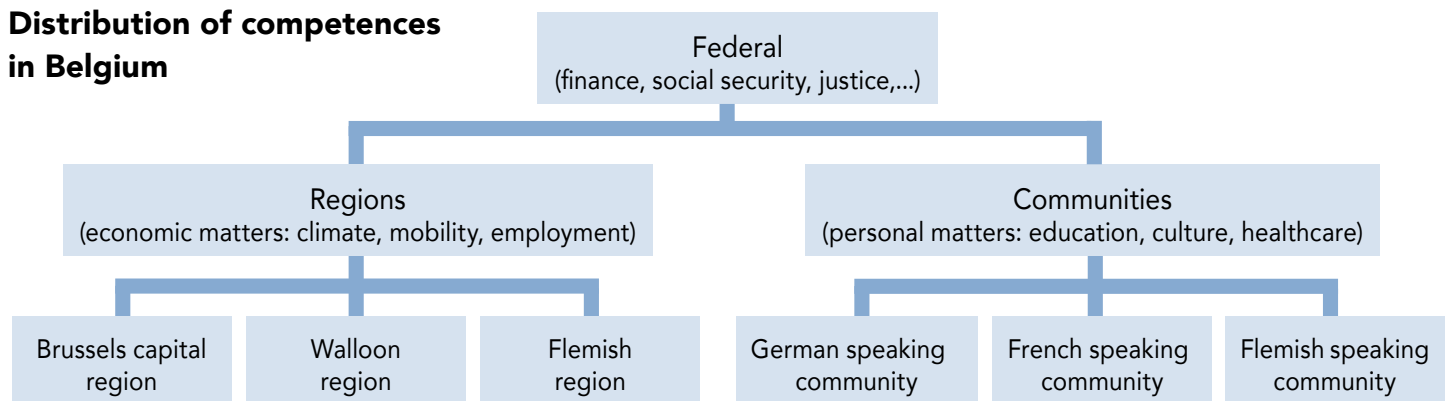*Can it get any more complicated?*
Yes! The regional governments are composed differently in terms of political ideology. For example, the largest party in the Flemish government (in the northern part of the country) is liberal-conservative, while the largest party in the Walloon government (in the southern part of the country) is socialist. The federal government is not necessarily composed of the same political parties as het Flemish and Walloon government.

Does this also have advantages?
Yes, certainly! Belgian politicians are accustomed to negotiating with each other and seeking compromises. The term 'a Belgian compromise' is even used for compromises on a subject where opinions vary greatly, but it still contains a solution that everyone can agree with. This is a characteristic that is very useful in European politics. Belgians are often the driving force behind the scenes during important negotiations.

The representation of Belgium in the European decision-making process involves a significant amount

Distribution of competences in Belgium

Federal (finance, social security, justice,...)		
Regions (economic matters: climate, mobility, employment)		**Communities** (personal matters: education, culture, healthcare)
Brussels capital region / Walloon region / Flemish region		German speaking community / French speaking community / Flemish speaking community

of coordination work, and often causes confusion for non-Belgians. This chapter further explores how this coordination is established.

2.1.4 The Belgian Government in the Council

Since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, EU member states have had the option to be represented in the Council by a regional minister. For Belgium, this is an ideal solution because decision-making authority is divided among various levels of government. Belgians make full use of this provision.

Officially, according to Article 16 of the Treaty on European Union, each member state sends one competent minister to Brussels to represent the national government in the Council. In practice, there is always room on the front row for a delegation leader (the minister) and an "assessor" who assists the minister.

However, even with two available positions, the Belgian situation is not entirely resolved. For example, there are as many as four climate ministers: one federal and one for each region. This has, in the past, led to situations in which the ministers had difficulty or were unable to reach a common Belgian position and

Didier Reynders.

did not send a representative to the Council. Nevertheless, Belgium must find a solution on its own: Belgian positions must be represented in the Council. Fortunately, there are rules that establish the coordination of a common position.

The formation of a Belgian position

Through a complex coordination system and the establishment of a special Directorate-General for European Affairs and Coordination (DG E), Belgium manages to develop a national position. All relevant (federal and regional) governments are represented in DG E, and decisions are made through consensus. If no agreement can be reached, Belgium abstains from voting.

Who actually attends the Council meeting depends on the allocation of powers. There are four possible situations:

1. A Council formation that exclusively discusses federal matters.
2. A Council formation that exclusively discusses regional matters.
3. A Council formation that discusses topics that are mainly federal but partly regional.
4. A Council formation that discusses topics that are mainly regional but partly federal.

In the first two situations, the Belgian delegation consists solely of federal or regional ministers. In the third and fourth situations, the minister primarily responsible takes on the role of the delegation leader, and the minister partially responsible serves as the assessor.

2.1.5 The Belgian Commissioner

The Belgian European Commissioner in the current European Commission is Didier Reynders. He is a Belgian politician who, before his appointment as a European Commissioner, held a ministerial post in the Belgian federal government for a consecutive twenty years. He represented the French-speaking liberal party MR, of which he was also the vice president for many years.

In the European Commission, Didier Reynders is responsible for the portfolio of justice. His role includes

ensuring the rule of law is upheld and attempting to resolve rule of law violations at an early stage. He also oversees the improvement of judicial cooperation between member states and the use of new digital technologies to optimize legal systems.

In September 2023, he took on the additional responsibility of "competition" after the Danish European Commissioner, Margaret Vestager, nominated herself as a candidate for the presidency of the European Investment Bank. This takeover is temporary and will last until the end of the Commission's term.

Belgians in the European Commission
The Belgian politician Jean Rey was the very first European Commissioner for Belgium. During the first two terms between 1958-1967, he was responsible for foreign relations. He then continued to build his career within the Commission and became the first Commission President from 1967-1970 after the merger of the institutions. Later, during the first direct elections of the European Parliament in 1979, he was elected as a Member of the European Parliament.

In 2014, for the first time, a woman was nominated as the Belgian European Commissioner: Marianne Thyssen. In the Juncker Commission, she was responsible for employment and social affairs, and she succeeded in giving European policy a more social dimension. Among her achievements are the European rules to combat social dumping and the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights, along with many other specific social measures.

2.1.6 European Politics in Belgian political institutions
Since the sixth Belgian state reform (2011-2014), the Flemish, federal, and European governments in Belgium have the same term in office, and elections take place on the same day. One of the reasons behind this decision was that the powers of these different levels of government are closely intertwined, making it a logical step to synchronize election dates.

The synchronization of terms in office has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that it reduces election fever and the desire for politicians to seek personal recognition. In a country with a complex state structure like Belgium, having elections on different dates would result in frequent elections at various levels, which could lead to instability in policy at all levels of the country. Furthermore, it means that Belgians only must go to the polls once every five years.

Disadvantages include potential confusion about the distribution of powers. When elections are synchronized, all powers are often mixed. Politicians may not clearly distinguish between the distribution of powers during an election campaign, except for incumbent ministers defending their own policies. They often refer to other levels of government to limit their responsibility, whether justified or not.

Despite Brussels being the heart of the European Union and Belgians generally favouring European integration, the EU often seems distant in Belgium. European elections are overshadowed by the Flemish and federal elections. In the lead-up to election day, there are usually many debates featuring Flemish or federal leaders in the media, while the European candidates receive much less attention. The lack of awareness about the EU is conveniently used by (national) politicians to shift blame for unpopular measures onto the European Union. Measures are implemented because "Europe requires it," and popular measures resulting from European legislation are often presented as domestic achievements. Few Belgians are aware that 70-80% of Belgian legislation originates from European legislation.

2.1.7 The mandatory vote and voting from 16 years
In Belgium, there is compulsory voting for regional, federal, and European elections starting at the age of 18. This means that every eligible Belgian voter is legally obligated to report to the polling station on election day, enter a voting booth, and place the ballot in the ballot box. However, there is no obligation to cast a vote for a specific party or candidate, as casting a blank vote is also a valid option. In cases of absence, fines may be imposed.

Starting in 2024, for the first time, there will be no compulsory voting for local and provincial elections, which are held later in the year.

Voting from 16

In Belgium, there is a voting age of 16 for European elections. However, despite the potential to include the voices of young people, it has proven challenging in practice.

In late 2021, a new electoral law was approved, allowing young people from the age of 16 to vote in European elections. This applied to both young people with Belgian nationality and young people from other EU member states who officially resided in Belgium on the day of the elections. In initial communications on this matter, the Belgian government indicated that these young people needed to register to be included in the electoral roll. However, once registered and enrolled, the right to vote turned into an obligation to vote. In other words, not showing up on election day, even for those aged 16 to 18 became punishable.

The registration requirement created a significant barrier. Moreover, nobody was entirely clear on how the registration process worked and what the next steps were. Local authorities, responsible for processing the registrations, were barely informed. There was clear dissatisfaction at various levels of government.

The matter was eventually brought before the Constitutional Court. In July 2023 (at a point when registrations had been ongoing for three months), the court ruled in its verdict that the registration requirement had to be abolished.

In March 2024, the result was finally announced: young people from the age of 16 also have compulsory voting for the European elections. In practice, minors will automatically be placed on the electoral rolls and will be summoned for the European Parliament elections on June 9, 2024, via a summons letter, just like adults.

2.1.8 Belgian parties and their views on EU

The complex state structure in Belgium, the distribution of powers, and the existence of six governments and parliaments have a significant impact on the country's political landscape. In total, there are a staggering 19 parties represented in one or more parliaments in Belgium.

Because Europahuis Ryckevelde, the author of this chapter, primarily operates in Flanders, this section has chosen to focus on the parties represented in the current Flemish Parliament:

- **PVDA** (Labor Party)
- **Groen** (Progressive, Green Party)
- **Vooruit** (Socialist Party)
- **Open VLD** (Liberal Party)
- **CD&V** (Christian Democratic Party)
- **N-VA** (Flemish Nationalist and Liberal-Conservative Party)
- **Vlaams Belang** (Flemish Nationalist and Right-Conservative Party)

Open VLD, N-VA, and CD&V form the Flemish government, while the other parties are in the opposition The other partiers are in the opposition at the Flemish level. Please remember that this does not necessarily mean they hold the same position in the federal government. In the federal government, the majority is formed by Open VLD, CD&V, Vooruit and Groen, supplemented by Walloon parties.

In addition to the choice to focus on Flemish parties in this section, we are only highlighting a small aspect of the party's overall attitude towards the EU. Furthermore, the parties differ in their opinions on specific European issues such as migration, climate, or geopolitics, but these aspects are not addressed here.

PVDA and Vlaams Belang
– the ends of the political spectrum

The two parties at the opposite ends of the political spectrum, extreme left (PVDA) and extreme right (Vlaams-Belang), are the most Eurosceptic, but fundamentally not necessarily against European cooperation. In both party programs, there is more talk of 'fundamental reform' or a 'radically different Europe' rather than outright opposition to European collaboration.

PVDA talks about a Europe of the people, not of money. The radical change at the European level, for them, should primarily come on the economic front. The party wants to move away from both the budget pact and the stability and growth pact (rules concerning the economic governance of the EU) and advocates allowing state aid and government monopolies again. They are determined to destroy the existing European rules in this regard. Other key elements of their European vision include introducing a millionaire's tax and holding referendums for important European decisions.

Vlaams Belang interprets the European vision differently and mainly criticizes the 'European superstate that interferes too much with the powers of its member states.' According to the party, the EU sometimes goes against the democratic decisions of the European people. The fundamental reform they propose is more at the governance level, with a confederal Europe as the goal. In addition, the party strongly opposes the flow of money to less prosperous regions (via the solidarity fund) and takes a critical stance towards the euro.

Vooruit, CD&V, and Open VLD
– the centrist parties
In broad terms, both Vooruit, CD&V, and Open VLD are pro-European parties that support further European integration. They each emphasize different aspects of this integration based on their respective ideologies.

Vooruit is a socialist party that links strong cooperation between member states to increased security, prosperity, and freedom. "Together we are stronger" is a recurring theme in their European vision. The party aims to focus more on defending the rule of law and democracy, seeing Belgium playing a leading role in this regard. Vooruit's position on the European Union reflects a desire for further deepening and strengthening of the EU before considering enlargement. They advocate for the abolition of the veto right in foreign policy, considering it to be an important element of this process.

CD&V places great importance on strengthening the EU's external borders, linked to a humane asylum policy. Additionally, the party considers economic growth essential for achieving energy transition. They also regard the achievement of strategic autonomy at the EU level and cooperation with EU neighboring countries as essential.

Open VLD is committed to increasing collaboration, not only at the European level but also internationally. Strong international organizations such as NATO and the UN are, in addition to the EU, of essential importance to them. Their pragmatic vision of cooperation asserts that global challenges can only be addressed effectively at the European level. They prefer that cooperation is as efficient as possible. A "leaner" and more decisive Union is, in their vision, necessary, which requires fewer commissioners, fewer advisory bodies, and the abolition of the veto right.

Groen and NVA: center-left and center-right
Groen believes in a strong European Union. They are staunch advocates of the EU's climate policy but would like to see more emphasis on social policy in the Green Deal. Furthermore, they believe that the European Union should focus more on its own democracy: a significant role for the European Parliament, more direct democracy, and the abolition of the veto right.

N-VA considers itself a Eurorealist. They support European cooperation when the issue is best decided beyond state borders. They attach great importance to the principle of subsidiarity, advocating that policies should be made at the level closest to the citizen. They see a role for the EU in economic, security, and migration policies. They want each member state to maintain its own identity within the EU and advocate for a place for Flanders at the negotiating table (currently only Belgium as a whole is represented).

2.2 Croatia in the EU

2.2.1 Croatia celebrates 10 years in the EU

Since gaining its independence in 1991, one of the main strategic goals of the Republic of Croatia was to join the Euro-Atlantic integration processes by joining EU and NATO. Most EU countries recognized Croatia as an independent country on 15 January 1992, which started the diplomatic relations between Croatia and the EU.

The relationship progressed slowly in the beginning both because of the war in Croatia, but also because of some still-existing authoritarian tendencies in its first governments. The atmosphere in Croatia began to relax and liberalize during the latter part of the decade,

and especially in 2000 with the first change in government. The cooperation intensified in the late 1990s and in 2001 Croatia joined the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It officially became an EU candidate country in 2004. During this time, Croatia undertook a series of reforms in various areas in order to fulfill the conditions for accession called the Copenhagen criteria, the most important of which were reforms in the areas of market economy, judiciary, rule of law, democratic institutions and human rights. The negotiations lasted until 2011, when the Treaty on Croatia's accession to the European Union was signed by then Prime minister Jadranka Kosor and President Ivo Josipović.

Source: REUTERS

Croatian President Ivo Josipović and Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor sign the Treaty of Accession to the European Union.

In 2012, a referendum was held in which all citizens of the Republic of Croatia with the right to vote could participate. At the referendum, 66% of citizens voted for joining the EU. On July 1, 2013, Croatia became the youngest full member of the European Union. So, after a full decade as a member of the European family, what has changed for Croatia and its citizens?

2.2.2 Croatia's European path

Croatia's road to EU ascension began in full in February 2003, when it applied for membership. It became an official candidate-country in 2004, while in 2005, pre-accession negotiations officially began. First phase of the negotiations included the screening period where the EU institutions analyzed the level of compatibility between then-current Croatian laws and EU *acquis Communautaire*. During the process of negotiations and accession it had to harmonize its legislation and policies with the EU's body of laws and regulations. Accession negotiations were organized into 35 thematic chapters covering various policy areas, such as justice, fundamental rights, competition policy, agriculture, environment, etc. Croatia had to negotiate and conclude agreements for each chapter, committing to implementing EU rules and regulations.

