

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 12 OBJECTS



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This publication is produced by the European Commission Representation in Ireland in cooperation with the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA)

Manuscript updated in April 2026

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2026

Print	ISBN 978-92-68-38900-3	doi: 10.2775/4826480	IH-01-26-001-EN-C
PDF	ISBN 978-92-68-38899-0	doi: 10.2775/8960702	IH-01-26-001-EN-N

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The European Union in 12 Objects

Many people would like to know more about the European Union and how it works. Given the EU's importance in the lives of its citizens, that is not only desirable but essential.

However, understanding the EU poses a significant challenge. Its field of action is vast and its workings highly complex. Of its nature, it is significantly more difficult to explain than the operation of a single EU Member State, yet the amount of time most people can devote to understanding the workings of Europe is a fraction of what they devote to following the politics and complexities of their own country.

To explain the full range of the EU's activities would require the contents of a significant library. The purpose of this publication is therefore simple and modest - to provide a succinct explanation of what the European Union is, how it works and what it is all about.

It does so by reference to 12 simple everyday objects that correspond to the 12 stars on the European flag. The approach is inspired by *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the joint BBC Radio/British Museum project that was both a radio series and a book.

A short factual guide to the European Union, this publication avoids going down every highway and byway of the European maze, while hopefully capturing its essence. It reflects the author's own personal views as well as his experience as an Irish diplomat and European official.

This publication is based on an original blog series, written by Bobby McDonagh and published online by the Institute of International and European Affairs from January to March 2026. The views expressed within are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the IIEA, which is fully independent.

About the author

Bobby McDonagh's career, unusually, spanned each of the three main EU Institutions. He represented Ireland for eight years in the Council of Ministers, including for four of those years as Ireland's Permanent Representative (Ambassador) to the EU. He worked in the European Commission for four years in the cabinets (private offices) of two Irish European Commissioners. Early in his career, he was an official of the European Parliament.

He also worked for 15 years on European matters at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin, including as Director General of its EU Division, helping to shape, coordinate and advance Irish policies on EU issues.



1. The Mirror

Reflecting the Complexity of EU Identity



The first object that I have chosen to explain the European Union is a mirror. Europe is largely about identity and who we are.

The EU, of its very nature, reflects the complexity of identity. It illustrates perfectly that the reality of who we are, as individuals, is more rich and subtle than today's simplistic populists and right-wing nationalists would have us believe.

The mirror I have chosen as the first symbol of Europe is the mirror that allows us to see and understand who we are.

The European Union is founded on a simple truth, namely that it is possible to be comfortable with more than a single identity and to be proud of several identities at once. The philosophical bedrock of Europe is that there is no contradiction between being, say, Irish and European; the same applies equally, of course, to the citizens of each of the EU's 27 Member States. On the contrary, Europe is part of Ireland's identity and Ireland is part of Europe's identity. We are enriched rather than diminished when we recognise that truth and act on the basis of it.

The *reality* of identity is usually complex. Almost all of us as individuals have rich composite identities, as we may discover especially when we explore our ancestry. A simple and clear example of that was a former French Ambassador to Ireland who told me that his two grandfathers had fought in the First World War, one in French uniform and the other in German.

The *politics* of identity, on the other hand, are often savagely simple. When it comes to conflict and confrontation, the underlying complexities are swept aside. Once we choose to man the political barricades, we find ourselves obliged to wear our chosen uniform and wave our chosen flag.

The European continent has been devastated many times over by crude nationalism. We know all too well on the island of Ireland the tragedy to which the oversimplification of identity can lead.

It is no coincidence that the European Union was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, to create a new community "among peoples long divided by bloody conflicts", as the original European treaty put it. Nor is it a coincidence, on our own island, that membership of the EU helped to create a wider shared European context in which the nationalist and unionist traditions in Northern Ireland could begin to sit more comfortably together.



Photo taken as the Northern Ireland Executive took office in 2007. (Left to Right) First Minister of Northern Ireland, Ian Paisley; the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso; and the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, Martin McGuinness.

How Identity Works in the European Union

The most important point to understand about how identity works in EU negotiations is that recognition of the necessary European dimension does not diminish the pursuit of national interests. Rather it enhances it. All Member State negotiators must recognise that their national identity includes a European identity and that their real national interests include an important, sometimes vital, European dimension.

During my many years as an Irish negotiator in the EU, never once did I, or any of my colleagues from across the Irish civil service, find ourselves pursuing some vague “European” interest rather than Irish interests. Our sole aim was to advance Irish interests, as the representatives of *other* Member States pursued *their* national interests.

Rather the ongoing challenge was to understand and pursue Irish interests in their full and therefore true context. All of us around the negotiating table started out with narrowly-defined national negotiating objectives on each issue, but we also had a profound *shared* interest in reaching balanced, necessarily imperfect, compromises in which no Member State could achieve all of its narrowly-defined national objectives but which worked to the overall benefit of all. It isn't possible to achieve narrow national objectives by clinging to them uncompromisingly. If that were the case, all Member States would do the same and nobody would ever budge. Nothing would ever be agreed.

Ireland has many specific interests in the EU which it rightly pursues vigorously, as do other Member States. However, Ireland's most profound European interest, like that of our partners, in a ferociously competitive and increasingly threatening world, is in a European Union that *can* reach agreement, that functions effectively for the common good and that can assert itself collectively in the wider world.

I will explain the different EU institutions in relation to other “Objects” in later chapters. However, it would be useful to note at this stage a certain subtle but important distinction. Whereas the representatives of Member States in the Council pursue national interests while taking strong account of the European dimension, the supranational European Commission and European Parliament primarily pursue European interests while taking strong account of national perspectives, interests and sensitivities.

The EU is not limited to two layers of identity, national and European. Europe also validates and supports regional identities. It is entirely possible, even the norm, for someone to be comfortable not only with, say, German and European identity, but at the same time with Bavarian identity.

Many regions, both within Member States and across national borders, have been strongly supported by the European Union's Regional and Cohesion Funds and by its other regional policies. Many of the less wealthy regions in Europe have often found recognition and practical support easier to obtain from Brussels than from their national capitals. The EU's specific prioritisation of cross border and interregional development has proved its importance both on this island and across the continent.

Ireland has been one of the Member States to benefit most from the EU's regional policies. EU support, through the Regional Fund, the Social Fund, the Agricultural Guidance Fund and the Cohesion Fund, was a major factor in enabling Ireland to move from being one of the poorest Member States a few decades ago, with amongst the largest *per capita* EU receipts, to being one of the richest Member States today. That Ireland's share of EU regional funding has dwindled, and that Ireland has become a net contributor to the EU's budget, represents not something to regret but rather a remarkable success to be celebrated.

Prime Minister Theresa May told the British Conservative Party Conference in 2016, shortly after the Brexit referendum that “if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere.” This controversial pronouncement represented an explicit rejection of the important reality, the fundamental European

principle, that it is possible to be comfortable with, and to celebrate, more than a single identity. May's comment was understandably condemned by the half of the United Kingdom's population which continued to value its additional European identity. The depth of their anger reflected their awareness that nothing could better sum up the foolishness of the advocates of Brexit than May's stunted vision of human identity.

