

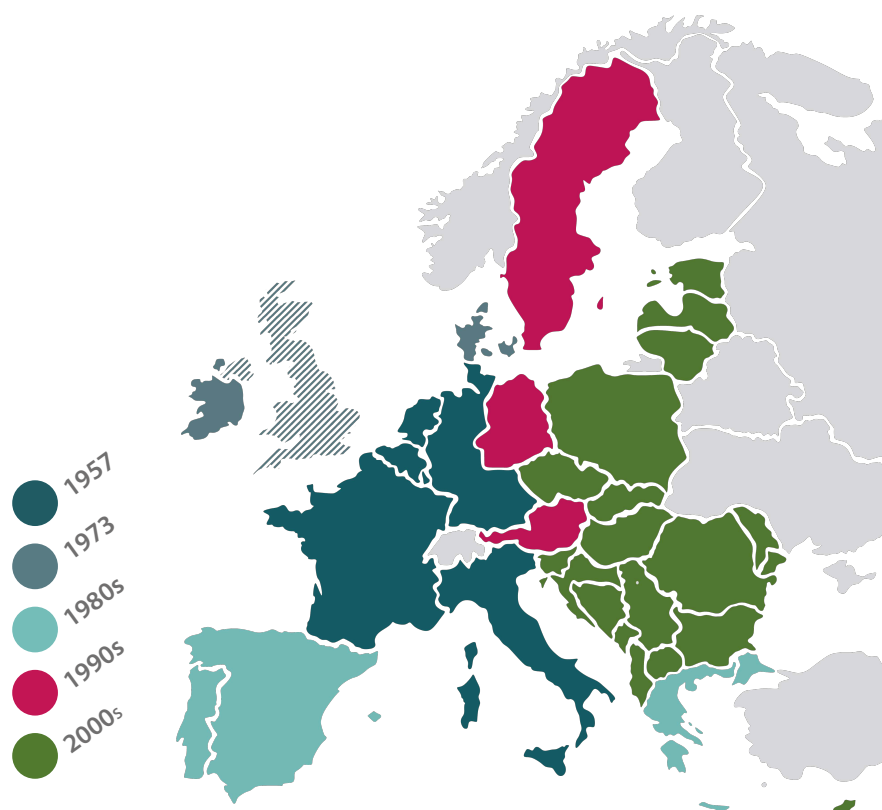
# A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

## WHY DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION EXIST ?

**T**he European Union (EU) is a political and economic union of 27 Member States that are located primarily in Europe. It is the result of a process that was initiated in the aftermath of World War 2, with the aim of bringing peace to the continent. The EU wasn't built in a day: it grew gradually, treaty after treaty. From six countries in 1957, the EU has grown into a union of 27 countries.

After a failed attempt to form a military union in the 1950s, European countries focussed on building a common economic market with shared rules and standards.

The creation of the EU can be characterised as a process of integration (new treaties are regularly signed, bringing a deeper level of integration) which sees the transfer of agreed powers from Member States to the European level. The EU therefore faces constant tensions and flux.