The most significant reforms where to be undertaken within the judiciary and human rights system. It was crucial to crack down on corruption and strengthen the independence, impartiality, and professionalism of the courts. These reforms resulted in arrests of some high-profile persons such as the former prime minister Ivo Sanader in 2007. In mid-2000s one of the key areas to improve was co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). During the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), war crimes were committed on both sides. One of the tasks for the Croatian justice system during the EU negotiations was extraditing several of its citizens who were suspects in these cases to the ICTY, including the fugitive general Ante Gotovina, who was at large since 2001. He was arrested in Spain in 2005 and trialed at the ICTY. In 2011, Gotovina and another general, Mladen Markač, were convicted to prison sentences by the ICTY, which caused backlash from the Croatian public who generally considered them innocent. In 2012, ICTY Appeals Chamber overruled the original judgement and acquitted both generals, which was a watershed moment causing mass celebrations in Croatia and symbolically closing this political chapter.

Croatian generals Ante Gotovina (left) and Mladen Markač during their trial. Photo: EPA

There were other major political obstacles before concluding all the negotiation chapters and fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. Among them were the long-standing border issues with Slovenia over the Piran Bay boundary. Between December 2008 and October 2009, Slovenia blocked Croatia's EU accession over these border issues. On 6 June 2010, Slovenia voted to accept the ruling of United Nations arbitrators on the dispute, removing this obstacle. Croatia also has border disputes with Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro, but they are not EU member states and so were unable to block Croatia's negotiation process. Another significant obstacle was regarded the free market reforms, including the privatization of Croatian shipyards which were traditionally state owned and/or heavily subsidized, enacting non-discrimination and equal rights treatment of foreign real-estate buyers.

The process of integration between Croatian and European policies did not end with its ascension. Since joining the EU, Croatian politics have been significantly impacted by its membership. Croatian Parliament (Hrvatski Sabor) regularly passes laws and regulations to align with EU directives and regulations. This includes adopting EU legislation into national law across various policy areas, ensuring compliance with EU standards and policy goals. Croatian government representatives participate in various configurations of the European Council meetings on a regular basis, connecting the European and national policies.

For the majority of its citizens, however, the most visible aspect of Croatian EU membership is its access to various EU funds and programs. Croatian political institutions manage and implement EU-funded programs and initiatives within the country. They oversee the allocation and utilization of EU structural and cohesion funds, agricultural subsidies, and other financial assistance provided by the EU.

Croatian-Slovenian border dispute.

Source: DER SPIEGEL

Christine Lagarde, Zdravko Marić, Zbyněk Stanjura, Valdis Dombrovskis and Paolo Gentiloni.

2.2.3. Continued integration
- Eurozone and Schengen Area

In its more recent history, Croatia successfully joined the Eurozone and became its 20th member, adopting the euro as its official currency. Croatia's EU membership obliged it to introduce the euro once it had fulfilled the euro convergence criteria. To achieve this, it had to become a member of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), meet specific economic criteria outlined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), known as the Maastricht criteria, and enter the Exchange Rate Mechanism II (ERM II), which is a system designed to stabilize exchange rates between the national currency and the euro. The process was relatively smooth for Croatian citizens because their prior currency, kuna, was widely used for savings and loans, while also being tied to value of the euro. After completing these steps and receiving a positive decision by the European Council, Croatia joined the eurozone on 1st January 2023.

On the same date, Croatia also joined the Schengen Area, fulfilling another of its long-term policy goals.

The Schengen Area, the world's biggest visa-free area, comprises all EU member states, allowing for the free movement of people within the area, without passports or border controls. It spans more than 4 million square kilometers and is home to about 420 million people. About 3.5 million people a day cross internal Schengen borders to work, study or visit family and friends, while around 1.7 million people stay in one Schengen country but work in another. Before joining, Croatia had to demonstrate the ability to effectively control its external borders to ensure the security of the Schengen Area as a whole. It also had to adopt legislation regarding visa policy, police cooperation, data protection, and Schengen Information System (SIS) implementation.

2.2.4. Economic progress

Croatia's economy has benefited considerably from its membership in the EU. It enabled it to have a relatively stable economic growth, rising living standards and strengthening labor market. From 2013 until today, industrial production in Croatia has been on a constant rise, as has trade. Croatia's total exports increased from

Croatia GDP per capita 2015-2022.
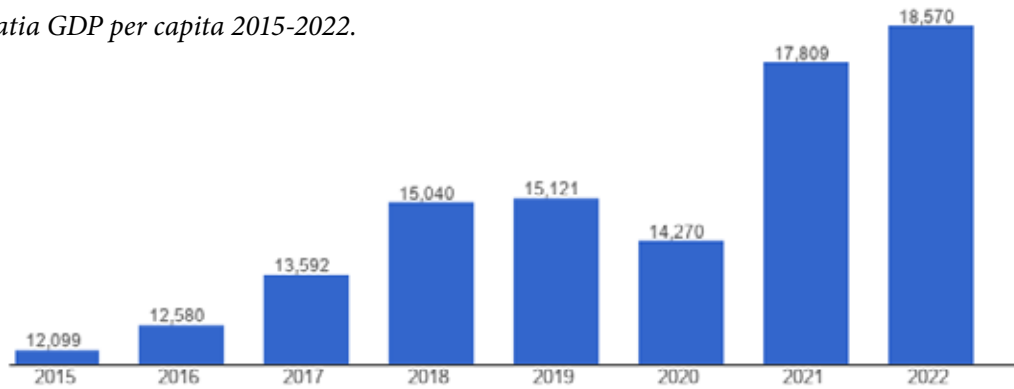
Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

16 billion euros in 2013 to 42 billion in 2022, while imports increased from 9 to 24 billion euros. In the same period, the total number of employed persons increased from 1.3 to 1.6 million workers. The unemployment rate fell from 20.2% in 2013 to 6.7% in 2022, the average net salary grew from 732 euros to more than 1000 euros. Croatia's gross domestic product grew from 58 billion to around 70 billion dollars per year, while the total public debt fell from 80% of GDP in 2013 to 68% of GDP in 2022.

Like all member states, Croatia gained access to various EU funds and programs which have boosted its economic and social growth. Over 13 billion euros worth of projects were signed for projects in this time, in diverse areas such as agriculture, infrastructure, transportation, sustainable development and civil society.

However, there's still some criticism aimed at the structure of Croatian economy. It is a relatively imbalanced economy relying heavily on tourism which makes up a quarter of its GDP. While this is not a problem during good times, in periods of global economic turmoil and external shocks it can be risky because of reliance on foreign tourists. It is also a cause of economic inequality and uneven regional development as coastal regions profit heavily from it, while regions such as Lika and Slavonija don't share the spoils. There are other major structural challenges as well, such as low productivity, widespread corruption, emigration to other EU member states and strong state presence in the economy. Despite these challenges, the economy overall looks stronger, more robust, and resilient than before with stronger ties to other EU countries within the common market.

2.2.5. Social and democratic development

While Croatia's economic progress since joining the EU is relatively consistent and robust, results are more ambivalent when it comes to social, demographic, and political development.

From 2011 until 2021, Croatia's population has decreased from 4.3 million to 3.8 million. A large proportion of those people migrated to other EU member states such as Germany or Ireland. The internal EU free market exacerbated emigration. Like many other EU countries, Croatia also suffers from declining birth rates and an aging population, while lacking significant numbers of the working-age population, which is increasing the strain on its pension and health systems.

When it comes to human rights and active citizenship, progress is mixed. Although there has been some progress in treatment of minorities, on the other hand there are many documented cases of human-rights breaches, especially on the borders towards migrants who are suffering from pushbacks by the Croatian police and border authorities. The number of people trying to enter Croatia through neighboring countries is on the increase, with tens of thousands of migrants trying to cross the borders each month. Human rights organizations documented many violations against refugees and migrants, including illegal returns (pushbacks), physical violence, humiliation, and theft by law-enforcement officials.

There is a growing trend of powerful people such as politicians and business figures using lawsuits to silence critical voices against them such as journalists and civil

Opposition parties organize protests against naming Ivan Turudić Attorney General.

society activists. In 2023, there were at least 945 ongoing SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) lawsuits against journalists. Also in 2023, the Ministry of Culture and Media proposed a media law, which would allow publishers and editors to refuse to publish a journalist's reports without explanation and would require journalists to reveal their sources from investigations. The law received backlash from the the Croatian Journalists' Association and The International Federation of Journalists who argued that it undermines journalistic freedom and encourages censorship.

Similarly, civic space in Croatia has been shrinking in recent years, with the government limiting access to decision-making and policy-creating processes, decreasing funding, and increasing administrative burdens. St. Mark's Square in Zagreb, the place where the Government and Parliament buildings are situated, has traditionally been a location to organize protests and make citizens' voices heard. However, in recent year's Andrej Plenković's government decided to limit citizen access to it, put barricades on it and is under constant police surveillance.

Independent institutions, such as the Commission for the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest and Bureau for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime have suffered from government entrapment, with their influence and authority diminished and applied selectively. In 2024, Ivan Turudić, a controversial judicial figure close to the ruling party, was elected Attorney General. It was a strongly contested decision by the opposition because of his ties to persons involved in criminal cases, including political corruption.

2.2.6. The Croatian government in the Council

It is often said that a country becomes a "real" member state of the EU only after it hosts its first presidency of the EU Council. Croatia fulfilled this milestone from January to June of 2020, as part of a trio with Romania and Finland. During its presidency, Croatia focused on several key priorities, including EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 which was being negotiated at the time, European migration policies, and the European Green Deal.

Official logo of the Croatian EU Council Presidency in 2020.

It was a challenging period for the Union's youngest member state, as it was faced with an unprecedented global crisis in the form of a COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis meant that many of the meetings took place online or in a hybrid form, which until that point was not common practice.

The presidency also presented an opportunity for Croatian citizens and civil society organizations to engage with EU institutions, allowing them to set the agenda and bring their perspectives in European discussions, while also providing them with a learning experience of the inner workings of EU politics.

2.2.7. The Croatian Commissioner(s)

The first Croatian commissioner in the European Commission was Neven Mimica. He served as the European Commissioner for Consumer Policy from July 2013 to November 2014 and later as the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development from November 2014 to December 2019. This was an important achievement for Croatia because international development cooperation was a novel policy area for the country which has only become a development co-operation provider in 2011. During the 1990s it was considered a developing country and received official development assistance. After its accession to the EU, it was able to share its post-war transition experience with developing countries around the world.

Neven Mimica was succeeded as Croatia's representative in the European Commission by Dubravka Šuica. She took office as a European Commissioner on December 1, 2019, and holds the position of Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography.

Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demograhpy.

2.2.8. European politics in Croatian political institutions

The Croatian public generally views its membership in the EU through the lens of its access to various EU funds and programs. As the newest and one of the least economically developed member-states, this represents a key aspect of its relationships towards EU.

Unfortunately, Croatia is also one of the member states with the highest levels of corruption. In recent years, several politicians were probed by European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). The list includes some high-ranking officials such as (former) ministers of Regional Development and EU Funds, Gabrijela Žalac and Tomislav Tolušić, as well as Josipa Rimac, former mayor of Knin and state secretary in the Ministry of Public Administration. They were involved in embezzling EU funds,

Former Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds, Gabrijela Žalac, arrested in a corruption case.

among other things from projects aimed at building wind-farming infrastructure. Their actions have contributed to lowering the public trust in both national and EU institutions, but also skepticism towards climate change mitigation policies.

2.2.9. The right to vote and voter turnout

In many ways, Croatian citizens still have a lot to learn about the EU and its role in it. Voter turnout for EU elections in Croatia is among the lowest in the EU. In the European Parliamentary elections of 2014, the turnout was 25,24%, while average EU-wide turnout was 42,61%. Similarly, in 2019 the turnout 29.85% as opposed to 50,66% EU-wide. This is the percentage of citizens who went to the polls in relation to the total number of registered voters. A lower turnout in 2019 was recorded only in the Czech Republic (28.72%), Slovakia (22.74%) and Slovenia (28.89%).

Part of the reason for low turnouts can be attributed to the fact it is the newest member state and its citizens haven't yet had the chance to internalize their common European identity. It is therefore crucial to spread awareness and educate them about the importance of their active participation in European democratic procedures.

There have been some positive signs that Croatian citizens are open to being swayed by the benefits of EU membership. The Croatian people's confidence in the EU and its institutions has slowly increased in the past decade, possibly due to the disillusionment with their own political class. In 2013, 36% of Croatian citizens trusted EU institutions, while confidence in their own government and parliament stood at just 16% and 12% respectively. In the same survey conducted in 2023, 52% expressed trust in the EU while only 23% had confidence in both the government and the national parliament.

2.2.10. Croatian parties and their view on the EU

For the initial several years of its EU membership, Croatia had 11 MEPs. This number later increased to 12. Its two largest political parties - Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) each had four representatives during the 2019-2024 term.

HDZ is a member of the political group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP). Its four MEPs are Željana Zovko, Tomislav Sokol, Karlo Ressler and Sunčana Glavak. They are positioned as Christian-democratic, nationalist, moderate-right political party with a pro-European outlook. Historically, they have been the largest party in Croatia which has been in power for majority of the time since Croatia has become and independent state (1990-2000, 2003-2011, 2016-present).

SDP is historically the second largest party in Croatia. It is a member of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) political group. Currently it also has 4 MEPs: Biljana Borzan, Predrag Matić, Tonino Picula and Romana Jerković. It is mostly focused on social topics and is strongly pro-EU.

The remaining four MEPs are all sole representatives of their political parties or independent MEPs.

Valter Flego is a member of the Istrian Democratic Assembly, a regional party from the north-western region of Istria. His party is part of the Renew Europe (RE) political group. They are a moderate, social-liberal but economically somewhat conservative, pro-EU party. Although they dominate the political landscape within their region, they have very limited influence in the rest of the country.

Ladislav Ilčić is a representative from Hrast – Movement for Successful Croatia, which is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). He and his party are socially conservative and nationalist with strong religious undertones. Although they have been on the political scene for several years, they hold limited support in Croatia, often failing to qualify for the national Parliament. In the European Parliament, he represents strongly conservative and often Eurosceptic positions.

Ivan Vilibor Sinčić is a member of the Human Shield party, which was originally created as a protest movement against evictions which were prevalent in Croatia during the aftermath of the economic crisis in the late 2000s and early 2010s. They are not a member of any political groups in the EP. They promote a variety of populist agendas with limited ideological coherence bordering with conspiracy theories and are generally Eurosceptic. They enjoy marginal support nationally and have been suffering from internal divisions and conflicts in recent years.

Mislav Kolakušić, an independent MEP, is also not attached to any political groups in the EP. He was previously a judge in Croatia, launching his political career on an anti-corruption and judicial reform agenda. Characterized by his abrasive and combative communication style, he quickly adopted many populist talking points combined with a pronounced Euro-skepticism, while lacking a coherent ideological and policy orientation. He is, however, one of the least active Croatian MEPs and generally has relatively minor support nationally.

Majority of these parties and candidates will also participate in the 2024 EP elections, alongside some newcomers. Among them is Možemo!, a relatively new force in the Croatian political scene which represents the green-left and is a member of the Greens/EFA Political Group. On the other side of the spectrum, we have Most – a Christian conservative right wing party and Domovinski pokret – national right wing. It is likely that some of these challengers, and possibly all three of them will have their representative at the European Parliament from 2024 onward.