Flags have a particular capacity to touch people's hearts and to stir up emotions. We in Ireland, like many others, are rightly and deeply proud of our national flag. It is sad, here and elsewhere, that it is often those who do most to dishonour their country - by their extremism, xenophobia or racism - who are the first to wave their national flags in a parody of patriotism.

It is no small thing that the Irish flag and the European flag fly side by side in Ireland outside public buildings and at official events, as similarly national and European flags fly alongside each other in the 26 other Member States. Our Tricolour is not diminished in the slightest by appearing alongside the European flag. On the contrary, our sense of Irishness is enriched by the symbolic confirmation that Ireland, as Robert Emmet would have wished, has taken its place "among the nations of the earth".

It is also important, in a world in which some political leaders proclaim the sole and dangerous aim of making their own nation "great again", that the twenty-seven national flags the EU Member States, including the Irish flag, fly so comfortably beside each other in a European context.

The citizens of each European country owe primary allegiance to their national flag, in Ireland's case to the Tricolour. However, we also owe appropriate allegiance to Europe's flag.

In the "mirror" in which we see and understand ourselves as a nation, the Green White and Orange flag and the Blue flag with its twelve yellow stars fly comfortably side by side.



2. The Weighing Scales

Balancing Diverse Interests and Perspectives



Compromise is the lifeblood of the European Union. Friendly and fair relations between countries, and between EU institutions, cannot work without significant give and take. Compromise is not just the end product of European negotiations. It is the EU's very way of doing business. Compromise is deeply embedded in the very process of EU negotiations.

When the EU Commission tables a legislative proposal, that proposal already represents a compromise within the Commission between different priorities, objectives and national perspectives. From the moment when Member States then begin to discuss the Commission's proposal in the Council of Ministers, they work to refine and adjust the draft so that every national point of view is taken into account to the maximum extent possible and so that ultimately there will be a sufficient majority to approve the law. The Council then negotiates its version of the proposal with the European Parliament with a view to agreeing yet another compromise.

It is thus clear that the weighing scales required by the European Union is necessarily a highly sophisticated one, perhaps the most complex, subtle and flexible such mechanism ever required in the relations between free democratic countries. The EU is not merely balancing *two* points of view, as in a "bilateral" negotiation between two individuals or countries, already often a huge challenge. It must rather balance the interests of 27 Member States. It must navigate the different perspectives of the EU's three major institutions. As if that were not enough, it must at the same time keep its eye firmly on the real prize, namely the adoption of coherent and ambitious policies that will serve Europe as a whole, as well as its Member States and citizens.

Compromise is about respect between nations, as between individuals. It is the opposite approach to that of the growing number of global bullies who believe that might is right, especially those who invade other countries or threaten to do so. The EU's processes are the antithesis of the populist approach of promising unachievable simple answers to complex problems.

In the long run, compromise is not just about decency in relationships. It is also the best way to advance lasting interests. "The Winner Takes It All" is an ABBA song, not a negotiating strategy.

How Compromise Works in the European Union

Compromise in the European Union is driven both by *legally-binding mechanisms* and by *an ethos of respect*.

As regards legally-binding mechanisms, the EU is based on, and circumscribed by, the rule of law. The Union is based on its Treaties that have been formally approved by each of the Member States, either by referendum or by their national parliaments depending on the constitutional requirement in each case. The EU cannot act, by legislation or otherwise, outside of those Treaties. The EU's Court of Justice guarantees that the European Treaties and legislation are upheld in every respect. It can impose penalties, notably fines, to ensure that this is the case.

One of the important things prescribed by the EU Treaties is how the EU reaches its decisions. The precise roles, rights and operation of the Commission, Council and Parliament, which I will explain in more detail in later chapters, are a matter neither of conjecture nor whim.

Legislation is necessarily *proposed* by the Commission and then *adopted* in co-decision between the Council and Parliament. The compromises they must reach between them in that context are not dictated principally by how effectively they throw their weight around in a particular case or by the caprice of the moment. The quest for inter-institutional compromises is entirely unavoidable because that is what the Treaties' decision-making procedures require.

Likewise, the Member States *within* the Council *must* reach agreement according to the various decision-making procedures prescribed by the Treaties.

Unanimity is required for foreign policy decisions, in a small number of other very sensitive areas including taxation, and for the broad policy matters determined at the highest level by the European Council (comprised of the 27 Heads of State or Government). In other words, in such cases the agreement of every Member State is required for any decision and one Member State alone can block anything. This is sometimes referred to as a “veto”.

On the other hand, the vast majority of legislation can be agreed by what is called a “qualified majority” of Member States in the Council of Ministers (as well as, in a parallel process, between the Council and the European Parliament). The “qualified majority” system assigns a certain number of votes to each Member State - the more populous a Member State, the more votes it has. However, the Member States with smaller populations have more votes than a simple translation of their population size would justify. The number of these *weighted votes* when added together must reach a specified threshold, and at the same time represent a specific percentage of the EU’s overall population, for the proposed legislation to be adopted.

These binding decision-making systems, which ensure that every Member State’s rights are taken into account, necessarily require *compromise*, both in how negotiations are *conducted* and in the *agreements eventually reached*.

These legally binding arrangements distinguish European Union decision-making radically from those who act unilaterally in relations between countries or who try to do so - by relying on military aggression, by declaring unilateral tariffs or by generally dismissing international law. It is highly significant that there is no such thing as “unilateral” action within the EU. No European institution, no Member State and no combination of them can override the decision-making rules and protections set out in the EU Treaties and guaranteed by the European Court of Justice. The only option for any Member State or States that cannot get their way within the EU’s procedures is to act outside those Treaties. Any such action would be without the support, weight, budget or imprimatur of the European Union.

Compromise within the EU is not only necessitated by its mandatory procedures but is also encouraged by its *ethos of respect*. The ethos of relations between the 27 Member States is one of respect for the interests and sensitivities of others.

Every Member State is entitled to make known its views at every level and at every stage of negotiating every proposal. Those national views are listened to respectfully because that is the EU’s way of doing business. Every Member State realises that, if it wants its own concerns to be taken into account, it must likewise take account of the concerns of others.

Each proposal is gradually shaped to reflect, insofar as possible, all of the perspectives that are brought to the table. The advocates of a proposal understandably maintain an eye on the target of reaching the necessary “qualified majority” to approve it. This means adjusting the proposal by means of compromises to make it more acceptable to reluctant Member States and to bring them on board. However, the process is not a mere mathematical calculation of voting weights. Every effort is made to satisfy the reasonable requests of every Member State. The ethos of EU negotiations is not one of isolating a minority but of accommodating all to the maximum extent possible.

Similarly, in those cases where *unanimity* applies for a decision to be reached, the norm is one of mutual respect. One Member State may be legally entitled to block a proposal but it normally listens in good faith to the legitimate perspectives of others. At the same time, the majority respects the legal right of one or more Member States to exercise their veto on a proposal although it may engage, sometimes assertively, in support of its point of view.