## KEY FACTS

### • EU PRINCIPLES

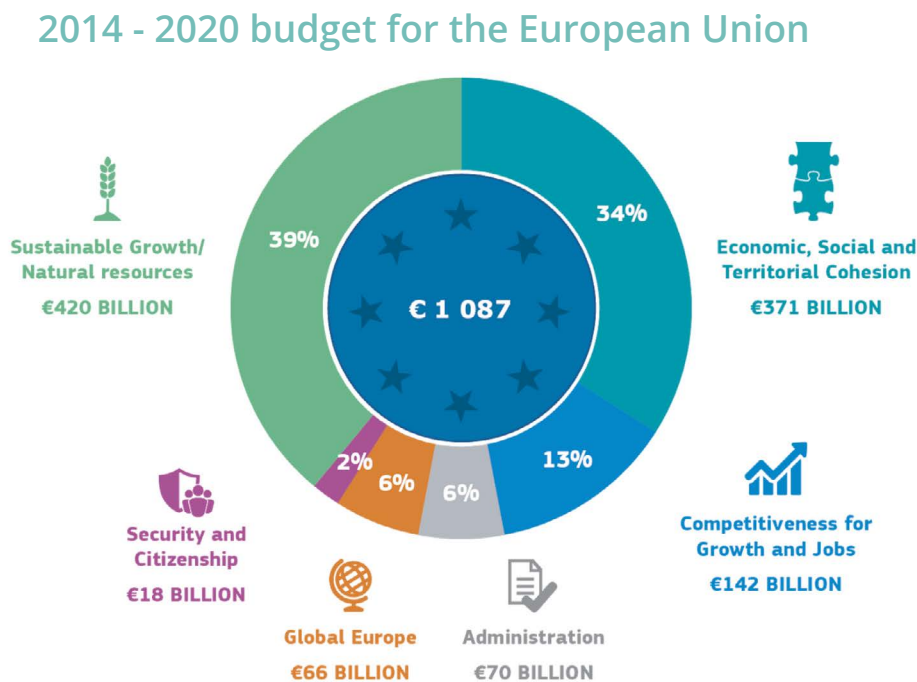
**T**hese crucial principles explain how and why the EU works:

- Principle of attribution of powers: the EU only has legal competence for those areas where Member States have chosen to transfer powers to the European level. The EU's powers, and the way decisions are made, have a legal basis in the EU Treaties that were agreed by all Member States.
- Principle of subsidiarity: The EU will always prioritise dealing with things at the most local level possible. EU Action will only be proposed where it is considered that a problem cannot be solved more efficiently at the national level. Therefore, any EU action must bring added value.

## • EU BUDGET

The EU's revenue is derived from customs duties on goods imported into the EU, a share of Value Added Tax (VAT) on all purchases made or services rendered and, most importantly, a contribution from Member States based upon their Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

These public funds finance the implementation of EU policies and the running of the EU Institutions (outlined below). Principal expenditures are explained in the image below:



Every five years, Member States meet to agree on the next budget: they aim to pay as little as possible and to get a good return for their money. Poorer countries receive more money than they give, leaving richer countries as “net contributors”.

## WHAT ARE THE EU'S COMPETENCES?

**The EU has sole competence for policies that are linked to the EU market: customs, rules around the functioning of the common market, monetary policy for countries using the Euro, and trade agreements.**

The EU and Member States share competences on the following policies: employment and social affairs, economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture, fisheries, environment, consumer protection, transport, energy, security and justice, public health, research and space, development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Member States can only pass laws in these areas if the EU has not already proposed laws or has decided that it will not do so.

Policies that are the competence of Member States (and where the EU can support not directly regulate) include: public health, industry, culture, tourism, education and training, youth and sport, civil protection, and administrative cooperation.



# HOW EU DECISION-MAKING WORKS (IN A NUTSHELL)

There are three main institutions for EU decision-making: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union.

Laws are decided by two of these bodies:

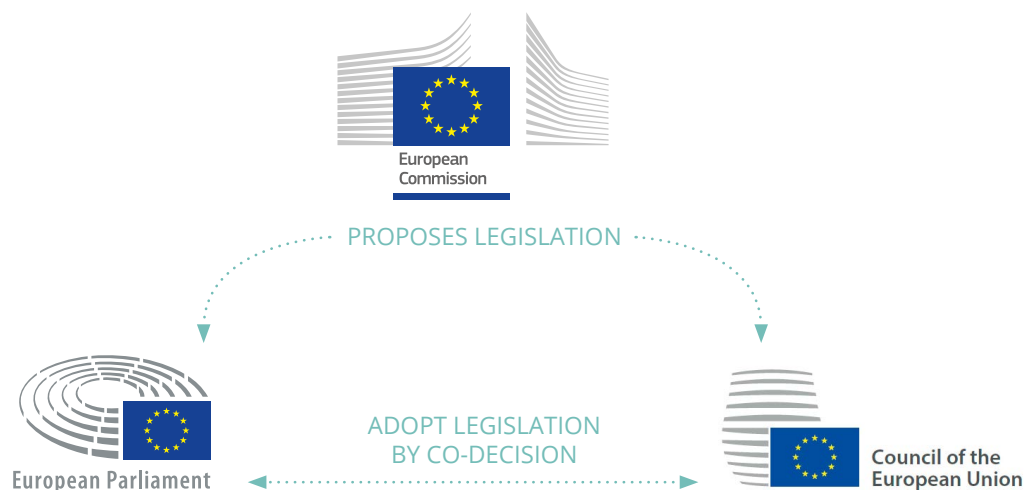
- the European Parliament (which is similar to a national parliament representing citizens), based in Brussels and Strasbourg, whose members are directly elected by European citizens
- the Council (which is similar to a high chamber, like a Senate representing regions), also based in Brussels, which is composed of representatives from the governments of all 27 Member States.

## How a law is typically developed at the EU level

**A**n EU law or an EU law revision takes about three years to be developed. There are many steps in this process, involving different actors and consultations, and with many opportunities to influence progress.

This is how it works:

- **First, the European Commission will do the preparatory work to draft a new law. This usually includes an impact assessment and a public consultation to hear different views.**
- **The European Commission then proposes a law.**
- **The European Parliament and the Council then separately agree on their positions and proposed amendments. Both positions are agreed only if the majority vote for it (in the Council, this majority needs to represent 55 per cent of Member States and 65 per cent of the EU population).**
- **Once this is done, the Commission, the Council and the Parliament will meet (those meetings are called “trilogues”) to agree on a final compromise.**



The above procedure is called codecision (meaning the Parliament and the Council will both decide on the law). It is used to decide 80 per cent of EU laws. There are, however, exceptions for certain issues. Some policies - such as trade agreements - require unanimity of the Council, i.e. the assent of every EU Member State.

In other policies, the European Parliament has more limited powers. This is, for example, the case for Free Trade Agreements: the European Parliament only has formal power to agree or reject a Free Trade Agreement, it cannot make changes to the text.



## SHORT SUMMARY OF HOW EACH INSTITUTION WORKS

### THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS AN INDEPENDENT EXECUTIVE BODY WHOSE LEADERSHIP IS APPOINTED BY THE MEMBER STATES, BUT IT IS POLITICALLY ANSWERABLE TO THE PARLIAMENT.

**It is composed of:**

- A political arm – institutionalised in the position of the President of the Commission, Vice-Presidents and a ‘college’ of Commissioners who are political appointees from each Member State and are each in charge of a specific topic.

- An administrative arm composed of 27 Directorates General (DG) (like Ministries) and other specialised agencies or services. Each DG is responsible for a policy area (for example: DG-Trade, DG-Environment, DG-Agriculture). It is composed of civil servants and headed by a Director-General who is answerable to its Commissioner. Each DG is organised into different directorates, which are themselves organised into different units.

**The Commission plays the following roles:**

- It is the only institution that has the competence to set the legislative agenda and to propose new laws.
- It ensures that the EU treaties are respected.
- It ensures that the EU law is implemented.
- It represents the EU in the world.

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directly vote for  
MEPs and about**

**30%**

**of national law  
comes from EU law,  
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distant from the EU.**

### THE COUNCIL

THE COUNCIL REPRESENTS THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES AND HOLDS SIX KEY RESPONSIBILITIES:

- To pass EU laws and to approve the EU budget, mostly jointly with the Parliament.
- To coordinate the broad economic policies of the Member States.
- To develop the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Twice a year the Council meets at the Heads of State level; these meetings are called “Summits”. Heads of State level is capitalised, but ministerial level isn’t. Either way we should be consistent. Otherwise it meets more frequently at the ministerial level according to the subject being discussed (environment, finance, etc.). This means that Council representatives vary according to the subject discussed.