2.3 Denmark in the EU

2.3.1 Denmark's 51 years in the EU

In 1973, Denmark joined the European Economic Community (EEC), now the European Union (EU), significantly impacting its politics, economy, and culture.

Joining the EEC in 1973 alongside Ireland and the United Kingdom, Danish leaders anticipated economic benefits. However, concerns about relinquishing control created divisions. Denmark's role as an EU member influenced its domestic, economic, and foreign policies, in areas such as trade, environment, finance, and agriculture. Denmark's EU journey faced challenges, notably the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, where Danish voters initially rejected EU membership. Negotiations led to a national compromise, with the Socialist People's Party changing their stance, resulting in a Danish "yes" vote with specific conditions (opt-outs).

The EU significantly impacted Denmark's economy, particularly in farming and regional policies. Denmark actively participated in EU efforts for global peace and stability, contributing to humanitarian initiatives and strengthening the EU's international influence. Culturally, EU membership facilitated greater exchange between Denmark and other European countries, especially for students and researchers through programs like ERASMUS.

Despite benefits, Denmark's EU membership sparked debates on national control, the euro, and EU development. These discussions are integral to democracy and collaborative problem-solving among member countries. Denmark's EU journey reflects a dynamic relationship, shaped by economic, political, and cultural considerations. The ongoing challenges highlight the importance of democratic dialogue in navigating the complexities of European cooperation.

2.3.2 The Danish opt-outs

Denmark's relationship with the EU is distinctive due to four Danish opt-outs established after the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. These exceptions shaped Denmark's EU policies and influenced its stance in key policy areas.

The Maastricht Treaty 1992 transformed the EU and introduced economic and monetary union, a common foreign and security policy, and expanded EU powers. However, in a June 1992 referendum, the Danes rejected the original Maastricht Treaty, posing a challenge to Denmark's EU ties. Subsequent negotiations and national compromise resulted in the creation of four Danish exceptions:

Euro Exception: Denmark opted out of the eurozone, retaining the Danish krone as its currency.

Justice Exception: Denmark has an exception in police

Nyhavn in Copenhagen, Denmark.

and justice cooperation, impacting its involvement in these areas.

Defence Exception (no longer in effect): This exception meant limited participation in EU defense policy and military cooperation.

Union Citizenship Exception: Denmark does not fully recognise EU citizenship, though it has minimal significance as EU members agree it does not replace national citizenship.

These exceptions addressed concerns raised during the Maastricht Treaty referendum, offering flexibility in choosing Denmark's participation in various EU cooperation areas.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, debates have ensued on whether Denmark should maintain or revise these exceptions. Some view them as safeguards for Denmark's sovereignty, while others believe they hinder complete engagement in EU cooperation.

Multiple referendums on abolishing the opt-outs have been conducted. Only one has succeeded. The 2022 referendum on the defense exception was the first abolishment through a vote following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It signaled Denmark's willingness to deepen integration in EU defense, yet the fate of the remaining opt-outs remains uncertain.

Danish opt-outs and related referendums are central in Denmark's EU history, exemplifying the central role of democratic participation in Europe's political development. These opt-outs will remain a significant topic in Denmark's future EU policy.

2.3.3 The Danish Government in the Council

The Danish Prime Minister actively engages in European Council summits, negotiating agreements with member countries to safeguard Danish interests in EU cooperation. The European Council, a key EU institution, serves as a platform for leaders to establish politi-

cal guidelines and strategies, addressing crucial issues like refugee flows and climate change.

Denmark's participation in the European Council aims to ensure that EU policies align with Danish interests and values, working towards shared solutions for the challenges faced by the EU.

Additionally, the Danish government contributes to the Council of the European Union, a legislative EU institution alongside the European Parliament. This council, consisting of ministers from member countries, addresses specific policy areas. For instance, foreign ministers deliberate on EU foreign policy, while agriculture ministers focus on related issues.

Unlike the European Parliament, the Council of the EU represents member countries. Decisions are typically made through a qualified majority or consensus, requiring at least 55 per cent agreement from member states, representing at least 65 per cent of the EU's population. The Council of the EU operates on a rotating presidency, changing every six months, facilitating cooperation and negotiations.

To advance agendas, Denmark like other member countries leverage pre-agreements in the Council of the EU. Denmark often collaborates with like-minded countries, sharing common political perspectives in certain areas. The Danish embassy in Brussels strengthens relationships with other member countries' representations, promoting common goals. Additionally, the embassy closely collaborates with EU institutions, with diplomatic personnel attending meetings, negotiating on behalf of Denmark, and keeping the Danish government informed about EU matters.

2.3.4 The Danish Commissioner

Margrethe Vestager has been named the first superstar to come out of the EU, and for several years her face could be seen on shiny magazine covers across Europe. Since 2014, Vestager has been the European Commis-

sioner for Competition responsible for areas such as commercial competition, company mergers, cartels, state aid, and antitrust law. It is one of the most powerful positions in the Commission, and indeed the world, that is notable in affecting global regulatory practices in a phenomenon known as the Brussels Effect. Vestager is known for taking a tough stance against global heavyweight tech-companies and has taken up historical lawsuits against Fiat, Starbucks, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM). The former American president Donald Trump has famously called her the "Tax Lady who really hates the U.S.," which only added to her already heated reputation as the 'person Silicon Valley fears the most.'

She is not only famous for being tough, but also for knitting European elephants to her coworkers, the so-called Europhants, during Commission meetings. Working in a male-dominated environment, where shades of black, white, and sometimes blue, is the norm, Vestager has always stood out with her colorful, flowery clothes and sneakers. Furthermore, as a self-proclaimed feminist, she was very conscious of the choice to knit during meetings and to wear feminine, colorful clothes. This is because Vestager has used her powerful position, in various ways, to fight for women to become more visible in a world that is based on men, both when it comes to medicine, gender equality, car safety, and of course salary.

Interestingly, Vestager was not part of the Danish government when she in 2014 was nominated for the position of European Commissioner. Rather, the President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker had specifically requested the nomination of Margrethe Vestager as the Danish Commissioner, indicating that she would be given a powerful post. As a result, Vestager left her position as Minister of Economic Affairs and the Interior in Denmark to join the European Commission in 2014 and has since then had the powerful position as European Commissioner of Competition. In 2019, she was lead candidate as President of the Commission, but Ursula von der Leyen was elected President, and instead, Vestager became one of the Commission's three Executive Vice Presidents. In this position, while continuing working as the Commissioner of Competition, she is in charge of the strategy A Europe Fit for the Digital Age, which aims to shape the EU's digital technologies and to support EU's green transition.

2.3.5 The European Affairs Committee in the Danish Parliament

When Denmark became a member of the European Parliament in 1973, the European Affairs Committee was created at the same time in the Danish Parliament. The Committee consists of Danish politicians from all political parties and the number of members from each party represents the number of seats the party has in the Danish Parliament. This means, for example, that the Social Democrats who currently have the most seats in the Parliament also have the most members in the European Affairs Committee. This ensures that the Committee's opinion on the ministerial negotiating statement also expresses the entire Parliament's position. The main purpose of the European Affairs Committee is to control the Danish Government's EU policies and ensure that there is not a majority against these policies. This is because Denmark almost always has minority governments, which means that the Government must have support from other political parties.

For a Danish minister to go to Brussels to vote for new EU policies, the Council of the European Union will first present EU topics to the European Affairs Committee who then discusses it internally. Following this, the Danish Government must then visit the European Affairs Committee to guarantee the support of the Danish Parliament on EU affairs. This is an oral presentation on the Government's negotiating position on a specific EU topic that usually takes place every Friday at a Committee meeting. A negotiation proposal is only approved when the European Affairs Committee determines that there is not a majority against the minister's proposal. The European Affairs Committee will then grant the ministers a mandate, so that they can negotiate on Denmark's behalf in the Council of the European Union.

Christiansborg, the Danish Parliament.

2.3.6 The reform process of EU decisions in the Danish Parliament

The amount and complexity of EU topics dealt within the Danish Parliament has naturally grown considerably since Denmark became a member of the EU in 1973. Therefore, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Danish membership of the EU in 2023, the European Affairs Committee has created an EU Reform Group to examine the parliamentary control of EU policy in Denmark as well as how the Danish Parliament can increase its influence of EU policy.

European legislation has strong implications for Danish politics since important conditions for Danish legislation are established in the EU. This is unfortunately not reflected in the Danish Parliament's control of EU legislation, which explains the need for a reform. With the Danish Parliament's limited involvement, it exerts only minimal influence on European legislation. It poses a democratic problem for Danish citizens and companies that the Danish Parliament is often absent in the decisive phase before an EU proposal is presented, since this is where the opportunities to influence are greatest. To enhance the Danish Parliament's influence on EU policy, the EU Reform Group recommends the following changes:

1   Denmark must engage in EU policymaking much earlier in the decisive phase and with a stronger mandate.

2   Denmark should consistently prioritise its EU efforts in close dialogue with Danish interest groups during the EU's pre-legislative phase.

3   To increase the influence of the Danish Parliament on EU policy, the Danish Government must present EU proposals when opportunities to exert influence in the EU are greatest.

4   To garner a greater public engagement and interest, better EU education for young people, better conditions for public information activities, as well as an EU training course for newly elected MPs are needed.

5   The Danish Parliament must establish better cooperation with the European Commission, the European Parliament, as well as other national parliaments as it would enhance the Danish Parliament's ability to control Danish Government's negotiation strategy in the EU.

2.3.7 Danish parties and electoral associations
Political parties:

Socialdemokratiet (Social democrats)
Like most European countries, Denmark also has a Social democratic party. It is the biggest party in Denmark and over twice as big as the second largest. It has led the country during the last two governments, and numerous governments since its establishment in 1878. Generally considered to be center-left but has been leaning right especially since establishing the new government with Moderaterne and Venstre. They currently have three MEPs in the European parliament and sits in the S&D (Socialists and Democrats) group.

Venstre (Left)
Venstre means 'left' but it is a Center-right party, having a business, low-tax and agricultural focus. When it was founded in 1870, it was named as an opposite to the old conservative party, then named Højre (right). It has led numerous governments during the last two decades and is currently, for the second time in Denmark's history, in government with Socialdemokraterne and also Moderaterne. They have 3 MPs in the European parliament, sitting in the group of Renew, the alliance of liberals and democrats.

Moderaterne (The Moderates)
A new party with a former leader and prime minister from Venstre, it had an incredible first election in 2022 where it became Denmark's third largest party. Their leader, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, is the current Minister of Foreign Affairs. The party is considered to be centre-right and focuses on many of the same issues as Venstre but without the strong emphasis on agricultural issues. They have one MP in the European parliament in Renew Europe.

Enhedslisten (Red-Green Alliance or directly translated The Unit List)
Enhedslisten is a grouping of old socialist and communist parties back in 1989, first as an electoral association and then two years later, as a political party. It is considered to be the most left-wing party in Folketinget, and focuses on social justice, climate-change, economic justice and co-ownership. They have one MP in the European parliament sitting in GUE/NGL

Socialistisk Folkeparti (Green left or directly translated The Socialist People's Party)
Founded in 1959, Socialistisk Folkeparti is a socialist party which has had numerous collaborations with Socialdemokraterne. Depending on who you ask, they are left to center-left, focusing on many of the same issues as Enhedslisten. They have two MPs in the European parliament in Greens – European Free Alliance

Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party)
Dansk Folkeparti was once one of the biggest parties but has lost many members and politicians to newly formed Nye Borgerlige and Danmarksdemokraterne. Their focus is mainly on immigration, elderly care, and low taxes. They have one MP in the European parliament in the group of Identity and Democracy, ID.

Danmarksdemokraterne (Denmark Democrats)
This newly formed party was established by the controversially former banned Venstre minister of foreigners and integration, Inger Støjberg. Like Dansk Folkeparti the party has a strong critical stance on immigration and are very focused on developing and supporting more rural areas of Denmark. They have no MPs in the European parliament.

Alternativet (The Alternative)
Being a green relatively new party, it has seen both a drastic rise and a quick fall in the polls. In the last election it only just secured its survival and is still fighting for survival in the polls. They have no MPs in the European parliament, but wants to be a part of the Greens – European Free Alliance

Radikale Venstre (Danish Social Liberal Party or Radical Left directly translated)

A party which has shifted between being centre-left and centre-right. They had two MPs in the European parliament in Renew Europe, but Karen Melchior left the party after some controversy, but retained her position as MEP in the European parliament.

Liberal Alliance (same in English)

A libertarian party focused on low taxes, a smaller state and more freedom for businesses. They will join ALDE (Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe) if they receive sufficient votes to enter the European parliament. They have no MPs in the European Parliament.

Det Konservative Folkeparti (The Conservative People's Party)

Officially they were founded in 1915 but they can trace their origins back to the first political party in Denmark, Højre (meaning right). Campaigning for lower taxes, green initiatives, and different social issues. They have one MP in the European parliament in European People's Party, EPP.

2.3.8 The right to vote and voter turnouts

You have the right to vote in Denmark if you're a Danish citizen and 18 years or older. Back in 1834, when the right to vote was founded, it looked a lot different. Let's have a look!

In 1834 the Danish legal age was 25, and it was decided that this too should be age to be eligible to vote. Besides being 25 years old and a man, you also had to own a significant amount of land or property to vote. This meant that only 2,8 % of the Danish population had the right to vote. In 1849 the requirement of being a landowner to vote was dropped, but the age of voting was raised to 30 years. This meant 15 % of the population were now eligible for voting. Women, servants, and the poor were still excluded from voting. After a long and hard fight by a national women's movement women finally gained the right to vote in 1915. Along with the women, all Danish citizens including servants and the poor, were secured the right to vote. The eligible age for voting was lowered to 25, equal to the legal age.

The Danish flag, Dannebrog.

Through the 60-70ies the voting age was lowered to 21, then 20, until it reached 18 in 1978, which remains the age of voting today. During the 2000s other European countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) lowered their voting age to 16, and in 2008 political parties in Danish Parliament supported the movement, but no changes were made. As expressed by the former Danish prime minister Helle Thorning Schmidt: "it's not that simple. A referendum must take place, and the debate needs to be matured." (Authors own translation).

Since the 1970'ies there has been a high voter turnout for the Danish Parliament ranging from 80%-90 %. The high voter turnout is a sign that the Danish political system has a strong degree of participation and interest from the population, and that Danes, in general, are concerned about politics and its impact on society and everyday life.

Historically Denmark has had a much lower voter turnout when it came to EU elections. From 1979-2004 only 50 % of eligible voters participated. Since then the voter turnout has gradually advanced, and in 2019 the voter turnout was 66 %. This goes to show that Danes are less informed and involved in EU compared to the Danish Parliament.

2.3.9 Denmark holds the rotating presidency in 2025

The presidency of the Council of the EU has existed since 1958. The presidency rotates every six months between the member states. With the 27 member states of the EU it, presently, takes 13.5 years between each given countries' presidency. The idea behind the rotating presidency of the Council is that it secures that every single EU member state have the opportunity to guide the political course of the Council of the EU.

The presidency has three main tasks:

1 to outline the agenda for the Council of the EU.
2 to chair the meetings of the Council of the EU and negotiate on political agreements.
3 and lastly, it is the presidency's task to represent the Council of the EU in relations with other EU institutions.