The ethos of respect must, of course, work both ways. There have been some cases, especially recently as reflected in Hungary’s approach to Ukraine, of one European Government digging in its heels, not in defence

of reasonable national concerns, but in support of an approach that challenges the EU's fundamental values and interests. That Member State's lack of respect for the interests of its partners has meant a fraying, in turn, of the respect to which it would otherwise be entitled. Where this will lead remains to be seen.

Compromise means of course, as in any negotiation, that no party can obtain everything that it wants. The principle of every compromise agreement is that you give something to get something. Bargaining is often referred to appropriately as "give-and-take". This is usually understood in the European Union, but not always.

Some politicians, especially those with populist tendencies, see compromise as a process of conceding things rather than what it truly is, namely a means of achieving them. Such a failure to understand the nature of compromise was, in my view, the underlying misunderstanding that led to the UK leaving the European Union. I was Ireland's Ambassador in London when David Cameron, who eventually called the fatal Brexit referendum, became Prime Minister. I was astonished that some newly appointed senior Government ministers had no idea how successful the British negotiating effort in Brussels had been over many years - arguably the most effective of all the then 28 Member States - and believed it needed to be overhauled. The problem was that they saw compromise as surrender and seemed to believe in the fantasy that you don't need to take the rough with the smooth. It was little surprise that one of Cameron's successors later slid so far down the populist road that his political philosophy was summarised by his mantra that the UK should "have its cake and eat it".

There can, more generally, be a tendency of national representatives in the EU, encouraged sometimes by their national media, to blame Europe for the parts of a Brussels compromise that they don't like and to claim credit for the usually more significant elements that will be well received at home.

Moreover, a few national ministers may need to be persuaded from time to time that compromise requires prioritisation between national objectives or that a concession to others on one issue may be the best means to achieve a concession that we require on a more important issue.

The EU's decision-making procedures are highly complex and can be painstakingly slow. However, complexity, in a world of increasingly shallow oversimplification, is to be warmly celebrated. Some sneer at Europe's complexity and even laugh at it. The EU's complexity may indeed be funny but, personally, I never find it quite as "funny" as the centuries of war that preceded it on the European continent or than the brutality that characterises many other parts of the world today.

A well-calibrated weighing scales is an essential part of the EU's equipment.



3. The Table

Having a place at the Council Table



Perhaps the most obvious object to symbolise the European Union is a table. I have chosen a table to symbolise the negotiating reality and format of the EU's Council of Ministers (often referred to as simply "the Council"). The Council is the institution that brings together the representatives of the Member States.

A table is, of course, often similarly required, in practical terms, as a piece of furniture in each of the EU institutions and beyond. However, the very definition of the Council is the "table", the negotiating table, around which the Member States sit. The Council has no alternative to taking its decisions and formulating its policies around such a table. When reference is made to "having a place at the table" in Europe, it is normally the Council that is being referred to. That is why I have chosen a table to symbolise the Council.

Background

Currently, there are 27 Member States in the Council. Each has its own equal place at the table and equal right to be there. Originally there were only six Member States. After Ireland joined along with the UK and Denmark in 1973 there were nine. The number continued to grow, including with the significant accession of 10 new Member States in 2004 following the restoration of democracy in central and eastern Europe, until the number reached 28. Following the Brexit referendum in 2016, the UK became the first country to leave the European Union and thus lost its "place at the table" where, of course, many of the decisions that still affect it continue to be taken. There are now 27 Member States, with many others negotiating to join.

The European Commission (which will be discussed under Chapter/Object 5) also has a place at the Council of Ministers' table. While it plays a significant role in that context, including in its role as the initiator of the draft legislation being considered by the Council, it is not a member of the Council and has no voting rights there.

The Council of Ministers meets in 10 different configurations. The 27 Agriculture Ministers, for example, meet to negotiate on agricultural matters, the 27 Environment Ministers meet to discuss environmental issues, and so on. There is no hierarchy as between the different formations of the Council. The General Affairs Council, however, is responsible for cross-cutting issues, institutional issues and the preparation of meetings at the highest level, namely the "European Council".



Source © European Union.

The European Council

The European Council is not the same thing as the Council of Ministers (or “Council”). It brings together, at that highest level, the 27 “Heads of State or Government” (so-described because, while most Member States are represented by their Prime Minister in the European Council, a few - including France - are represented by their Head of State).



Source © European Union. From left to right: Micheál Martin, Taoiseach, Ireland, António Costa, President of the European Council, Kaja KALLAS, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Technically, the European Council is a separate institution from the Council. Unlike the Council, it cannot adopt legislation. However, other than as regards legislation, it is in practical terms the highest level of the same negotiating structure as the Council of Ministers, with all 27 Member States around the table. Given that the European Council comprises the most senior politicians in each of the Member States, it gives overall direction to the work of Ministers in the Council, shapes the EU’s overall direction and is its most influential body.

It is important to note that, unlike at the Council of Ministers, in which national ministers are accompanied by one or more of their officials or even occasionally represented by one, the Prime Ministers or Presidents who represent their 27 Member States at the highest level in the European Council are strictly unaccompanied at its meetings. Thus they sit around a smaller table and must negotiate on their own, reacting to evolving discussions and proposals. This in turn means that the personal ability, knowledge and experience of the political leaders in question is of particular importance both in promoting their national interests and in shaping European compromises.

The symbolism of the table and its significance apply as much to the European Council as to the Council of Ministers.

Preparatory Work at Official Level

The work of the 27 Ministers in the Council is prepared by officials from the 27 Member States who sit around similar tables at earlier stages of the negotiating process. Thus the work of the Council takes place initially at official level and subsequently at political level.

On every working day, numerous working groups, comprising officials from each of the 27 Member States, take place to begin and take forward the process of shaping legislation and policy across the wide range of EU business. Ultimately, it is for the Ministerial level to reach decisions. However, a great deal of the highly complex work of taking into account the different points of view and refining the proposals to be considered by Ministers necessarily takes place between their officials, in the same Council building and around similar tables.

The highest level at which officials meet to prepare Ministerial discussion in the Council, and to resolve the outstanding disagreements to the extent that they can, is Ambassadorial level. The 27 Ambassadors from the Member States to the European Union are called Permanent Representatives. They each head up a large diplomatic mission in Brussels called a “Permanent Representation” (in effect their country’s Embassy to the EU), typically comprising officials assigned there for several years from every Ministry in their home capital.

The 27 Permanent Representatives, as well as their 27 Deputy Permanent Representatives, constitute two separate high-level committees (Coreper II and Coreper I respectively) through which all of the work from the numerous working groups is funnelled towards the Council of Ministers meeting in its different formations. (At a similarly senior level, the Political and Security Committee and Special Agriculture Committee help to prepare Ministerial discussions on foreign policy and agriculture respectively).