Every six months, one Member State takes the role of Presidency of the Council. This makes them the driving force in the EU legislative and political decision-making process.

It is much harder to influence the Council than the Parliament because efforts must be focussed at both the national and the EU level.



*Photo from left to right:  
Ursula von der Leyen, President of the EC  
David Maria Sassoli, President of the EP,  
Charles Michel, President of the European Council.  
Photo Etienne Ansotte*



## THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT IS THE ONLY DEMOCRATICALLY AND DIRECTLY ELECTED EU INSTITUTION AND IS THUS THE MOST SENSITIVE TO PUBLIC OPINION. IT IS COMPOSED OF 704 MEMBERS (MEPS) WHO ARE ELECTED BY EUROPEAN CITIZENS EVERY FIVE YEARS.

### The Parliament plays the following roles:

- In conjunction with the Council it has the power to pass laws, and to approve the EU budget.
- It exercises democratic supervision over all EU institutions and in particular the Commission.
- It debates issues of public importance and may put questions to the Commission and the Council. It thus plays a crucial role in broadening the focus of policy-making discussions.

### HOW THE PARLIAMENT LEGISLATES

The Parliament works in Committees (for example the Environment Committee; the Foreign Affairs Committee; the Development Committee) to propose and adopt amendments to Commission proposals (which then become laws). For each proposal, a “rapporteur” is designated by its peers: this MEP (and their advisers) is in charge of drafting the text. In parallel, each group will designate “shadow rapporteurs”, MEPs who coordinate their group’s position on the text.

Compromise is at the core of Parliament policy making, as no group has the majority. A “good” rapporteur will manage to listen to and find an agreement with the “shadow rapporteurs”. Once an agreement is found, the text is voted on in Committee before going on to be voted on by all MEPs, in Plenary.

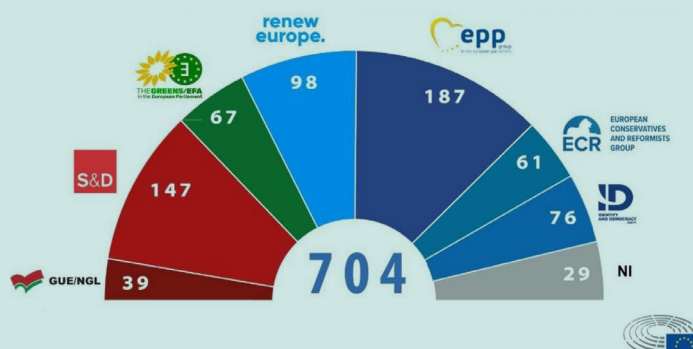
The European Parliament is also an important instrument for the public to be able to apply pressure. They can do this through questions, reports and hearings.

### HOW THE PARLIAMENT IS ORGANISED

Most MEPs belong to a political ‘group’ and a ‘national delegation’. Groups gather at the EU level with like-minded national parties. For example, the European Parliament Group of the Social Democrats (S&D) gathers national socialist parties; like the French “Parti Socialiste” or the German “Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands”. Within those ‘groups’, there are ‘national delegations’ which bring together MEPs from the same party and the same country.

Not all ‘groups’ are ideologically homogeneous. There are differences of positions depending on the MEPs’ countries of origin. For example, Northern Europeans are generally much more pro free trade than Southern Europeans. Eastern Europeans will be less sensitive to climate issues than Western Europeans.

There are seven political groups, from the far left to the far right, as seen in the image below.



The Greens (ecologist parties) are the most ideologically homogeneous group: they are very coherent in the way they vote. On the other hand, the socialists or the conservatives will be much more fragmented, depending on their countries of origin.

Historically, the Parliament has had a majority which consists of a coalition between the centre right (the conservatives, named the European Popular Party (EPP)) and the centre left - the socialists. However, in the 2019 elections, those two parties, for the first time ever lost their majority and had to make a deal with the Liberals (Renew Europe).