The latter is especially interesting considering the ordinary legislative procedure, when the Council of the EU negotiates with the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The presidency works closely together in groups of three countries, so-called trios, or trio presidencies. It is a system that has been put in place with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, the goal is to create continuation in the priorities of the Council of the EU. The trios are constructed with an eye towards the geographical location and the size of the member states. Together the three member states determine and outline long-term goals and a common agenda for the 18 months in which those three countries hold the presidency. Based on the agenda of the trio presidency each country proceeds to create their own detailed agenda for their six-month presidency.

Presently and until the 30th of June 2024 Belgium holds the presidency, the current trio presidency consists of Spain, Belgium, and Hungary. Denmark will take over the presidency of the Council of the EU – for the eighth time – in the second half of 2025, Denmark is part of a trio presidency with Poland and Cyprus.

The Danish government will, ahead of time, investigate which legislative proposals are to be dealt with by the Council of the EU, of these legislative proposals the Danish government prioritises which are most important to Denmark, and which are achievable. The last Danish presidency took place in 2012. This presidency became widely known as the 'Tap Water Presidency' (in Danish Postevandsformandskabet), since tap water was served at all the meetings, rather than bottled water. Tap water was chosen rather than bottled water based on a wish to make the presidency more sustainable.

The last Danish presidency achieved several political results such as, the agreement on the Unified Patent Court, lower prices on data roaming abroad, and minimum sentences for IT-crime.

3. The European Parliament as legislator

A week in the life of an MEP

You go to your office: the European Parliament in Brussels. As an MEP, you are assigned certain files. You prepare these files as thoroughly as possible for the plenary sessions. You do this by informing yourself as best as possible. You follow the committees on your files in Parliament, talk to various stakeholders, organize work visits, and receive lobby groups. But you do this with the greatest possible transparency. Every MEP must fill in a lobbying dossier in which you register the contacts you make. After the information round, you formulate adjustments or amendments to the proposal of the committee.

You try to improve the proposal for the European citizens it concerns. Then it is a matter of finding the necessary support for the amendments. You inform and persuade your political family in the European Parliament but also reach out across party lines to find allies. In the European Parliament, you must seek compromises. If necessary, you take on other files to ultimately find the best solution for as many files as possible for the citizens you represent.

Once a month, the work is confirmed by the plenary vote. A whole week is spent voting on a vast number of different files. This takes place in the seat in Luxembourg.

**3.1 The party groups in the European Parliament**

Party groups or factions Members of the European Parliament are not organized by member states but belong to groups with similar political convictions. A group needs 23 members to form, and at least one-fourth of the member states must be represented in a group. Members may only belong to one group.

Currently, there are seven parliamentary groups. Before the plenary session (the moment when votes are cast on proposed amendments), a group meeting is held to determine whether the group's members will vote for or against a particular amendment.

In the parliament, members are grouped by faction in a semi-circle. The president has a view of the political spectrum from the far left to the far right.

From left to right:
- Left faction – GUE/NGL
- Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – S&D
- Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance – Greens/EFA
- Renew Europe Group European
- People's Party – EPP European
- Conservatives and Reformists Group – ECR
- Identity and Democracy Group – ID
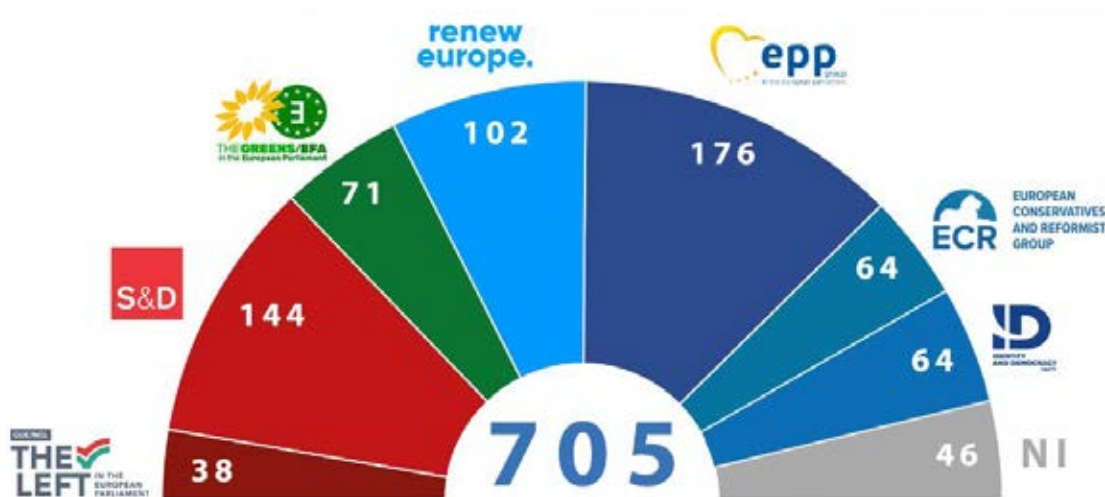
Source: European Parliament 2024

Left faction – GUE/NGL

In the "Left faction," the smallest faction, there are representatives from *'enhedslisten'* for DENMARK and PTB for Belgium. Croatia has no MEPs here.

This faction stands for economic justice, opposing the current economic "doctrine." Additionally, they advocate for the protection of climate and the environment, equal rights and freedoms, peace, solidarity, and democracy.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – S&D

Here, many other parties describe themselves as social, social democratic, or democratic. Among them are Socialdemokraties for DENMARK, Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske for CROATIA and VOORUIT and PS for Belgium.

S&D stands for a stronger, more united Union. Their priorities include European strategic autonomy, stronger partnerships, gender equality, more social EU legislation, greater attention to inclusion in the green and digital transition, and affordable housing. In short: "Stronger together."

Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance – Greens/EFA

This group includes representatives from Socialistisk Folkeparti for Denmark and Groen and Ecolo for Belgium. Croatia has no MEPs here.

The Greens primarily focus on social justice and addressing climate change. Their priorities also include protecting European values, inclusion, the digital revolution for the benefit of citizens, and gender equality.

Renew Europe Group

This group brings together liberal currents in the EU. Among them are representatives from Venstre, Moderaterne and Det Radikale Venstre (DK), Istarski demokratski sabor (HR) and Open VLD, and MR (BE).

This group focuses on renewal, modernizing European institutions (for more EU transparency, effectiveness,

and democracy). Other policy priorities include promoting European values, investing in a sustainable future, and a more prosperous Europe.

European People's Party – EPP

This is the largest group in the European Parliament. It includes parties that describe themselves as Christian democratic, including Det Konservative Folkeparti from Denmark, Hrvatska demokratska zajednica for Croatia and CD&V, CDH and CSP for Belgium.

The EPP group focuses on strengthening the internal market as a basis for developing a digital internal market, enhancing competitiveness, free and fair trade, and achieving climate goals. EU citizens are always at the center, making security and defense and employment core elements.

European Conservatives and Reformists Group – ECR

This group mainly consists of nationalist and conservative parties. Among them are representatives from Hrvatski suverenisti from Croatia and NV-A from Belgium. Croatia has no MEPs here.

This group aims for more sovereignty for the member states. The EU should only act when necessary cooperation is needed. Policy priorities focus on more free trade and entrepreneurship with fewer regulations, creating more employment, and protecting EU citizens (and EU external borders).

Identity and Democracy Group – ID

In this group, there are representatives from Dansk Folkeparti from Denmark and Vlaams Belang for Belgium. Croatia has no MEPs here.

The focus of ID is mainly on creating jobs and growth, increasing security, tackling illegal immigration, and making the EU less bureaucratic. Criticism of the European superstate that intervenes too much in the powers of its member states is also present in the vision of Vlaams Belang, the Flemish party in this group.

3.2 Who elects who – country size and influence in Parliament

Every five years, during the European elections, we elect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who directly represent our interests in the European Parliament. In total, there are about 705 MEPs (including the President). This means that the larger the population, the more MEPs a country has in the European Parliament. The numbers range from 6 (for Malta – the smallest country) to 96 (for Germany – the largest country). Belgium has 21 MEPs, Denmark has 14, and Croatia has 12.

The allocation of seats is proportional to the number of votes a party receives within a particular electoral district: the more votes, the greater their share in the distribution of seats. Additionally, according to EU law, member states determine their own electoral thresholds for the European elections (maximum 5%).
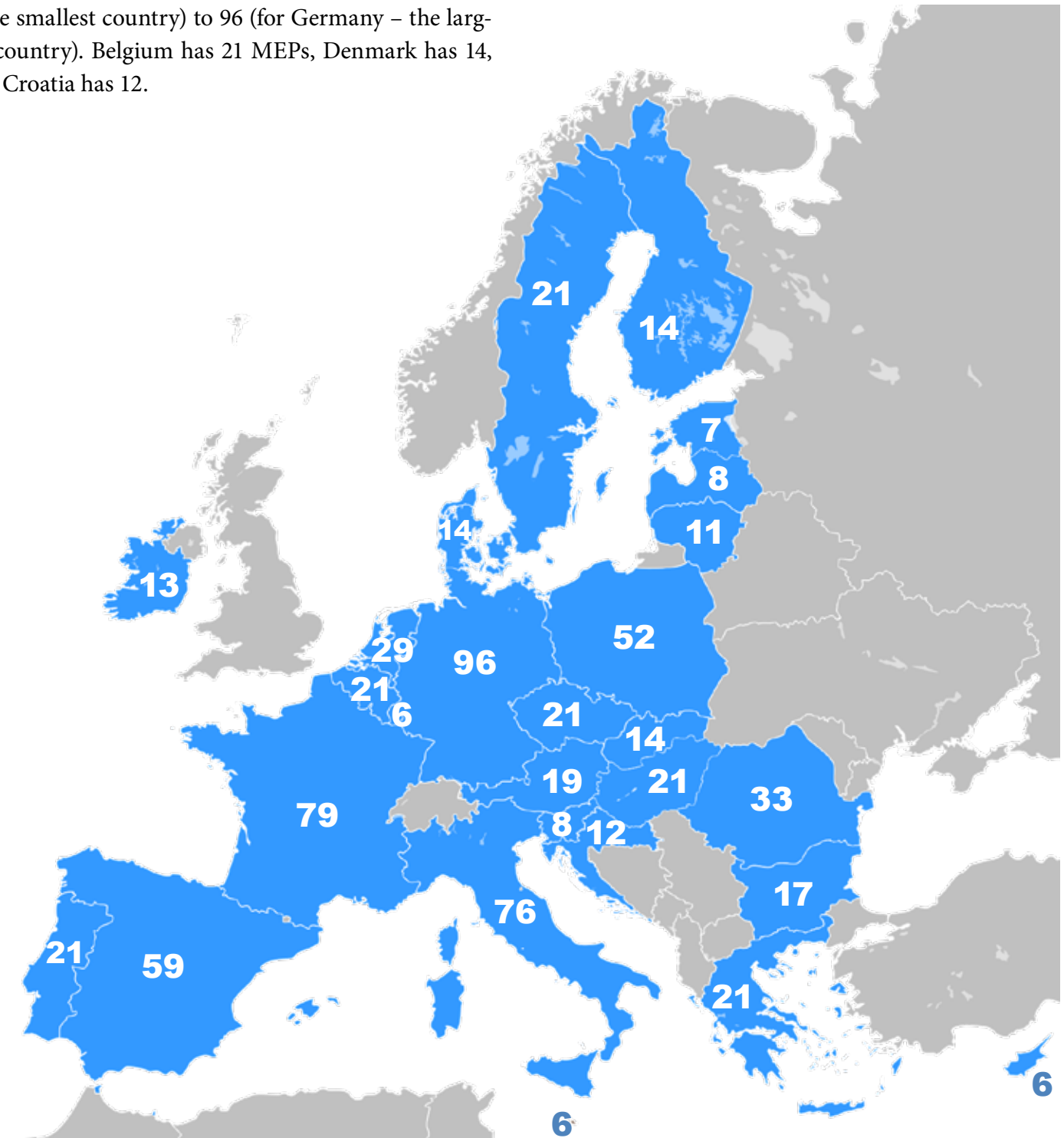
Source: European Union 2020

3.3 The European parties

Some national parties also group themselves at the European level into European parties, which should not be confused with the factions formed in the parliament. It may be the case that the members of the factions in the EP are all members of the same European party, but this is certainly not obligatory. This can be seen, for example, in the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, where different parties come together.

A European party is a voluntary political cooperation between related political parties and/or individuals from different EU member states. Treaties specify that "political parties at European level contribute to the formation of a European political awareness and to the expression of the will of the Union's citizens". They come together in European congresses, jointly determine positions, and have their own political staff. Political parties can be funded by the European Union under certain conditions and are supervised by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations.

Conditions for funding

Registration with the Authority
To be registered, the party must meet the following conditions: the headquarters must be located in a member state; at least one-fourth of the members must be parliamentarians from the European Parliament or from national or regional parliaments of the member states; members must not belong to multiple European political parties; the party's positions must respect European values; members must participate in European parliamentary elections and they must not have a profit motive.

Representation in the European Parliament
The party must be represented in the European Parliament by at least one MEP.

External audit
The party must be audited by an external auditor authorized by the European Parliament and must not have sanctions imposed by the Authority.

3.4 Power lies in the committees

The legislative work of the Parliament largely takes place in the parliamentary committees. There are 20 standing committees consisting of 25 to 80 members each. These committees are more or less proportionally composed and are responsible for specific policy areas. For example: Agriculture and Rural Development, Culture and Education, Women's Rights and Gender Equality, or International Trade.

Each Committee has a Chair, 4 Vice-Chairs, and its own secretariat. In each committee, a faction coordinator is also appointed to try to align the positions of the members of the faction as much as possible.

Another important function is that of rapporteur. As soon as the European Commission forwards a legislative proposal to the Parliament, a rapporteur is appointed in the relevant parliamentary committee to fully follow up on the dossier.

Sometimes, a dossier intersects with the work areas of different parliamentary committees. In this case, there is a 'committee in charge' and other advisory committees are appointed to handle the same proposal. These committees usually also appoint a rapporteur: a rapporteur for opinion.

During the meetings of the parliamentary committees, legislative proposals are examined, and amendments are drafted. These are later presented to the full Parliament. If desired, you can watch these meetings in full as they are all public. Most MEPs are members of multiple committees and alternate members of another committee.

Parliamentary committees are also responsible for holding the executive accountable for their policy areas. They regularly invite European Commissioners to their meetings for this purpose.

3.5 How much does Parliament decide – what powers do they have?

The European Parliament is the institution that has undergone the most changes over the course of the existence of the European Union. At its inception, it only had supervisory powers, but with each treaty amendment, the Parliament gained more powers. At present, the Parliament has significant legislative, budgetary, and oversight powers. However, it still wields equal influence in every policy domain. Depending on the subject, a different procedure is used.

There are three decision-making procedures:

1. *Ordinary legislative procedure:* This procedure is used for the vast majority of decisions. In this procedure, the Council and the European Parliament have equal decision-making powers. Both institutions must agree on the legislative proposal and work together to find a compromise. This procedure applies to policies related to migration, energy, transport, climate change, environment, consumer protection, and economic governance.

2. *Approval procedure:* In this procedure, the European Parliament must approve the decision to be made. It cannot propose amendments itself. This applies to matters such as the accession of new EU member states and international trade agreements of the EU.

3. *Consultation procedure:* In this procedure, the European Parliament can approve or reject a legislative proposal or propose amendments, but these are not binding. The Council decides whether the legislative proposal is approved or not, but it must wait for the European Parliament's opinion before deciding. This applies to competences related to taxation, competition law, and the common foreign and security policy.