Coreper II and Coreper I meet at least for one day every week, and very often more frequently, sometimes at short notice. Their role is to reduce the areas of disagreement on which Ministers will have to focus their discussions and to make those Ministerial discussions as coherent and effective as possible. Sometimes the Ambassadors at Coreper II and Coreper I can reach substantive agreement that only needs to be formally approved by the political level.

Each member of the European Council appoints a “sherpa”. These 27 sherpas, in tandem with the Permanent Representatives in Coreper II and Ministers at the General Affairs Council, help to prepare the work of the European Council.

EU Presidency

There is a six-monthly EU “Presidency” that rotates on a strictly equal basis between the 27 Member States. During its six months, each national Presidency aims to advance the work of the European Union as effectively as possible, including by chairing most of the formations of the Council of Ministers and much of the work at official level.

However, as the EU has become more complex, and continuity has become more necessary and challenging, the role of the six-monthly rotating Presidency has been diluted somewhat. For example, the European Council (namely the highest level negotiating forum) and the Foreign Ministers’ formation of the Council of Ministers are now chaired by more permanent appointees.

Ireland will hold its next EU Presidency in the second half of 2026.

Council Secretariat

A permanent Council Secretariat provides important support for both the Member State holding the rotating Presidency and for the ongoing work of the Council as a whole.

General Reflections

The main point to retain from this summary of the Council of Ministers (and the European Council) is that each Member State has a place, as a right, around the EU's most influential table. Contrary to the frequent complaint that "Brussels" decides everything, with the implication that Member States must meekly accept policies foisted on them by European bureaucrats (the infamous "Eurocrats"), the representatives of the 27 democratically-elected European governments sit around the Council table every day, at every meeting and at every level, to take the important decisions. That represents both an important responsibility for each Member State, and a significant opportunity.

As set out in Chapter/Object 2, in which the central importance of compromise to the EU's way of doing business is underlined, the Council operates on the bases of agreed and binding procedures and its work is generally shaped by an ethos of accommodation and respect.

Both the binding procedures and the spirit in which they are implemented mean that it is very rare for a Member State like Ireland to be "outvoted" on any proposal in the Council. While, in common with every Member State, we can rarely obtain everything we want in a negotiation, we almost always achieve enough of our priority objectives to support whatever proposal emerges.

At every level of the Council, as well as at the European Council, the gradual enlargement of the EU over the years, from six countries to 27, has led to a necessary evolution in the way business is conducted. So-called "*tours de tables*", that is "table rounds" in which every Member State speaks on a particular topic, have necessarily become increasingly rare. Any discussion in which every Member State, and the European Commission, were to set out their position for, say, 10 minutes each, would take about 5 hours. While such "*tours de tables*" do still take place occasionally on exceptionally important topics, negotiators have become more agile and flexible in how and when they intervene. While each Member State retains the right to speak when it asks for the floor, effectiveness and influence have increasingly required strategy, selectivity and brevity in the interventions made.

While the negotiating process has necessarily become more complex and challenging as the European Union has enlarged, it is remarkable how the process has retained its efficiency and inclusivity. The fear that the EU could not enlarge successfully, because it would become unwieldy, has become a "dog that didn't bark." Further enlargement in the future will, of course, pose additional challenges.

Alliances

The development of alliances within the Council is essential to the protection and promotion of a Member State's interests.

Some groupings between Member States are of long standing, such as "BENELUX" that has brought together Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg since even long before the establishment of the EU itself.

Other alliances have developed over time based on, or limited to, shared interests in a broad policy area such as agriculture or taxation. Yet other temporary alliances relate to a particular proposal or even to a specific aspect of it.

Ireland works closely with other Member States or groups of Member States as appropriate, especially when shared priorities have been identified. We have taken the view that, while working particularly with likeminded countries makes sense, we should use every opportunity to influence every other Member State on every issue of importance to us. We are one of the few countries to have an Embassy in every other Member State and we strengthened our embassies in European capitals following Brexit, especially our most important ones.

Intergovernmental Conferences

Member States also negotiate from time to time in another context, namely at an Intergovernmental Conference, or “IGC”. The EU Treaties provide for an IGC to be convened if the Member States wish to change the European Union’s fundamental Treaties.

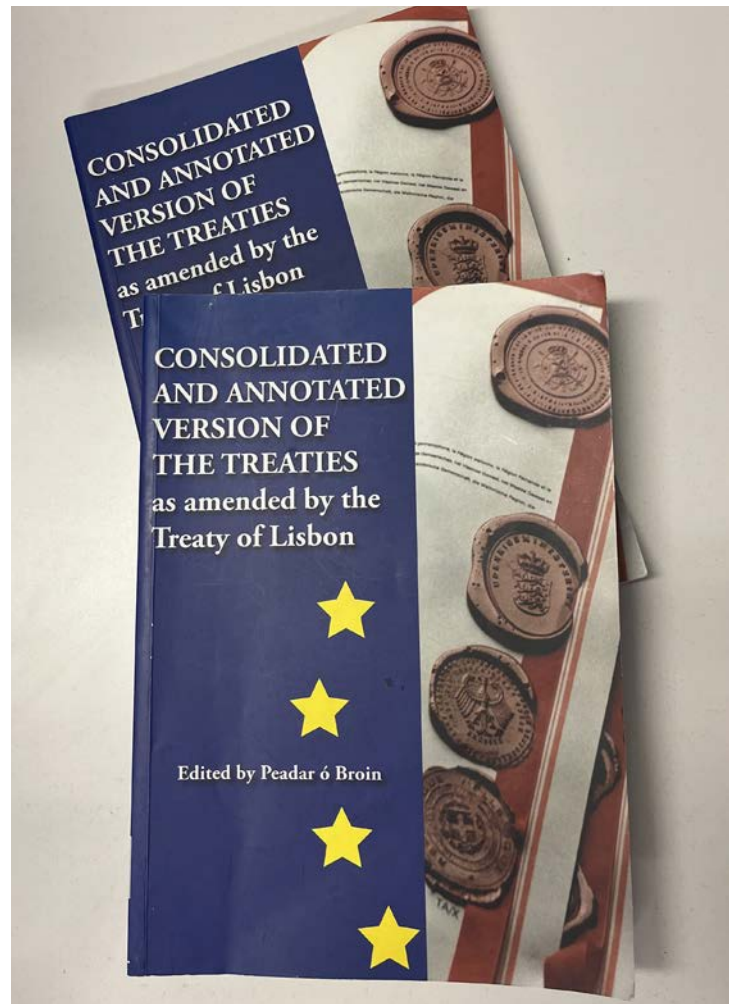
While the role of an IGC is defined in the EU Treaties, it is not in itself an EU institution, as reflected in the use of the word “intergovernmental”. Rather it is the format in which the Member States can go about changing the EU’s scope, procedures or institutions.

Every decision at an IGC requires *unanimity*. In a larger and more diverse European Union, this is increasingly hard to achieve. However, it means that no EU Treaty change can be imposed on a Member State. Each national government must not only approve whatever agreement emerges at the end of the negotiation in which it has participated, but must also then seek approval of the Treaty changes at national level. Depending on the constitutional requirements of each Member State, this will require either a referendum, as has been applied in Ireland for every significant change, or - in the case of most Member States - approval by the national parliament.