# TIPS FOR PREPARING FOR MEETINGS WITH EU POLICY MAKERS

One key thing to remember is that, despite deep levels of integration, and unlike federal countries, there is a weak common European identity. Although people vote directly for Members of the European Parliament and about 30 per cent of national law comes from EU law, European citizens still feel quite distant from the EU. Therefore, when analysing European politics, one has to keep in mind that it will be more defined by national interests than non-existent EU public interest.

## Accessing EU institutions

**W**hen meeting EU policy makers, it is important to adapt your speech to the person you will be talking to. Some will be more sensitive to political arguments, while others will only be convinced by technical expertise. Below, is a short description of the main types of stakeholder you will meet. Hopefully, this will help you prepare for meetings or calls.

## The European Parliament

The Parliament is the easiest EU institution to “access”: it is the most democratic and

**"The Parliament is the easiest EU institution to 'access'."**

open, meaning it is quite easy to get a meeting with an MEP or their assistant. This makes the Parliament prone to lobbying. Different political groups have greater or lesser interest in listening to civil society's inputs: the left-wing Greens and the S&D

MEPs are likely to be more open than the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), though there are many exceptions.

Some MEPs are also more powerful than others: heads of delegations, heads of groups, heads of Committees. MEPs who have been elected for a long time also tend to have more influence than recently elected MEPs, for whom it takes time to understand the rules of the game.

MEPs are politicians; they will therefore be more sensitive to arguments that will convince their voters and political counterparts, rather than technical arguments. They will also probably be interested to participate in any activity (picture, letter, etc.) that will raise their visibility.

## The European Commission

**T**hey are two kinds of people at the Commission: politicians and technicians.

Commissioners and their cabinets are the highest level. They are politically-appointed, and have political mindsets. Commissioners' cabinet members are supposed to be both knowledgeable about the issue they are covering, and to understand the political objectives of their Commissioner. They are the intermediaries between the stakeholders (such as yourselves) and the politicians. They will therefore be sensitive to political arguments and big picture thinking. Commissioners can make decisions themselves, so you should aim to get her/him to make a concrete commitment to action.

**"They are two kinds of people at the Commission: politicians and technicians."**

Civil servants working at the Commission are pure technicians. They are experts in their fields and are interested in having discussions about content. When meeting them, it is important to have a strong understanding of the policy you will discuss, and be ready to back your case up with data and evidence. They tend to value discussions with people who “speak their technical language”. They will not be sensitive to political arguments and will often not be able to directly do anything as a result of your meeting, as they are not senior enough to make decisions. The lower-level they are, the more true this is. However, if they are convinced by your arguments they may escalate the issue up

their hierarchy. Lower-level people can also be a useful source of information and advice, and may try to help you behind the scenes.

## The Council

**T**he Council is the institution that is the hardest to access. You will therefore rarely have the opportunity to meet with people working at the Council level in Brussels. It is much more likely that you will meet them at the national level, in the relevant ministry.

**"The Council is the institution that is the hardest to access."**

If you meet civil servants working in a Permanent Representation, then you should approach them in a similar way to how you would approach European Commission technicians.

Should you meet a Permanent Representative (who has a role similar to an Ambassador), then consider their political interests as their role is to represent the interests of their country. You should talk with them in a similar way as to how you would approach a Commissioner or cabinet member.

**"When meeting EU policy makers, it is important to adapt your speech to the person you will be talking to."**



### MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR:

This guide doesn't aim to be scientific or exhaustive. The content is taken from 10 years of working in EU affairs, including in the European Parliament. The purpose is to give the reader "a feel" of the dynamics of the "EU political battleground" and to allow EU and non-European civil society organisations, as well as Indigenous and forest organisations leaders, to better understand the type of actors they will meet when coming to Brussels, in order to better advocate for forest peoples' rights at the EU level.

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