3.6 The spitzenkandidat-process

The practice and term of the system of so called 'spitzen candidates' originates, as the name suggests, in German national politics. Hereby, each political group in the parliament puts forward its candidate for the job of European Commission President. The European Council who's responsible for choosing the Commission President then picks the candidate they prefer who's ideally the spitzen candidate of one of the larger political groups in the European Parliament. Nevertheless, the current president of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen was chosen by the European heads of government outside of the spitzen candidate system. Thus, showing small commitment to the system by the European Council.

The attempt of installing the system of spitzen candidates in the European elections was to make the appointment of the Commission President, one of the EU's top functions, more transparent and more democratic. Voters then knew that their vote for any national party meant support for a specific spitzen candidate to become Commission President. However, this practice has been heavily criticised by some member states and by the European Conservative and Reformist party in the European Parliament as well. Both argue that the spitzen candidate system has no legal base whatsoever. Also, they argue that it shifts powers from the member states to the Parliament. The spitzen candidate system limits the number of candidates the European Council can chose from to become Commission President.

However, after the elections in 2019, EPP spitzen candidate Manfred Weber didn't get enough support from other political families in the parliament to become the next president of the European Commission thus leaving the decision again up to the European Council. That way German Chancellor Angela Merkel proposed Ursula Von Der Leyen as a compromise between member states and political families. In 2024, the political groups in the European Parliament again have proposed their own spitzen candidates. Nevertheless, the names that are whispered the most to become the successor of Von Der Leyen are none of these spitzen candidates.

4. How does European democracy work?

4.1. Even a single member of parliament can make a big difference

Members of European Parliament (MEPs) are representatives elected directly by citizens of EU member states. European elections are held at all member states at the same time, and citizens of each state vote for representatives from their respective countries. The MEPs represent both their national constituents, but also the EU citizens. The number of MEPs from each country is based on the principle of degressive proportionality. This means that while the size of the population of each country is considered, smaller states elect more MEPs than is proportional to their populations. The logic behind this is to prevent domination in the Parliament by a small number of large and powerful states.

The MEPs can influence EU politics in a number of ways:

- participate in plenary discussions and votes.

- meetings and debates within their political groups

- raising awareness on certain topics among other MEPs and the public, such as issues experienced by their constituents.

- advocating for specific policies or causes and gathering support for them to increase the chances of their implementation.

- working in committees which deal with specific political issues.

There are a total of 20 committees, and legislative proposals are discussed in them before being brought to the plenary. Some MEPs use the committees to get feedback and improve their proposals, as well as to gather wider support before plenary discussions. As such, they are important intermediary bodies in which often the majority of lobbying, coalition-building, debates and preparation of proposals take place. Although the EP is a large body, consisting of 705 MEPs, each of them individually can bring about important changes.

One example of this is the work of Maltese MEP Alex Agius Saliba of the center-left Socialists and Democrats, who was the rapporteur on the legislative proposal for Universal Charger.

Maltese MEP Alex Agius Saliba during his campaign for the universal charger.

The proposal first went through the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee and was adopted in the Parliament in 2022. The result is that from 2026, all small and medium-sized electronic devices in the EU will have to use a USB Type-C port in order to improve product sustainability, and to reduce electronic waste.

Jan Philipp Albrecht, a German MEP from the Greens-European Free Alliance, was the rapporteur for the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). His work and advocacy were instrumental in shaping the GDPR, a comprehensive regulation governing data protection and privacy for all individuals within the European Union, which was introduced in 2018.

In 2019, MEP Virginie Rozière, a French MEP was the rapporteur for the EU directive on whistleblower pro-

tection. This legislation established EU-wide standards for the protection of whistleblowers, ensuring that individuals reporting breaches of EU law are safeguarded from retaliation.

4.2. The Council of Ministers behind closed doors (powers of the Council)

The Council of the European Union, often referred to as the Council of Ministers or just the Council, is one of the main legislative bodies of the European Union. It consists of ministers from the member states' governments, who meet in various configurations depending on the topics of specific legislative proposals. The Council operates on a system of rotating presidencies. Member states take turns holding the presidency, which means that a different country holds the presidency every six months. The presidency rotates among the member states according to a predetermined schedule.

The Council's primary role is sharing legislative responsibilities with the European Parliament. It is responsible for passing EU laws, which are proposed by the European Commission. The Council and the Parliament must agree on the text of a legislative proposal for it to become law. It is also responsible for approving the EU budget, along with the Parliament.

For the majority of proposals, it uses the Qualified majority voting procedure, which means that two conditions need to be met in order to pass a certain proposal:

- 55% of member states vote in favor - in practice this means 15 out of 27.
- the proposal is supported by member states representing at least 65% of the total EU population.

For some issues, other voting procedures are used, such as reinforced qualified majority (at least 72% of member states vote in favor - in practice this means at least 20 out of 27) or even unanimous decisions.

For a long time, there have been criticisms of the role of the Council, primarily aimed at its lack of transparency. Unlike the Parliament, members of the Council are not elected. Rather, they are ministers from member states' governments, meaning they are usually selected by their respective Presidents, Prime Ministers, or Chancellors, depending on the political system of individual member states. In addition, their meetings are often held behind closed doors and lack public scrutiny, unlike the Parliament's plenary sessions.

4.3. Trilogues and non-formal decisions

Trilogues are informal, behind-closed-door meetings between representatives from the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union (representing member state governments), and the European Commission. They are important because these three institutions and their representatives usually have different opinions on various legislative proposals. There are also often differences between various member states present in the Council as well. All this makes it rather complicated to make any decisions. This is where the trilogues come in - they are vehicles for reaching compromises between various interests on proposed legislation. During trilogues, representatives from the three institutions discuss the proposal and the proposed amendments.

Trilogues are not public, and the discussions are confidential, which is why they have been criticized for lack of transparency. Critics argue that this process diminishes public accountability and can lead to decisions being made without sufficient scrutiny. However, proponents contend that trilogues are necessary to ensure efficient decision-making and to facilitate compromises between the EU institutions.

4.4. How transparent are the EU's institutions?

Like we mentioned in the previous few chapters, there have been many debates and valid criticisms regarding the (lack of) transparency of EU's institutions. The most prominent issue is the democratic deficit, or the legislative power of unelected officials. In two out of three most important EU institutions (European Commission, Council of the European Union), officials and representatives are not directly elected by citizens. Members of the Council come from national governments of the member states. The Council in turn pro-

Political system of the EU. Source: Wikipedia
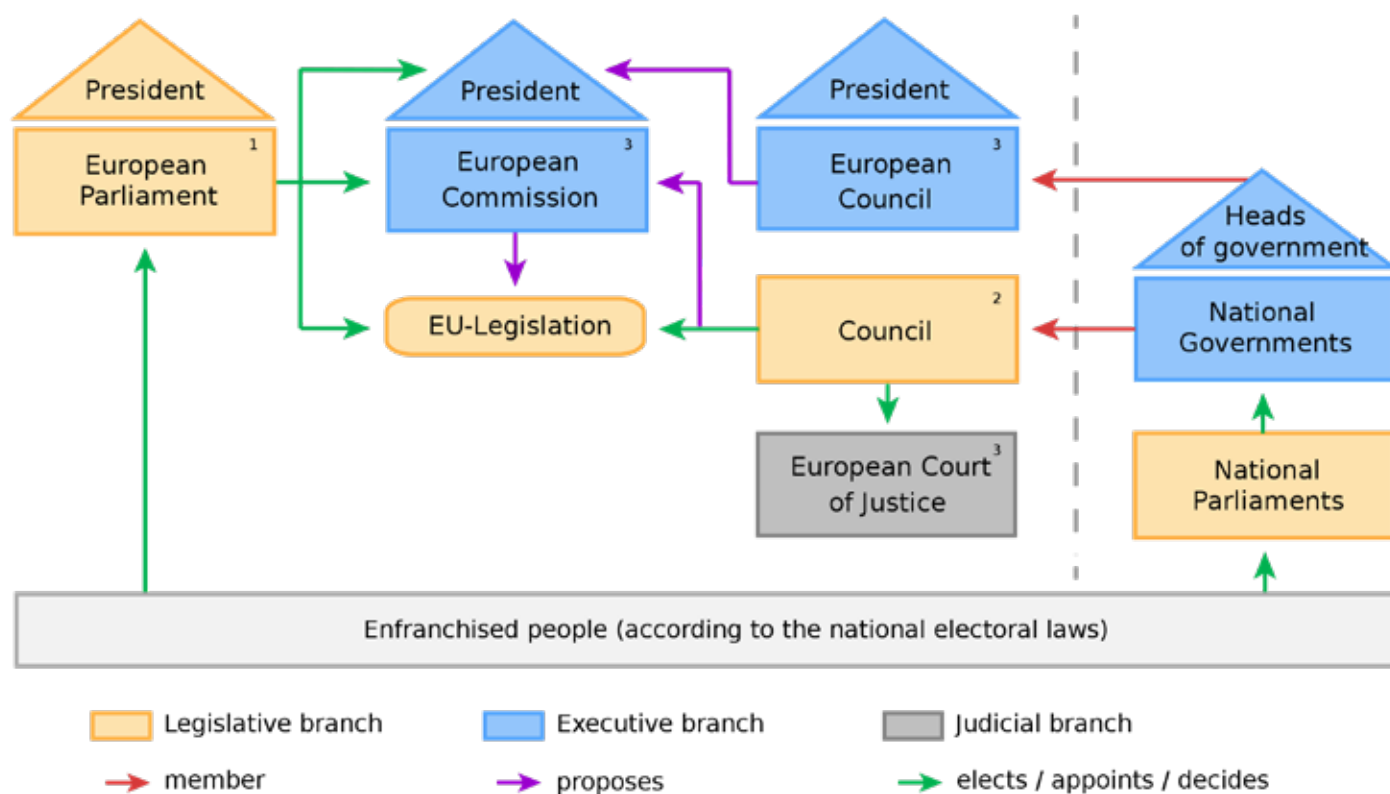
posed the candidate for the President of the European Commission, who needs to be confirmed by the majority in the European Parliament. Members of the European Commission are proposed by the Commission's President and confirmed by the member states. Each Commissioner comes from a different member state, ensuring that all member states are represented in the Commission.

There is also a challenge regarding the bureaucratic nature of the EU's institutions. The EU's decision-making processes can be complex, involving multiple institutions and stages. Critics argue that this complexity can make it challenging for citizens to understand how decisions are made. Some critics also argue that there is a lack of clarity and transparency regarding the influence of lobbying activities on EU decision-making.

The EU tries to address these issues in several ways. The EU institutions have a policy of granting public access to their documents, meaning that citizens and residents of the EU have the right to request access to doc-

uments held by the institutions. Legislation, including directives, regulations, and decisions, is published online in all official languages of the EU. In addition, the EU often conducts public consultations to gather input from citizens, stakeholders, and organizations on various policy issues.

The EU has regulations in place to regulate lobbying activities. The European Parliament and the European Commission have established rules of conduct for lobbyists, which include requirements for transparency regarding their activities and funding sources. One of them is a Transparency Register that provides information about organizations and self-employed individuals engaged in activities aimed at influencing EU policymaking and legislation.

4.5. Knowledge is power
- who informs the decisions?
Decisions in the (EU) are informed by a combination of inputs from various EU institutions, agencies, member states, and stakeholders.

The European Commission is the executive branch of the EU and has the right to initiate legislation. It conducts in-depth analyses, prepares legislative proposals, and assesses their potential impact. The Commission's proposals are often informed by expert opinions, research, impact assessments and consultations with stakeholders.

Member states provide input and perspectives on proposed legislation and policies through their representatives in the Council of the European Union.

EPs participate in committee discussions, debates, and votes. They represent the interests and concerns of EU citizens, bringing diverse viewpoints to the decision-making process.

Various EU agencies and bodies, such as the European Environment Agency, European Medicines Agency, and others, conduct research, collect data, and provide expert advice in specific policy areas. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and Council of Regions (CoR) represent civil society and regional interests, respectively. They provide opinions and perspectives on EU policies, ensuring that decisions consider the views of different societal and regional stakeholders.

The EU also engages the public through the mechanism of public consultations to gather input from citizens, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders. These consultations provide an opportunity for the public to express opinions on proposed policies, legislation, and other initiatives.

4.6. Lobbyists and revolving doors
Lobbyists play a significant role in EU politics by representing various interest groups, including businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry associations, and other stakeholders, in the policy-making process. They aim to influence EU policies, legislation, and decisions in favor of their clients' or organizations' interests.

"Revolving doors" in the context of EU politics refer to the movement of individuals between public office and private-sector roles, particularly in lobbying firms or industry groups. This phenomenon occurs when individuals, often former politicians, government officials, or high-ranking civil servants, transition from public service positions to jobs in the private sector, where they may engage in lobbying activities that aim to influence policies and decisions. These types of activities can sometimes lead to conflicts of interests, due to previous relationships and possible favoritism in policy-making procedures.

It's important to note that while lobbying is a legitimate and common practice in democratic systems, there can occur some issues regarding transparency, accountability, and potential conflicts of interest. One recent example is "Qatargate", a corruption scandal involving several MEPs and lobbyists who have been illegally influenced by organizations connected with the government of Qatar.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Greek MEP Eva Kaili, who was allegedly involved in the Qatargate scandal.

Efforts have been made to regulate lobbying activities, enhance transparency, and ensure that decision-makers are aware of the various interests at play. The EU has established a voluntary Transparency Register - a tool to allow European citizens to see what interests are being represented at Union level and on whose behalf, as well as the financial and human resources dedicated to these activities.

5. Who holds the power?

5.1. The role of citizens in European politics

Citizen power is at the center of European politics and its fundamental values. In addition to voting in elections, they can engage in various democratic processes such as referendums, initiatives, and consultations. Citizens can advocate for specific causes in several ways. They can lobby politicians and policymakers in various EU institutions and engage in protests and activism to raise awareness about issues affecting them.

One of the ways is participation in civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions and grassroots movements that work on various social, political, and environmental issues. If they gain enough support in their advocacy actions, they can influence European decision-making processes and legislative acts.

Another powerful option they have is starting EU Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs). Through them, citizens can directly engage in the EU legislative process by proposing new legislation or requesting changes to existing EU laws. In order to achieve this, ECIs need to be supported by at least one million EU citizens from at least seven different member states within one year. So far there have been six successful ECIs. The first one was Right2Water, a campaign to commit the European Union and member states to implement the human right to water and sanitation.

5.2 The European Court of Justice

The European Court of Justice exists since the very start of the European project and was put into place for the first time in 1952. The European Court of Justice resides in the city of Luxemburg and is like the other

Right2Water protests in Dublin, Ireland.

institutions active in all 24 official languages of the EU. Over the course of history, the Court of Justice gained a lot of judicial power to that extend that it has become one of the major supranational institutions of the EU.

The European Court of Justice exists of 27 judges who, much like the European Commission, have been put forward as a candidate by the national governments of the EU member states. Every judge at the European Court of Justice is appointed for a term of six years after which they can be reappointed. Every three years a part of the college of judges is renewed. The president of the European Court of Justice is chosen for a term of three years after which they can also be reappointed. The current president of the Court of Justice is the Belgian Koen Lenaerts who has been holding this office since 2015.

Koen Lenaerts.   © European Union, 2015

The European Court of Justice's mission is to make sure that European legislation gets implemented evenly and under equal circumstances for every EU citizen in every member state alike. The judges of the European Court of Justice make decisions when different interpretations of EU legislation occur between member states or when there is a conflict between national legislation and European legislation. This means that the European Court of Justice can make decisions that overrule decisions of national lawmakers. Also, the ECJ considers that laws that originated at the European level overrule national legislation and constitutions of the EU member states.