It is important to emphasise that the European Union can acquire no new competences without the agreement of every single Member State. All of its existing competences have been conferred on unanimously by the Member States.

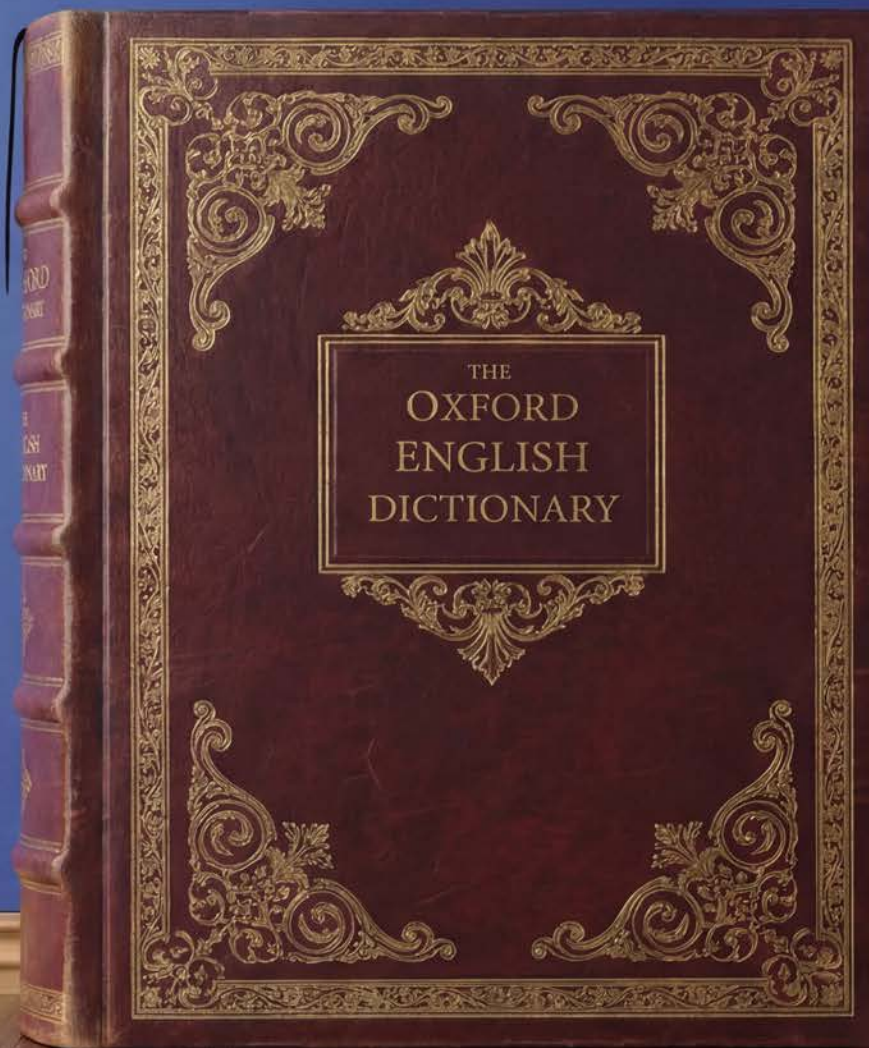
For significant Treaty change, an IGC will now typically be prepared by a European Convention, a large deliberative body in which not only national governments but also representatives of national parliaments are involved, as well as representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

Irish EU Presidencies have played a central role in shaping and brokering agreement at several previous IGCs.



4. The Dictionary

The Value of Words and Language



As my fourth object I have chosen a dictionary. The European Union is founded on the simple belief that words have meaning.

We live in a world in which words increasingly seem to have lost any meaning. For populists and autocrats, words have become mere playthings to advance their agendas and their interests. Lies are casually described as “alternative facts”. Straightforward truths are frequently dismissed as “fake news”.

In the European Union, with all its faults and weaknesses, words retain precise meanings and language still matters. Some might argue that the EU is overcomplicated and that it uses too many words. But Europe’s numerous written treaties, laws and declarations remain the subtle and necessary building blocks of peace and prosperity on our continent and for the assertion of our values in the wider world.



Source © Tatsiana Kuryanovich - Dreamstime.com

The European Union Treaties are somewhat akin to the national constitution of a country. They are the foundation on which and within which the EU institutions must operate. They represent both the necessary springboard for every activity that the EU wishes to undertake and the strict confines within which those activities must fall.

The Treaties, like any document, represent the coming together of words in a formulation that gives them meaning. When EU Treaties are being negotiated, every word, as I know from personal experience, is haggled over. When Treaties are agreed, every Member State signs up to every single word contained in them. Any “opt out” for a Member State on a particular policy must likewise be explicitly set out in the Treaty. When Treaties are being implemented, their words are binding.

EU *legislation*, likewise, is necessarily composed of words, fiercely contested while being negotiated, but collectively adhered to when they have become the law.

The European Union is sometimes accused of adopting too much detailed legislation; naturally it does not always get the balance right. However, a great swathe of European laws, far from *creating* overcomplicated rules, are designed to remove the complicated national rules that would otherwise hamper trade within the EU’s Single Market, which brings so much benefit to European businesses and citizens. It is often the Member States which, for domestic political consumption, criticise the complexity of European laws that they themselves had, in the first place, called on the Commission to bring forward.

The two principal types of EU legislation are “Directives” and “Regulations”. A Directive sets out a binding goal that individual countries must achieve but leaves some scope to each country to devise their own detailed laws to achieve that goal. An EU Regulation is a directly binding legislative act.

When the European Court of Justice rules on the legality of EU legislation, or on a Member State’s implementation of it, it is again words that are at issue; what they mean and how they are to be interpreted.

However, for the European Union, the importance of words goes well beyond formal legislation. It is the EU’s belief in the value of words, for example, that guides its declarations and statements, including on foreign policy and on its relations with international partners.

Words are not only embodied in eventual compromises but it is the respectful use of the spoken and written word that makes those compromises possible. That is how the EU generally does its business internally and externally. The “conclusions” adopted by each meeting of the high-level European Council, although not legally binding, are considered politically binding for the Union’s ongoing work.

This is utterly unlike the whimsical impulsiveness of, say, Trump’s America where words are often detached from any meaning.

Another important illustration of the value that the EU attaches to words is that it stands by the international Treaties that it has signed up to. That may seem like a self-evident thing to do, but around the world these days we see examples of treaties being disrespected as if the words written down in them, agreed and then ratified, no longer have meaning. The behaviour of President Trump’s administration offers the most obvious example in that regard but, some years ago, Brexit saw the Conservative Government in the UK explicitly indicating its intention to break a Treaty it had ratified.

The EU’s measured and essentially trustworthy use of language stands in contrast to the misuse of language by many, but of course no means all, international partners.

A further illustration of the respect that the European Union shows for language is that the national language of every Member State, including Ireland, is now an official language of the European Union. A very significant proportion of EU employees are therefore translators or interpreters. English, at the same time, has increasingly become the predominant language of EU negotiations.

The rule of law always requires respect for the sacredness of language.

The creative and precise use of language makes trust possible between nations. As we know from the subtle drafting of the Good Friday Agreement, it can replace misunderstanding and confrontation with reconciliation and peace. The European Union is a perfect illustration of the power of language.

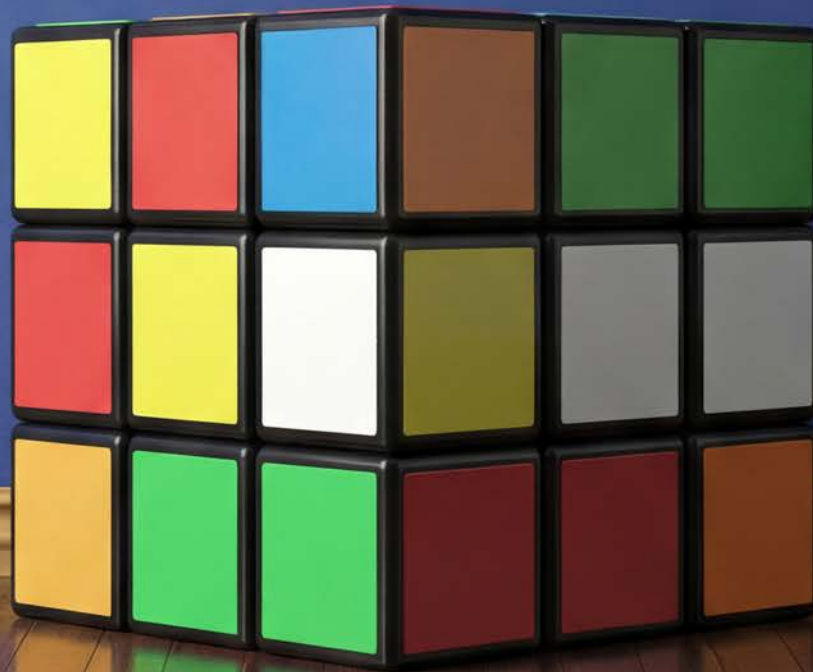
Seamus Heaney wrote “if you have the words, there’s always a chance that you’ll find the way”. The devaluation and misuse of words, on the other hand, carries enormous dangers.

“If you have the words,
there’s always a chance
that you’ll find the way”

Seamus Heaney

5. The Rubik's Cube

The EU Commission as a Complex Puzzle



Because of the European Commission's rich complexity, the object I have chosen to represent it is a Rubik's Cube. The Commission is very much a three-dimensional puzzle. The number of moves that can be made within the Commission seems infinitely variable.

However, unlike the popular puzzle, the Commission Rubik's Cube is one that no one will ever be able to fully solve. There is ultimately a logic to the Commission's unique kaleidoscope of motivations, identities and procedures. Its output usually reflects an impressive degree of coherence. However, the Commission is too complex for its subtle functioning and diverse dimensions ever to be fully rationalised and resolved, like a traditional Rubik's Cube, into a perfectly coordinated cube with each side a single coordinated colour.



The European Commission Building, Brussels

The Commission is the European institution that, more than any other, alongside the European Parliament, represents the European interest.

In contrast to the Council of Ministers, in which representatives of the Member States advance their national interests, while taking account of the European dimension; the European Commission promotes European interests, while taking account of the national dimension.

Role of the European Commission

The Commission plays an important role in *enforcing European law*. It is responsible for taking any Member State before the European Court of Justice (ECJ) if it believes that country is in breach of European law. For example, a Member State may fail to implement a binding European law or may do so incorrectly or belatedly. The Commission takes such action very frequently, against large and small Member States alike. Likewise, the Commission takes businesses and other entities before the ECJ if it believes they are in breach of EU law.

Importantly, the Commission alone is responsible for *proposing new laws*. It does so based on what it perceives to be the European interest and taking account, as appropriate, of any views expressed by the European Parliament, by the Council, by individual Member States or by representatives of civil society.

It *implements and manages EU policies and funding*. It has more than 30 Departments (“Directorates General”) and 30,000 staff that enable it to carry out those and other functions. That number of personnel, although large, is only a fraction of the total number of people employed by, say, the French postal service.

The Commission staff are headed by a Secretary General. Two of the recent Secretary Generals, David O’Sullivan and Catherine Day, have been Irish.



Former Secretaries General Catherine Day and David O’Sullivan

Importantly, the Commission has essentially *sole responsibility for managing the EU’s competition policy*, working in cooperation with national competition authorities. Its responsibility is to ensure that all companies operating in Europe compete equally and fairly on their merits.

In that context, it is responsible, for example, for approving or rejecting certain proposed mergers and for determining whether “state aids” given by individual Member States to their own national companies may be distorting fair competition across the EU.

Unlike in most other areas, in which the Commission proposes and the Council and Parliament then decide, the Commission is empowered by the Treaties to act alone on these particularly sensitive and contentious competition matters. This is in order to ensure that the pursuit of objective European interests in relation to fair competition is not undermined by the special pleading by, and horse-trading between, Member States that would otherwise inevitably predominate.

The Commission plays an important role in *representing the EU internationally*, including by playing the leading role on the EU’s trade policy.

Membership of the Commission

The Commission has 27 members, called “Commissioners”, one nominated by each Member State.

There has long been a debate about whether to prioritise the *representativity* and *legitimacy* of the Commission, by ensuring that there is a Commissioner from each Member State, or whether to prioritise *efficiency* by appointing a Commission with a smaller number of members that would be more compatible with streamlined decision-making and with the number of substantive portfolios.

Some years ago, the Member States designed a possible Commission with the number of its members smaller than the number of Member States, but in which the right to nominate Commissioners would rotate on a strictly equal and legally-binding basis between the Member States. However, this solution was never implemented, and the Member States have, for now and for the foreseeable future, come down in favour of the present arrangement, namely one Commissioner nominated by each Member State.

Independence of the Commission

Commissioners are nominated by individual Member States, in consultation with the Commission President, who then selects a team of Commissioners and allocates portfolios to each of them.

Commissioners, however, despite a frequent public misperception in that regard, do *not* represent their own Member State. Each Commissioner is obliged to take an oath (“solemn declaration”) before the ECJ in which they solemnly undertake to respect the EU Treaties, to be completely independent in carrying out their responsibilities in the general interest of the European Union, and neither to seek nor take any instruction from any Government or from any other body. Officials of the European Commission are similarly bound to be independent in the conduct of their employment.

However, every European Commissioner and official can, at the same time, bring a national perspective to bear on their job. This is subtly, but vitally, different from advancing narrow national interests. The Commission, like the EU as a whole, aims to reflect the aspirations and cultures of 27 diverse Member States. It is more effective in that regard to the extent that diversity is reflected in its own make-up.