This position has led to conflicts between the Court itself and national Courts of Justice of some member states who are reluctant to let the national constitution be overruled by European decision making. Most recently, the Polish Constitutional Court stated that the Polish constitution cannot be overruled by the European Court of Justice. Nevertheless, there is a wide consensus among member states that European law overrules national law.

5.3 The power of the Bureaucracy

The power of bureaucracy in the EU, and what it entails, can be perceived indistinct and ambiguous, as all citizens might not be informed about the EU and how policies are implemented with bureaucratic influence. Nevertheless, the EU's bureaucracy is a frequent target for criticism across Europe. It has been portrayed as the EU governance is equal to governance through "unelected bureaucrats". However, this is not quite appropriate when compared to similar entities, such as the US federal bureaucracy. With the number of employees, the EU employs far fewer than the US federal bureaucracy while being responsible for far more citizens (Vogler). Nevertheless, it is the Commision's viewpoint that "better implementation of EU and national policies and more effective administrative performance will address the expectations of Europeans for less bureaucracy and more transparency and could save EU people and businesses billions of euros per year."

To clarify the bureaucratic structure, the EU Commission has a General Secretariat, which is responsible for the overall coherence in the Commission's work—both in terms of formulating new policies and navigating them through the other EU institutions. In addition to the General Secretariat, the work is carried out by 30 Directorates-General, resembling topic-specific ministries (environment, competition, energy, etc.), similar to those found in Denmark and other countries.

Across these 'ministries,' various services work on translation, interpretation, legal assistance, administration, and more.

A 2018 case highlights bureaucracy's power when the European Commission faced criticism for swiftly promoting Martin Selmayr, President of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker's aide, to Secretary-General. This top bureaucratic role holds substantial influence over the Union's political strategy. Selmayr, formerly Juncker's Chief of Cabinet and a key figure in his lead candidacy campaign, couldn't be promoted without first becoming Vice-Secretary-General. The Commission adhered to this process, and shortly after, Selmayr was promoted to Secretary-General.

5.4 The European Ombudsman

In the Treaty of Maastricht, the European member states, at that time, agreed to install a European Ombudsman as a neutral and non-partisan institution. The first European Ombudsman was the Finnish politician Jacob Söderman who started in 1995. The current Ombudsman is the Irish Emily O'Reilly whose second and last term will end in 2024.

The Ombudsman is convinced that the European Union already maintains a high administrative level, but she believes it should set the "gold standard" in terms of governance and its interaction with citizens. Therefore, she supports the institutions, bodies, and agencies of the European Union with suggestions and recommendations to improve their work. The task of the Ombudsman is to handle complaints at the address of the European institutions from EU citizens or legal entities within the EU. The European Ombudsman can also proactively make inquiries to structural problems within the EU institutions. The institution then has three months to come with a report on how they will resolve this problem. In the end, the goal is to ensure that the EU upholds high standards of good govern-

Former European president Herman Van Rompuy with Emily O'Reilly.

© European Union

ance for its citizens with special attention to transparency and accountability.

The European Ombudsman is appointed by the European Parliament for a term of five years after which the Parliament can re-elect the Ombudsman for one more term. The European Parliament can also make a request to the European Court of Justice to demission the Ombudsman. The offices of the European Ombudsman are in Strasbourg.

5.5 The battle for the EU's top posts
At the EU Parliamentary elections, speculations arise about which member states will secure the key positions in the EU cooperation. Here, the size of the countries comes into play, but also unwritten rules about the balance between gender, political affiliations, and geographical distribution. However, there are differences in the process of inaugurating the candidates for the various top positions.

European Commission president
The current president of the Commission is Ursula von der Leyen, whose term expires in October 2024. The candidate for this position is nominated by national leaders in the European Council, considering the results of the European Parliament elections. He or she needs the support of a majority of members of the European Parliament in order to be elected. The president provides political guidance to the Commission, calls, and chairs meetings of the college of the Commissioners, leads the Commission's work in implementing EU policies, takes part in G7 meetings, and contributes to major debates in the EU.

European Council president
The current President of the European Council is Charles Michel. He began his first term on 1 December 2019, and on 24 March 2022, he was re-elected President for a second term of two and a half years. The President is elected by the European Council by a qualified majority and is chosen for a 2.5-year term, which is renewable once. The role includes leading the European Council's work in setting the EU's general political direction and priorities, in cooperation with the Commission, promoting cohesion and consensus within the European Council, and representing the EU externally on foreign and security issues.

European Parliament president
The current President of the European Parliament is Roberta Metsola, whose term expires in June 2024. There has been a tradition for the two major party groups to take turns holding the presidency of the EU Parliament. This means that when the 2.5-year term expires for the conservative group, EPP, they support the election of a social democrat as president. This has seamlessly worked since the 1980s when the two largest party groups began their collaboration. Metsola is a member of the conservative group, which would result in the inauguration of a social democrat as president after the election in 2024 if the tradition is complied with. The President's role is to ensure parliamentary procedures are properly followed, oversee Parliament's various activities and committees, represent Parliament in all legal matters and in its international relations, and give final assent to the EU budget.

Representative for Foreign Affairs
With the Amsterdam Treaty in 2001, EU cooperation gained a single foreign chief in the form of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The aim was to improve coordination of the common foreign and security policy among the member states in the EU. Josep Borrell Fontelles is currently the High Representative. The selection of the High Representative occurs at the summits using a qualified majority, with the approval of the President of the Commission, for a term of five years. The High Representative performs their duties alongside the European External Action Service. This unit collaborates closely with the diplomatic representatives of EU countries.

President of the Eurogroup
The Eurogroup consists of finance ministers from euro area member states and the Eurogroup president. Paschal Donohoe currently holds the position. The President serves for a term of 2.5 years, and only member countries that have adopted the euro are eligible. It is only the Eurogroup members that elect the President

by a simple majority. The responsibilities include chairing Eurogroup meetings, setting agendas, developing the long-term work program, and representing the Eurogroup in international fora.

President of the European Central Bank
At present, Christine Lagarde is the President of the European Central Bank (ECB), and she took office on 1 November 2019. It is a highly central position, as the ECB manages the euro and frames and implements the EU's economic and monetary policy. The President holds the position for a full 8 years. It is the European Council that appoints the ECB President, and it takes its (final) decision based on a Council recommendation. It also consults the European Parliament and the ECB's Governing Council (composed of the 6 members of the Executive Board and the governors of the central banks of the 19 euro area countries). The European Council makes its decision through a qualified majority vote.

6. Burning questions at the EU Elections

6.1 Belgium

6.1.1 *Case 1*. Should the pause button be pressed on the nature restoration law?

Global warming combined with environmental pollution is causing a loss of biodiversity. Both marine and terrestrial ecosystems1 are being disrupted, with direct and indirect consequences.

Directly, this puts our food security under pressure. Approximately five billion euros of the EU's annual agricultural yield is directly attributable to the efforts of pollinating insects such as bees and butterflies. Due to climate change, many areas are no longer suitable for these pollinators. They cannot find food or places to nest. Indirectly, the decline in biodiversity also poses

a threat to our way of life. Many natural areas (such as wetlands with natural vegetation) protect us against flooding and help keep our water clean.

In Belgium, ecosystems are also under severe pressure, and wild pollinators are not faring well. Of the 381 species of wild bees found in Belgium, no less than 32.8 percent are threatened, 6.8 percent are nearly threatened, and 11.8 percent are regionally extinct. The situation is no better for butterflies and hoverflies. This decline is due to various factors that mutually reinforce each other: habitat loss and degradation, a significant decline in flowering landscapes, the use of pesticides, nitrogen deposition and climate change.

To draw attention to this issue, the Flemish Government organizes the annual "Week of the Bee." During this week (often fronted by well-known Flemish personalities), various activities, information sessions, and events are held to both inform people and actively engage them.

Initiatives include "Maai Mei Niet" (can be translated as: don't mow in May) where people are encouraged not to mow their lawns for a month to promote local biodiversity.

There's also a competition to become the 'Bee-Friendliest Municipality' in which a municipality will be judged on 'Bee-friendly green management like new plantings, bee installations, initiatives aimed at citizens, and participation in the "Week of the Bee."

The European Green Deal aims to combat biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems through the Nature Restoration Law. By 2030, at least 20 percent of all land and sea areas in the EU must be restored, with all struggling ecosystems to be restored by 2050.

Under the Green Deal, EU member states are primarily responsible for implementation. The EU sets targets, and member states determine how to achieve them

within their national contexts. They decide on their own approaches but must report to the Commission through National Energy and Climate Plans (NEKP). This bottom-up approach allows countries to create their own plans. The aggregation of all these plans will reveal whether the global targets can be met.

In Belgium, the nature restoration law, as specific aspect of the European Green Deal, quickly sparked controversy.

In May 2023, Prime Minister De Croo expressed doubts about the timing of the nature restoration law. "Everyone is convinced that the current goals regarding CO_2 reduction are achievable, but we must avoid overloading the cart," he said. With these words, he asked the European Commission to press the pause button on the nature restoration law, against the will of the green coalition partners Groen and Ecolo in the Federal government.

They called the Prime Minister "a climate procrastinator" and emphasized, "Nature and climate go hand in hand: instead of wanting to press a pause button, ac-

celeration is needed. The statements of the Prime Minister are scandalous and not endorsed by the government." There was a lot of commotion surrounding this issue, but the government did not collapse.

The discussion quieted down until the farmer protests flared up in early 2024 following the vote on the nature restoration law in the European Parliament. Belgian farmers blocked the ports of Zeebrugge, Ghent, and Antwerp, as well as several important roads and distribution centres. The Luxembourg Square, in the heart of the European quarter in Brussels, was also occupied. The blockades lasted for a week and caused significant economic damage. But despite the drastic measures taken by the farmers, there is also a lot of understanding.

Under the government's influence, farmers in Belgium have invested for years in scaling up and industrializing. With the arrival of the nature restoration law, they must completely change course.

There was a lot of negotiation with the farmers, both at regional, federal, and European levels. But a real solu-

Image: Shutterstock

tion did not emerge. Concessions were made primarily in terms of postponement, such as the rule requiring farmers to leave 4 percent of their arable land fallow, which will not be implemented for the time being. But uncertainty remains one of the problems. The farmers complain – not without reason – that agricultural policy must have a clear direction. They want to know if they can make investments, how to further develop their farms, and they want to be heard in this regard. The protests have brought agricultural policy back to the top of the political agenda, but real solutions are still pending.

Despite the nature restoration law being passed in the European Parliament, it seems that Prime Minister De Croo is using the presidency of the Council to question the law again. According to information obtained by the Flemish newspaper De Standaard, the Prime Minister is using his European position to lobby against the nature restoration law among member states. The law still needs to pass through the Council of Environment Ministers, where it must be approved by a qualified majority.

It is unprecedented for a chairperson to interfere with the voting behavior; it is precisely the chairperson's role to pass laws. Belgium is considered a country that is good at seeking compromises and usually behaves constructively for several reasons, so politicians and the media are surprised by this move. We'll have to wait and see what happens next.
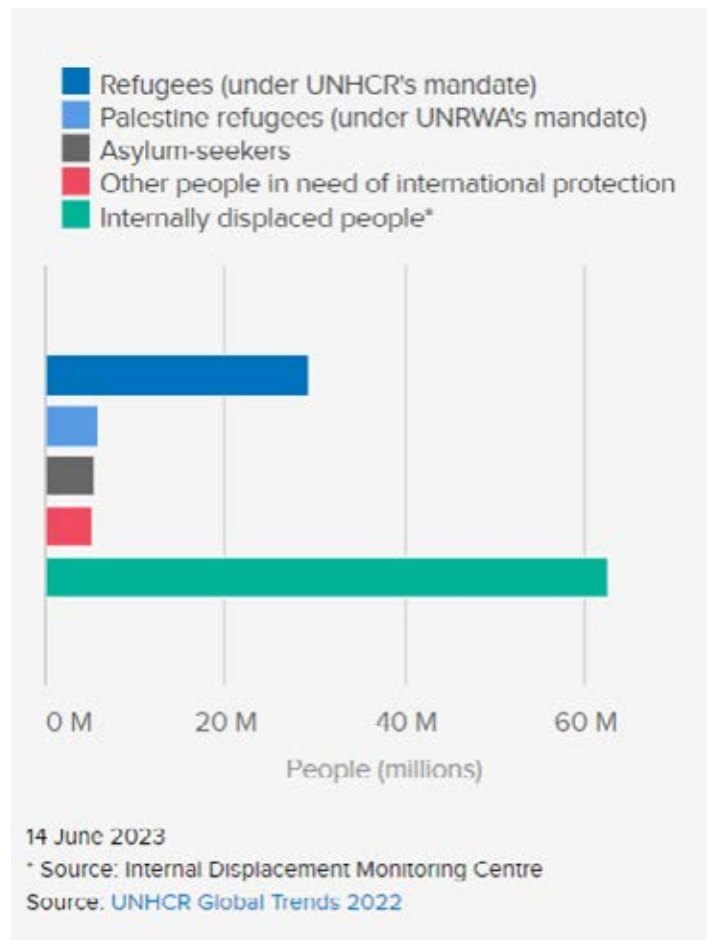
6.1.2 *Case 2.* Belgium and migration
Never have so many people been displaced worldwide. In 2022, for the first time in history, the sad milestone of 100 million displaced people was surpassed. The upward trend continued into 2023. By the end of 2022, 108 million people were displaced. More than half of these individuals are internally displaced, meaning they fled within their own country and did not cross international borders. In addition to armed conflicts and political violence natural and climate disasters are major causes of internal displacement.
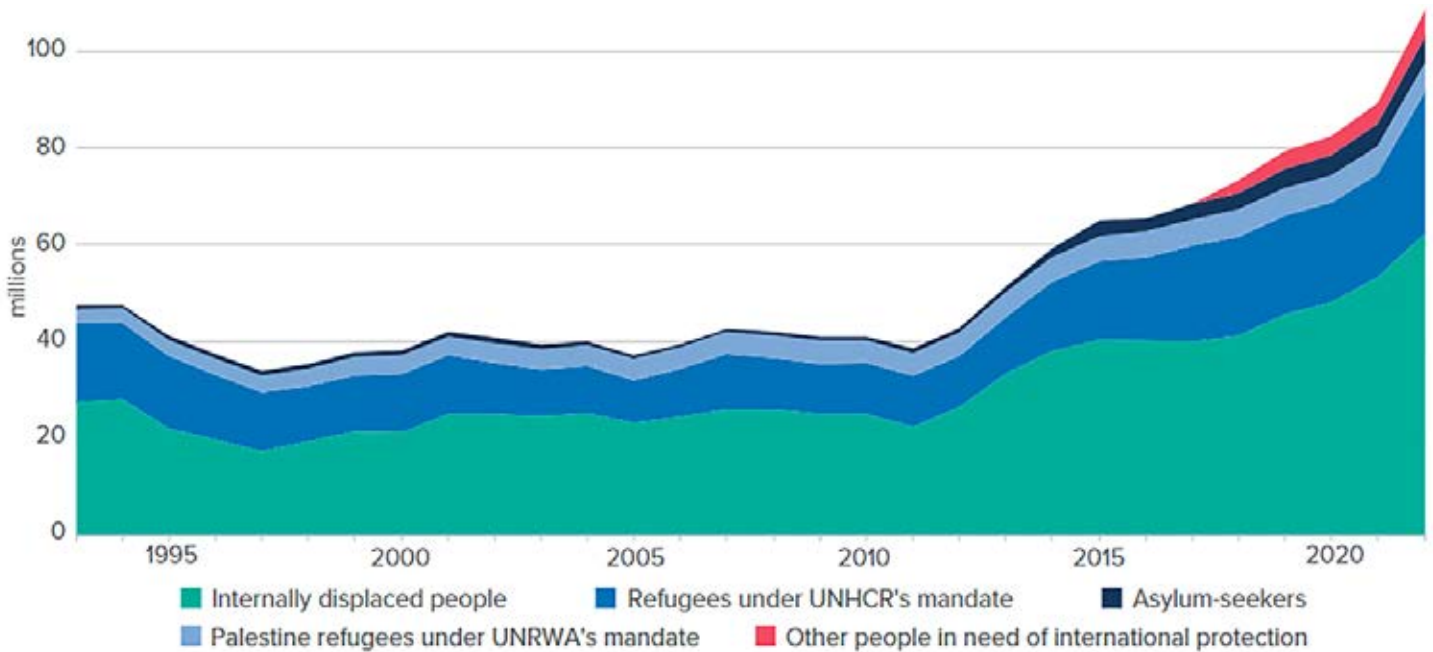
About 46 million people crossed their national borders and migrated to another country. People fleeing conflict also find their way to Europe. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Europe (excluding Turkey) hosted 15% of the world's refugees. This percentage has since risen to 26%, primarily due to the influx of Ukrainian refugees.