Irish employees of the Commission, for example, spend most of their time on issues that have little or no specific Irish dimension. However, they can, occasionally, bring arguments to bear within the Commission that may help to vindicate a specific national concern. They can only do this with any hope of being listened to if they have convincing *objective* arguments to put forward. It would be foolish and counterproductive for European officials to argue that something must be done simply for reasons of the national interest of their country of origin. However, they can, when appropriate, point out the unforeseen consequences of a proposal, argue for consistency, highlight sensitivities, assert relevant precedent, and where necessary, act as a counterweight to other national perspectives.

Rational argument is more central to deliberations in the Commission than in other European institutions in which the laudable pursuit of compromise is necessarily paramount.

Decision-making in the EU Commission

Two important factors shape the European Commission’s decision-making process.

First, all decisions of the Commission are *collective decisions* taken by the Commission college as a whole, that is by all 27 members of the Commission. The Commission meets around the Commission table every week to make the most important decisions.

The work of the Commission college is prepared by the Commissioners’ “cabinets”, or private offices. Each Commissioner has a small “cabinet” of 6 or 7 officials, necessarily comprising several nationalities. These “cabinets” work closely with and directly for their Commissioner. They are separate from the much larger Directorates General, somewhat similar to Government departments, that also work for their responsible Commissioner or Commissioners. The 27 “chef de cabinets” (“heads of cabinet”) meet in advance of every meeting of the Commission. Meetings of ordinary “cabinet” members take place more frequently.

The Directorates General are the repositories of expertise in all areas of the Commission's responsibility and play the central role in initiating, shaping and implementing the Commission's agenda.

Only the most important or disputed issues are discussed and agreed at the Commission's weekly meeting. However, the important *collective* nature of all of its decisions, which are far too numerous to be the subject of discussion by Commissioners, is maintained by many issues being "noddled through" without discussion at the Commission's weekly meeting; or by the extensive use of "written procedures" whereby the final version of proposals agreed at a lower level are circulated to all Commissioners, each of whom then has the opportunity to block the proposal and insist on its further consideration by the College of Commissioners. The Commission as a whole can also agree to delegate certain precisely defined decisions to a specified Commissioner or group of Commissioners.

The second factor that shapes the Commission's decision-making is that every decision (apart from those relating to senior personnel appointments) can be taken by *simple majority*. This is quite different from the Council of Ministers where decisions require either *unanimity* or *qualified majority* support. Since, in principle, the support of only 14 of the 27 Commissioners is required for a proposal to pass, it is far easier to reach decisions within the Commission.

The *availability* of this simple majority voting in the Commission means that, in practice, matters very rarely actually need to be put to a vote. Since it normally becomes obvious at a relatively early stage of the institution's deliberations that there are an insufficient number of Commissioners to block a proposal, and since there is normally no benefit to be gained from the minority fighting a losing battle, an overwhelming majority of proposals go through the Commission by consensus. Commissioners who are less than happy with a proposal tend to focus on seeking helpful amendments rather than pushing the matter towards a doomed vote.

The Extra Dimension of the Rubik's Cube

I have always seen the internal workings of the Commission as having an extra dimension in comparison with the other European Union institutions. Like a Rubik's Cube, the Commission's decision-making processes have an additional third dimension, namely, the need to understand *motivation*.

In the Council of Ministers, there is rarely any doubt about motivation. A Portuguese representative, for example, sits behind the Portuguese nameplate and represents the interests of the Portuguese Government. Of course, the definition of those national interests may sometimes be complex and the negotiating strategy sometimes difficult to read. However, the motivation is clear.

In the Commission, the extra dimension constantly comes into play.



I worked as a “cabinet” member with two Irish European Commissioners. When the member of another cabinet spoke at a meeting of the 27 cabinets there was always, in my mind, a need to understand the motivation. Was the colleague representing their Commissioner’s view (the most obvious possibility)? Or their Directorate General’s view (not necessarily identical to that of their Commissioner)? Or a national angle or sensitivity? Or their personal view? Or were they perhaps reflecting an informal deal they had made on another issue with someone else around the table? Or could they occasionally also have one eye on the advancement of their career?

This challenge of identifying motivation reflects the role of the Commission at the heart of the exciting complex machinery of the European Union. The Commission, more than the other EU institutions, is the fulcrum of the tension between European and national interests. It is arguably the most original element of all the institutional arrangements established by the Treaties.

The EU’s institutions were designed to embody the unique nature of the European Union, namely a Union of 27 sovereign democratic countries that have chosen freely to pool carefully defined aspects of their sovereignty. The Commission, an independent body designed to advance the shared European interests of all the Member States, while respecting their independence, is unique in the history of relations between nations.

That complexity at the very heart of the Commission, which bears much of the weight of the EU’s nature and ambitions, is to be celebrated. Because of its complexity, the Commission’s way of doing business is, perhaps surprisingly, more “competitive” than that of either the Council of Ministers (see Chapter/Object 3) or the European Parliament (see Chapter/Object 7). In the Commission, starkly competing drafts of the same proposal often vie with each other over many months across the vast machinery of the Commission. Information is power. The relations between different parts of the Commission can sometimes seem more like confrontation than cooperation. However, the dedication and ingenuity of generations of Commissioners and Commission officials, and quality of their output, has robustly stood the test of time.

The Commission is a remarkably “open” organisation - open to businesses, to civil society groups and to other interest groups, far more open than most national civil services including, say, the Irish civil service. It is willing to listen and explain. In my years working in Brussels, I heard many people disagreeing with the Commission, but I don’t recall anyone complaining that they hadn’t got a reasonable hearing.

As the Size of the European Commission Grows

As new Member States have joined the European Union, and with the principle of each country nominating a Commissioner being maintained, the size of the European Commission has grown, now comprising 27 Commissioners.

This has had a number of consequences.

Since the number of truly substantive portfolios is now significantly fewer than the number of Commissioners, some Commissioners are now necessarily allocated limited responsibilities that are somewhat less weighty than each Commissioner would generally have received when there were fewer members of the Commission.

Moreover, since the size of the Commission is now much larger than would be ideal from a purely managerial point of view, the President of the Commission, in order to ensure the effectiveness and coherence of its work, appoints a number of Vice Presidents, each of whom is allocated overall responsibility for the work of several other Members of the Commission. While each Commissioner is still a full member of the Commission college, this hierarchy of responsibilities has been a growing feature.

European Commission Structure



Source © European Union. Valid as of April 2026

Perhaps most importantly, in order to counteract the potential unwieldiness of such a large body, it has been necessary for more control and tighter coordination to be exercised by the President. The current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has grabbed that bull by the horns effectively and more forcefully than her predecessors.

As the EU continues to enlarge, the size of the Commission will continue to be an issue. It seems likely that the unwieldiness of representativity will continue to be favoured over the efficiency of streamlining.



Source - Chapter 0: Staying the course - The EU in 2024 - European Commission

6. The Persian Rug

The Beautiful Imperfection of the EU



Handmade Persian rugs often deliberately contain an imperfect design element, referred to as a “Persian Flaw”. Such imperfections are frequently seen as a mark of authenticity and quality. It is said that Persian rugmakers, like Islamic artists, include a deliberate imperfection in their designs to reflect their belief that only Allah can make something that is perfect .