The number of asylum applications in the European Union peaked at 1.3 million in 2015, as more people, particularly from Syria, sought protection in Europe. This unprecedented number placed significant political pressure on the European Union. Both EU measures and the policies of individual member states (see further) contributed to a decrease in 2017.

In 2023 Germany (351,510) and France (166,880) received the most asylum applications, followed by Spain (162, 420) and Italy (135,820). With about 35,160 asylum applications, Belgium is on the 7th place of EU member states receiving the most applications.

14 June 2023
* Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
Source: UNHCR Global Trends 2022

People forced to flee | 1993 – 2022

Legend:
- Internally displaced people
- Refugees under UNHCR's mandate
- Asylum-seekers
- Palestine refugees under UNRWA's mandate
- Other people in need of international protection

From the annual opinion survey "De Stemming" by De Standaard and VRTNWS, it appears that 1 in 5 Flemish people consider migration to be the biggest issue in our country. There has been significant debate on this topic in both public opinion and among policymakers for years. There are many different opinions, and the discussion often becomes heated.

Migration policy is a shared competency. The European Union outlines broad principles such as which country is responsible for the reception and procedures for refugees or the bed, bath, and bread principle (which entails that every asylum seeker has the right to food, shelter, and sanitary facilities), but the implementation of policy largely rests with the member states. In our federal state, competencies are divided. The federal level is responsible for asylum and migration. They handle the reception, procedures, and deportations of asylum seekers. The regional level is responsible for integration. Local governments are asked to assist with reception and integration. However, Belgium faces challenges in these two areas.

Belgium has been facing a reception crisis for years. Every year, especially as winter approaches, distressing images circulate of asylum seekers standing in long lines outside the Foreigners' Office (the place where asylum seekers must register) and being forced to sleep on the streets. In 2023, the crisis was so severe that more and more stories emerged of families with children having to sleep on the streets.

Nicole De Moor. Image: European Union

At that time, Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration Nicole De Moor decided that reception centers should give priority to families with children and unaccompanied minors. However, this decision was

quickly overturned by the Council of State as it was not in line with European laws guaranteeing the right to reception. Yet, in practice, little changed. Even before the secretary of state's announced decision, single men were already unable to find a place.

Since then, the Secretary of State has been working on creating new places, but progress has been slow. There is not much support among most municipalities for opening new asylum centres. To quickly have additional reception places, even youth holiday centres were utilized as locations for hosting asylum seekers.
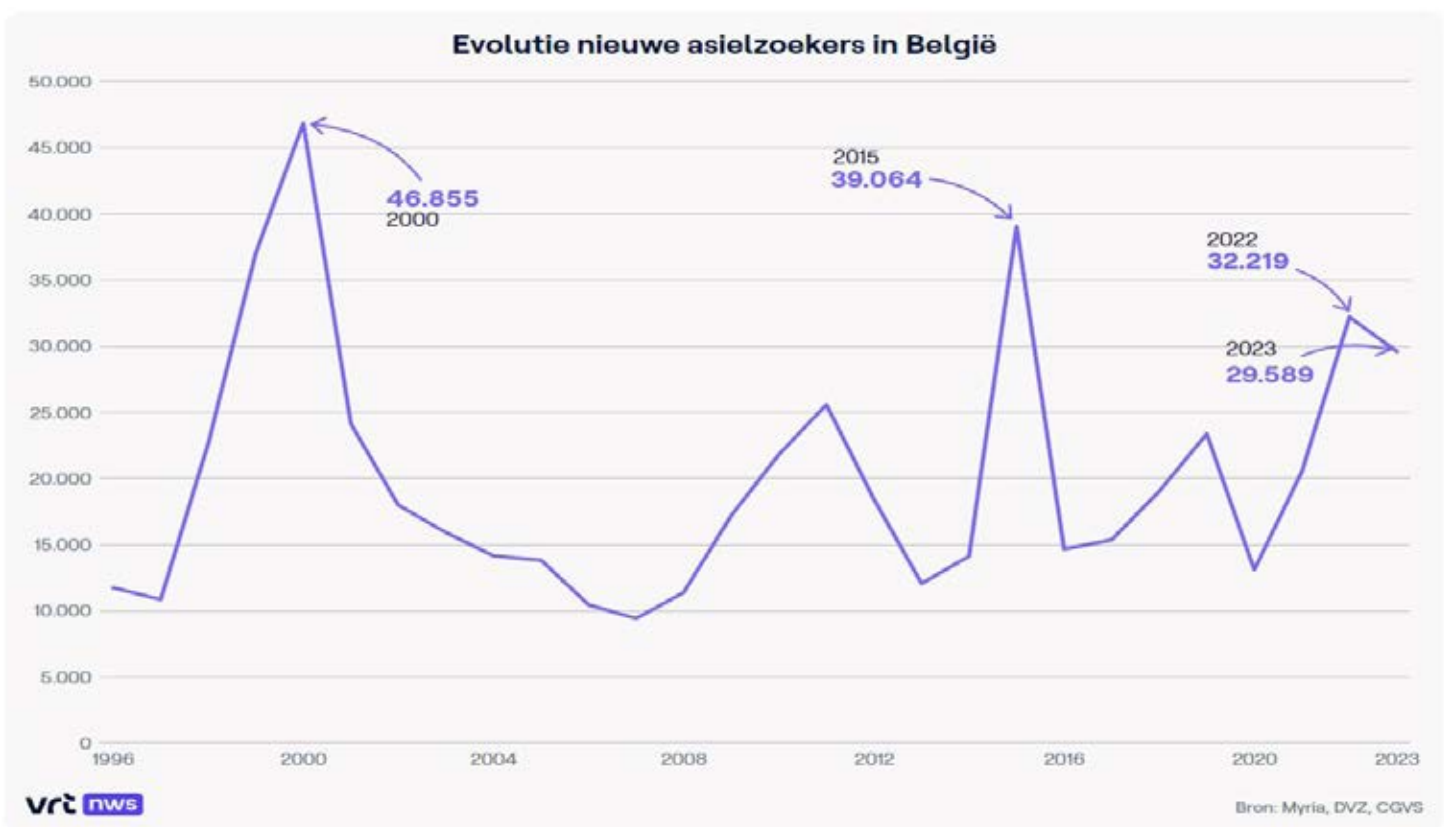
In the graph below, you can see the evolution of the number of asylum seekers in Belgium. The increase in 2022 is mainly due to Ukrainian refugees (see later).

After the peak in the number of asylum seekers in 2015, the number of reception places for asylum seekers was reduced. No buffer places were provided. In addition to the shortage of places, the Foreigners' Office, responsible for asylum applications, has accumulated a significant backlog. It takes an average of 1.5 years for an asylum seeker to receive a response. This, combined with more requests for the reception network than departures, exacerbates the reception shortage.

To provide accommodation for this influx of new people fleeing, the government called upon citizens. They asked individuals to open their own homes to Ukrainian refugees. Those who became host families received compensation. This call was answered by many Belgians, around 22,000 in total. Furthermore, Ukrainian refugees are immediately granted temporary protection, placing them under the responsibility of the regional government. They are entitled to a living allowance and can more quickly seek employment and their own housing, thus relieving pressure on the reception system from this group of refugees.

Belgian politicians are primarily looking to the European Union to implement a stronger asylum and migration policy, where stronger border control is a crucial point for every party involved. The Prime Minister is determined to use the presidency of the Council of the European Union to push through the new migration pact proposed by the Commission. It is already clear that migration will once again be an important election issue.

Evolutie nieuwe asielzoekers in België

46.855 2000

2015 39.064

2022 32.219

2023 29.589

Bron: Myria, DVZ, CGVS

6.2 Croatia

6.2.1. *Case 1.* Corruption scandal of the century - what's a billion kunas among friends?

In every election in Croatia, be it parliamentary, local, presidential, or European, one of the hottest topics of debate is corruption. The Mediterranean country has achieved significant progress in many fields in over three decades of its independence, but this issue persists like a weed in the garden. Throughout the years, many political careers have ended because of it, including a prime minister and countless ministers and their assistants. Some of them have manage to continue their political careers despite of it.

A typical blueprint for graft in Croatia includes high-ranking politicians, state-owned companies, and politically installed directors. One of the largest cases happened in 2008 in HEP (Hrvatska elektroprivreda – national electricity company), when over 650 milion kunas (around 80 million euros) was stolen by high ranking-directors through sister-companies. In the Sunčani Hvar (Sunny Hvar) privatization affair in 2007 a formerly state-owned hotel chain was privatized in suspicious conditions involving Damir Polančec, former Minister of Economy, Labour and Entrepreneurship. In 2017 during the Hotmail affair a secretive group selected by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković oversaw the sanation of Agrokor – one of the largest companies in Croatia and gained over 500 million kunas in the process for mysterious "consulting services". The most famous affair happened between 2007 and 2009, and it revolved around a relatively small company called Fimi Media through which over 70 million kunas of public funds was embezzled. The reason for its infamy lies in the fact that the former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader ended up in jail because of it.

In this long and lucrative list of corruption scandals, a clear winner has recently emerged. The biggest case - so far, at least, was discovered in 2022. It includes the national oil and gas company - INA, a mastodon owned in part by the Croatian state, with the rest being in the hands of MOL - it's Hungarian counterpart. INA is a strategically crucial part of the Croatian energy landscape and the largest company in the country.

Former Prime Minister of Croatia from 2003-2009, Ivo Sanader. He is currently serving a prison sentence for corruption in Remetinec prison.

From 2020, until 2022, five people, including one of INA's lower-ranking directors, Damir Škugor, were involved in selling INA's gas to a small company, owned by another suspect - Josip Šurjak, the president of the Croatian Bar Association, for prices significantly below market rate. Discounted gas was then resold to foreign customers by Šurjak's company for ten times the price, while the suspects kept the difference for themselves. Total damages caused to INA amounted to over one billion kunas (approximately 140 million euros), which made it the largest corruption case in Croatia's history.

Even though the severity of this case cannot be understated, there were some elements of the story which could be even characterized as comical. The gang of embezzlers proceeded to transfer the payments, amounting to hundreds of millions of kunas, to a private account owned by Damir Škugor's father Dane - a 70-year-old pensioner with a love for his olive garden and donations to the local church. The father-and-son duo pocketed almost 500 million kunas in this way and acquired dozens of valuable real estate properties. The rest of the money was split by the rest of this villainous team.

Photo: HINA

Arrest of Dane Škugor, a pensioner who received hundreds of millions of stolen funds on his account.

Another seemingly surreal aspect relates to the fact that a mid-ranking director in the largest company in the country even had access to such enormous amounts of strategic energy resources and was neither supervised nor suspected by anyone in the company until USKOK - Bureau for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime, discovered the case. INA being a partially state-owned company means it has strong ties with the government, but none of the state officials nor the outsourced internationally acclaimed revision companies, noticed any wrongdoing. Although the investigation and legal procedures are still ongoing, it seems likely that there are many facets of the story not yet known to the public, and it could remain so for years.

A similar scheme allegedly happened between Škugor and Leko from INA and his associate Vlado Mandić from EVN Croatia Plin company: by manipulating the dates and prices of the natural gas to make it look like it was cheaper than when the offers were created, and sales executed. They defrauded INA for almost half a million Euro, and created a situation where further damage would've been done in perpetuity during 2023 and 2024 and beyond. Some of the arrested suspects in these cases are accused of perpetrating various forms of money-laundering.

Emblematic of these types of corruption cases in Croatia is the role of state institutions, controlled by the ruling party, making the due process long and arduous, with many technical delays and obfuscations. In these procedures suspects are often protected or has privileged status.

An example of political entrapment of justice institutions in the country has escalated in 2024 when election of Ivan Turudić as State Attorney General in Croatia has fired up the opposition, which considers Turudić a political appointment of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, to a position that should be independent of politics.

The opposition points to a scandal where there was a leak of thousands of What's app messages between Turudić and the former state secretary in the Ministry

of Administration, Josipa Plešić, who was arrested on suspicion of corruption in May 2020. In the WhatsApp messages, Turudic calls Plesic "Beauty" and she calls him "my joy", implying a close personal relationship with Turudić leaking classified information to Plešić in order to help her defend her case. Turudić's election to Attorney general caused a wave of protests organized by the opposition, but it has had little effect. Cases like these continue to erode the trust of Croatian citizens in its institutions.

6.2.2. *Case 2.* Violence at the borders – Croatia's role as the EU's "bad cop"

In recent years, Croatia has faced increasing scrutiny and criticism over allegations of police violence against refugees attempting to cross its borders. These allegations are part of a broader issue involving the treatment of refugees and migrants at the European Union's external borders. Reports of abuse, illegal pushbacks, and human rights violations have drawn attention from in-ternational human rights organizations, the European Union, and the global media.

Croatia is situated along a key route for refugees and migrants trying to reach Western Europe. Many of these individuals are fleeing conflict, persecution, and economic hardship in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. They often enter Croatia through Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming to continue their journey to countries like Germany and France.

As part of the EU, Croatia is obligated to follow the Common European Asylum System, which includes respect for the rights of asylum seekers and the prohibition of refoulement – the forced return of individuals to a country where they may face persecution. However, the reality on the ground often deviates from these principles.

Numerous reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and testimonies from refugees detail a pattern of violence and mistreatment by Croatian police. These allegations include physical violence - refu-

Croatian police detaines refugees,

Source: pathforeurope.eu

gees report being beaten with batons, punched, kicked, and subjected to other forms of physical abuse by Croatian border police.

Instead of processing asylum claims as required by international law, Croatian authorities are accused of summarily expelling refugees back to Bosnia and Herzegovina without due process – these so-called pushbacks are illegal and in contradiction with human rights principles.

In 2017, there was a case of a tragic death of a six-year-old girl Madina Hosseini, who died due to inhuman treatment by the Croatian police during one of the pushbacks. For several years Croatian authorities denied any responsibility, but the case was reported to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In 2022, ECHR found the Republic of Croatia responsible for numerous human rights violations under the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: the right to life, the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment, the prohibition of the collective expulsion of aliens, the right to security and liberty and the right to institute legal proceedings.

This judgment of the ECHR confirms various problems that many actors have been pointing out for many years and about which we report to the Croatian Parliament, the competent authorities, and the public. In this case, it also referred to the work of the police, the State Attorney's Office, and the judiciary. There has been some evidence of police trying to cover up relevant facts of the case despite the contrary information by the victim's mother and other witnesses.

Furthermore, there have been cases of confiscation and destruction of personal belongings by the police, including phones and money, leaving refugees even more vulnerable. Conditions during detention and deportation are often described as degrading and inhumane, with refugees sometimes being forced to walk back across the border through rough terrain, irrespective of weather conditions.

The Croatian government has consistently denied allegations of systematic abuse, often attributing reported incidents to isolated cases, or dismissing them as false. Croatian officials emphasize their commitment to protecting the EU's external borders and maintaining national security. However, the consistency and volume of reports suggest that these issues are more widespread.

International bodies and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as various Croatian organizations such as Centre for Peace Studies and Are You Syrious, have called on the Croatian government to investigate these allegations thoroughly and to ensure accountability for any violations. The European Commission has also expressed concern, urging Croatia to align its border practices with EU laws and fundamental rights.

The situation in Croatia is reflective of a broader struggle within the EU to balance border security with humanitarian obligations. The EU's reliance on member states at its external borders to manage migration flows has led to a variety of approaches, some of which have been criticized for human rights violations. The lack of a unified and humane response to migration continues to strain the EU's foundational values of human rights and solidarity. There has been criticism that Croatia, alongside other Southern and Eastern Europe members of the EU on its outer borders, have been tasked to the role of "bad cop" on the borders, doing the EU's "dirty work" by preventing mass influx of refugees unwanted by the EU and national leaders.

The allegations of Croatian police violence against refugees underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reform in how the EU and its member states handle migration. While national security is a legitimate concern, it must not come at the expense of human rights and international legal obligations. Ensuring that refugees and migrants are treated with dignity and respect is not only a moral imperative but also a legal one. Addressing these allegations transparently and holding perpetrators accountable is crucial for restoring faith in the EU's commitment to human rights and for protecting the most vulnerable.

6.3 Denmark

6.3.1 *Case 1*. Denmark's biodiversity challenge

Biodiversity is a broad term used to describe the variety of living species on Earth, including plants, animals, fungi, and even microorganisms like bacteria that compose our natural world. But it can also be used more specifically to refer to all the species within a specific region or a particular ecosystem. Each of these species and organisms work together in ecosystems, like an intricate web, to maintain balance and support life on the planet. In addition, biodiversity supports everything in nature that humans need to survive, such as food, clean water, medicine, and shelter. The Earth's biodiversity is so rich that many species have yet to be discovered, but many species are also being threatened with extinction due to human activities, which puts the Earth's magnificent biodiversity at risk. In response to these grave consequences, both international organisations, like the UN and the EU, and individual countries, have

outlined action plans for improving the biodiversity. This will be elaborated below.

To preserve biodiversity, a range of initiatives and regulations operate at the governmental, supranational, and international levels, safeguarding wild animals, plants, and their habitats. This includes both international objectives, such as the multilateral treaty *UN Biodiversity Convention* formed in 1992, EU directives, such as the *Biodiversity Strategy for 2030*, and Danish legislation, such as the Nature and *Biodiversity Package 2020*. 196 other countries (2023) and the EU are a part of the UN Biodiversity Convention, which obligates each country to have a national biodiversity strategy. Additionally, the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 aims to establish uniform nature protection practices among member states.

The EU's biodiversity strategy for 2030 is an important pillar in nature protection, which is comprised of a comprehensive and long-term plan to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems in Eu-

Yellow Bee on a Purple Wildflower.

rope. The strategy aims to help Europe's biodiversity to recover by 2030 for the benefit of citizens, climate, and the planet, which contains well-defined actions and commitments. Post-COVID-19, the strategy also aims to rebuild European societies' resilience to future threats such as:

- The impacts of climate change
- Forest fires
- Food insecurity
- Disease outbreaks - including by protecting wildlife and fighting illegal wildlife trade

The strategy contains specific commitments and actions to be delivered by 2030. The European Commission's plan is very focused on placing effective restoration measures to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters. The EU countries would have a responsibility to designate protected and strictly protected areas. The EU will expand the already existing Natura 2000 network, which includes areas of exceptionally high biodiversity and climate value, with strictly enforced protection measures. The Commission acknowledges that today, only 3% of land and less than 1% of marine areas are strictly protected in the EU. The ambition is that at least one third of protected areas – representing 10% of EU land and 10% of EU sea – should be strictly protected. To achieve this, it will be crucial to define, map, monitor and strictly protect all the EU's remaining primary and old-growth forests. It will also be important to advocate similar protections globally and ensure that EU actions do not result in deforestation in other regions of the world.

Significant areas to protect include old-growth forests, which are the richest forest ecosystems that remove carbon from the atmosphere, and other carbon-rich ecosystems, such as peatlands, grasslands, wetlands, mangroves, and seagrass meadows. It is specified that each member state will have to do its fair share of the effort based on objective ecological criteria, acknowledging that each country has a different quantity and quality of biodiversity.

In the restoration of degraded ecosystems at land and sea across the whole of Europe by 2030, the Commission has set the following targets:

- Establish protected areas for at least 30 % of both land and sea in Europe.
- Increasing organic farming and biodiversity rich landscape features on agricultural land.
- Halting and reversing the decline of pollinators.
- Restoring at least 25 000 km of EU rivers to a free-flowing state.
- Reducing the use and risk of pesticides by 50%.
- Planting 3 billion trees by 2030.

Until the Nature and Biodiversity Package 2020, the Danish government's efforts in Danish nature were solely based on the EU's Biodiversity Strategy and were not supplemented with additional legislation. The Danish Ministry of Climate, Energy and Utilities has stated that there is a need for more untouched woodlands and more cohesive nature areas where nature is able to spread out in a more natural way than is currently the case. The biodiversity package includes clear targets for the proportion of Denmark's land area to be laid out as nature zones (including untouched woodlands and national nature parks) as well as specific initiatives to ensure that targets are reached (energy.ec). However, it appears that the Danish government's plan of a unified law on nature and biodiversity has not yet been implemented. It is stated that the goal is to contribute to the EU's biodiversity strategy for 2030, which aims for 30% of the EU's land and sea area to be protected nature, of which 10% should be strictly protected nature.

The Danish Biodiversity Council, which provides knowledge and policy suggestions to maintain and restore biodiversity in Denmark, does not find any compelling biodiversity or societal justifications for Denmark to pursue less ambitious goals than other countries. Therefore, the Council proposes that Denmark, as a starting point, adopts goals that at least meet the common objectives. The Council estimates that currently, 1.6% of Denmark's land area, including lakes and rivers, and 1.9% of Denmark's marine area can contribute to the international target of protected

areas. A further 5.5% and 0.5% of the Danish land and marine area could potentially be considered, but this requires a more detailed individual assessment of the individual areas, including a focus on effective management. Currently, no Danish land or marine areas can contribute to the international target of strictly protected areas.

It is evident that Denmark faces significant biodiversity challenges. Denmark ranks at the bottom in terms of protected natural areas among EU countries, and habitat quality is also among the worst. An assessment from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, IPBES, emphasises the need for a paradigm shift to achieve sustainability, which would involve the Ministry of Finance and other institutions integrating the multiple values provided by nature and biodiversity into socio-economic analyses. The financial institutions should play a more prominent role in ensuring effective biodiversity improvement. IPBES emphasises one of the reasons that the world is in a biodiversity crisis is because Denmark and other nations overlook the value of biodiversity and fail to embed this value, along with other values of nature, into our societal model. In Denmark's case, the intensive land use is at the core of the problem. It has detrimental effects on both nature and people. Impacts on nature and the environment need to be included in economic decision-making, and the country needs a more comprehensive strategy for how to better prioritise land and other natural resources. Currently, more than 60 percent of Denmark's territory is devoted to agriculture, leading to fierce competition for land for multiple purposes, including strictly protected areas on land and sea.

6.3.2 *Case 2*. Digital regulations in the EU: A farce or long battle towards change?

It is always big news in Denmark, when Margrethe Vestager condemns Google (Alphabet) and sends them a "record-big" fine, but do these big fines really make a dent in the massive revenue that the tech-giants command, the so-called GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft)? Are these fines the tip of a larger regulatory iceberg, or are they merely an opportunity taken for the EU to get some better reputation with the common man of Europe? In this article I want to give a short overview of the cases, the law proposals (Digital Services Act(DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA)) and discuss how we should view the lawsuits and new regulations.

The company that has been synonymous with its search engine and who has, through their own creation or others, embedded the phrase "just google it" or "Google is your friend" into our everyday lives, has also been the target of historical fines, lawsuits, and investigations. Google's annual revenue of 2023 297.13 billion dollars and the company commands 28% of the world's revenue from advertisement. An estimated 84% of desktop searches in the world go through google. It's estimated profit for 2022 is 225 billion dollars, but that's across the world, not just from the EU, however a whopping 80% of that revenue came from ads. Sadly, there are no public numbers on how much of the revenue is from the EU, only from both the EMEA-region (EU, Africa, and the Middle East), where 31% of the sales came from at an estimated 79 billion dollars.

There have been several lawsuits, and each have had their own focus. The first lawsuit was regarding its competition with price-comparison sites such as Foundem. Foundem complained that Google directed consumers towards their own services rather than use other price comparison sites and thereby preventing from developing into strong search sites. The cases resulted in smaller concessions by Google but no confession of wrongdoing. In 2013 a complaint is filed to European Commission about Googles Android business practices. This accusation had to do with Google demanding phone producers, who want to use android and have access to the play store (Google's app store), to both pre-install google search as default on all the phones and install the google chrome browser as default. The last lawsuit is a lot more complicated and deals with google controlling several parts of ad-sales, meaning that they can more or less control the market and thrash competitors. The source of all this control goes back to Goog-

Android home screen.

le acquiring DoubleClick in 2008, which was a service of ad sales, where publishers and advertisers could sell and bid on ads. The EU also led an investigation into the merger back then and investigated if google "...could allegedly raise the cost of ad serving for rival intermediaries, and Google's market position in search advertising and/or online ad intermediation services...". The conclusion was negative, but it seems to be exactly what happened. All in all, Google has been fined 3 times, for a total of 8.67 billion dollars (2.6 in 2017 + 5 in 2018 (trimmed to 4.45 billion in 2022) and 1.62 in 2020). All fines were appealed by Google, and all were upheld although at times slightly reduced.

In 2021 another investigation was launched, and Vestager mentioned their worry that the business practices of Google could be in breach of the EUs 'Competition rules on anticompetitive agreements between companies (article 101 of TFEU (The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and 'the abuse of a dominant position' (article 102 of TFEU). However,

during the last years, the EU has introduced countermeasures to tackle the problem the big media giants pose. These countermeasures are called the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act.

The law-proposals, Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act, aim to create a safer online experience for both users and businesses. They consist of comprehensive regulations of digital platforms. The law-proposals will provide guidelines to govern so-called 'Gatekeeper platforms', social media platforms so big they are considered bottlenecks (monopolies where no other path between business or consumer is available) between consumers and businesses. The laws were reviewed and adopted in 2022 but have yet to take effect. This will happen on the 17th of February 2024. At the time of writing this article, the laws have had little news coverage in the last months but should be an item of interest in the upcoming EP election as the implementation could influence both our personal digital experience and on the European digital market.

DMA more specifically aims to create a more contestable digital market by establishing a "set of clearly defined objective criteria to identify "gatekeepers"." and applying prohibitions and obligations to their market practices. These gatekeepers are search engines, app stores and messenger services. Gatekeepers will no longer be allowed to "prevent users from un-installing any pre-installed software or app", "prevent consumers from linking up to businesses outside their platforms" or "treat services and products offered by the gatekeeper itself more favourably in ranking than similar services or products offered by third parties on the gatekeeper's platform." One of the complaints about the EUs fines of Google was that because they were so small in comparison to Googles revenue, they could hardly be viewed as regulatory. However, with the introduction of DMA the EU can now fine up to 10% of the revenue in severe cases and 20% for repeated infringements. In many ways the new prohibitions and obligations seem directly engineered against Google, but they do go beyond, especially regarding the DSA.

DSA is more focused on social media platforms and on user-rights than market competition. Specifically, the EU wants to address concerns about why you are being recommended certain products and why your content gets blocked with no explanation from the Social Media Platform. Through the DSA it will be possible to flag "illegal content, goods and services.", more specifically hate-speech or counterfeit products. In addition, the DSA wants to create transparency around why certain commercials and products are presented to you. Perhaps the most important aspect of this is the complete ban on targeted advertising of children based on their personal data. There have also been many complaints with regard to user-content being removed or banned without explanation, but with the DSA, this should also be a thing of the past, as gatekeepers will be forced to explain why they ban content, and you will be able to challenge this ban through a "easy-to-use, free-of-charge complaint mechanism".

The big question is whether these fines and law changes will be able to change Google's and other gatekeeper's business ethics, or at least govern them. With the in-

creased size of the fines and the implementation of both DMA and DSA, the power that Google commands is surely to be diminished. The regulations about to be implemented will change our European society in very tangible ways. Some might question what power google really has, after all, it is "just commercials", however in a time where the relation between information and citizen has been reversed, you no longer find information, information finds you, controlling commercials, algorithms and to some extent (some of) the flow of information, requires an incredible amount of responsibility and thus, regulation. Some have tried to depict these law packages as an expression of isolationism, i.e. of the EU protecting itself from outside private competitors, but nothing could be further from the truth. Free markets can't work without regulation, and no one is better off with a monopoly in the private market, especially not one as powerful as this one.

Regarding the DSA and its implementation of flag-function of illegal content etc., I would be worried how this tool functions. What specifically happens if you get flagged? Does your content immediately become unavailable? Is there a certain amount of flagging that can cause content to become unavailable? While it is imperative that we address the problems with hate-speech, misinformation and counterfeit goods, it is also important that we don't provide the tools that some social groups could use to silence or harass others. The complaint mechanism, on the other hand, will surely help address concerns about public trust, misinformation and help sustain a less fragmented reality. It is not hard to understand why some succumb to the lure of conspiracy theories, when something that they believe in gets removed, banned, or taken down without explanations as to why. Without having tried this, I very much believe it would feel like a conspiracy. One of the last aspects of the DSA is the simplification of terms and conditions which seems like a complete no-brainer, as those agreements have always been, perhaps wilfully, obscure, and unnecessarily complicated.

One of the only things I don't understand in terms of DMA and DSA, is how little media attention it has been given. Perhaps corona is to blame, but the trials

and fines of Google were everywhere to be seen, which is odd considering how much more significant these acts will be for our society. It can't be stressed enough that regulation on this area, at this time, has been sorely missed. I believe that these acts are an important step in the right direction. Despite my reservations about some of the aspects they introduce, I believe that it is vital that we get a stronger understanding of this area of the market and of our society. Before we understood social media and the internet, we were already deeply dependent on it, and since then, it has only taken over more of our lives, for better and for worse. Without regulation, without discussion, we have no idea which direction we are heading. The DSA and DMA will provide a huge amount of transparency to our everyday lives and provide background to questions I think we've all wondered. Why was that post taken down? Why am I seeing this add? What exactly am I agreeing to? Why can't rich and strong societies hold fraudulent companies to account? What effect this will have on our societies, time will tell, but at least now, there are authoritative eyes watching.