I have chosen a Persian rug as one of the 12 objects to represent the European Union because the EU is also necessarily imperfect. Like a Persian rug, the EU is an example of beautiful imperfection.

The European Union is self-evidently flawed. It is essential to recognise that because it is the necessary starting point for any realistic appraisal of the EU and for remedying its weaknesses.

Moreover, not to accept the EU for what it is, “warts and all”, would be to set it up to be judged by impossible standards. Every institution in the world is imperfect - every government, every parliament, every business, every organisation, every family. The European Union and its institutions, despite their remarkable strengths and successes, are no different.

The EU and its Member States make big mistakes and small ones.

They blundered through the early phase of the Eurozone debt crisis, for example, and were initially slow in responding to the Covid crisis when it struck. The EU’s collective response to the situation in Gaza was entirely inadequate.

Moreover, in the decisions that they take every day and the positions they adopt, the EU institutions are no more immune to human error than anyone else. Misjudgements, arrogance, naivety and self-interest can all play their part as they do in all politics. It is part of human nature.

However, it is worth considering, in mitigation, four particular challenges that the European Union must face. That is not to deny its mistakes but to place them in context.

The *first* challenge, most obviously, is that the EU consists of 27 independent democratic countries, each of which has its own perspective, priorities and legal entitlements under the Treaties. The European Union, unlike an individual country, must therefore not only identify the best course of action to pursue but also get 27 Member States, or in some cases at least a qualified majority of them, to agree to that course of action. This is an enormous challenge that usually involves significant delays, and often leads to imperfect outcomes and sometimes to failure.

The unanimity required for foreign policy decisions, for example, often makes it impossible for the EU to speak as one and to act effectively, the Middle East situation being an obvious recent example (see Chapter/Object 10). It has also complicated its response to Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, overall, given the ambitious EU experiment in the pooling of sovereignty between many independent democracies, an experiment unique both in today’s world and in history, what is remarkable is not Europe’s significant failures but rather its remarkable achievements.

The *second* challenge specific to Europe’s decision-making is the complex interaction that is necessary between the three EU institutions that provide the delicate equilibrium required by the European project; the Council of Ministers (see Chapter/Object 3), the European Commission (see Chapter/Object 5), and the European Parliament (see Chapter/Object 7) .

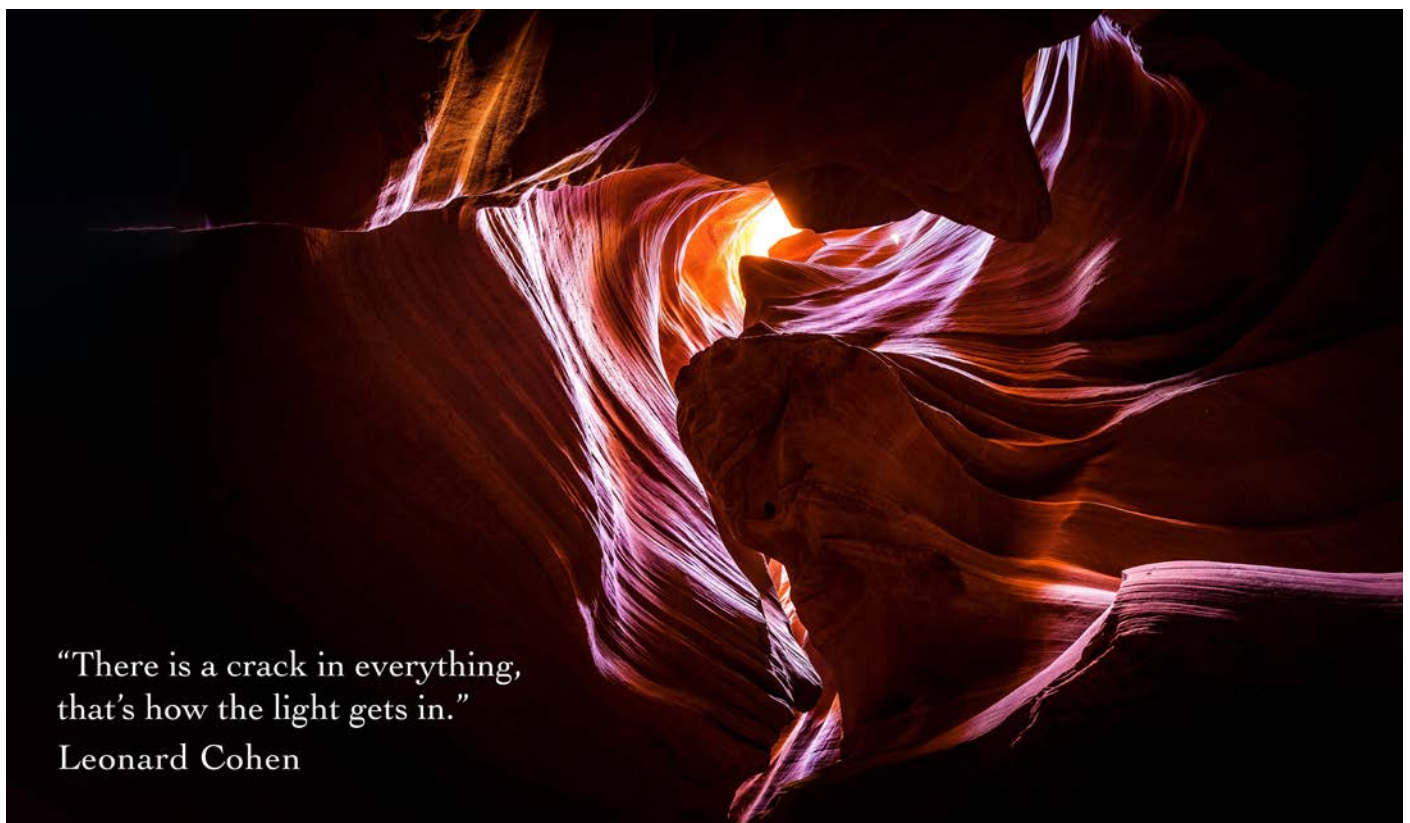
Third, the EU can only act strictly *within* the competences that the Member States have given to it under the Treaties. In the health area, for example, the bulk of competences remain at national level. Thus, in

responding to the Covid crisis, which the EU did effectively after some initial stumbles, it had significantly limited levers at its disposal.

The *fourth* and obvious challenge that the EU faces, not one unique to Europe, is the extraordinary complexity of some of the issues it must confront, issues to which the answers will always be imperfect compromises. An obvious case in point is how to handle migration, an enormous challenge that is set to grow. People will propose, as is their right, simple answers, ranging from putting a stop to all migration to removing effective barriers to it. In this, as in other cases, the EU has to deal, not with ideological perfection or political posturing, but with a complex reality, and against a background in which Member States are sharply divided and many of the competences to act remain at national level.

Like a Persian rug, the European Union is, in many respects, imperfect. It has weaknesses that should be remedied. It makes mistakes that should be avoided or rectified. It should not, however, be held to impossible standards.

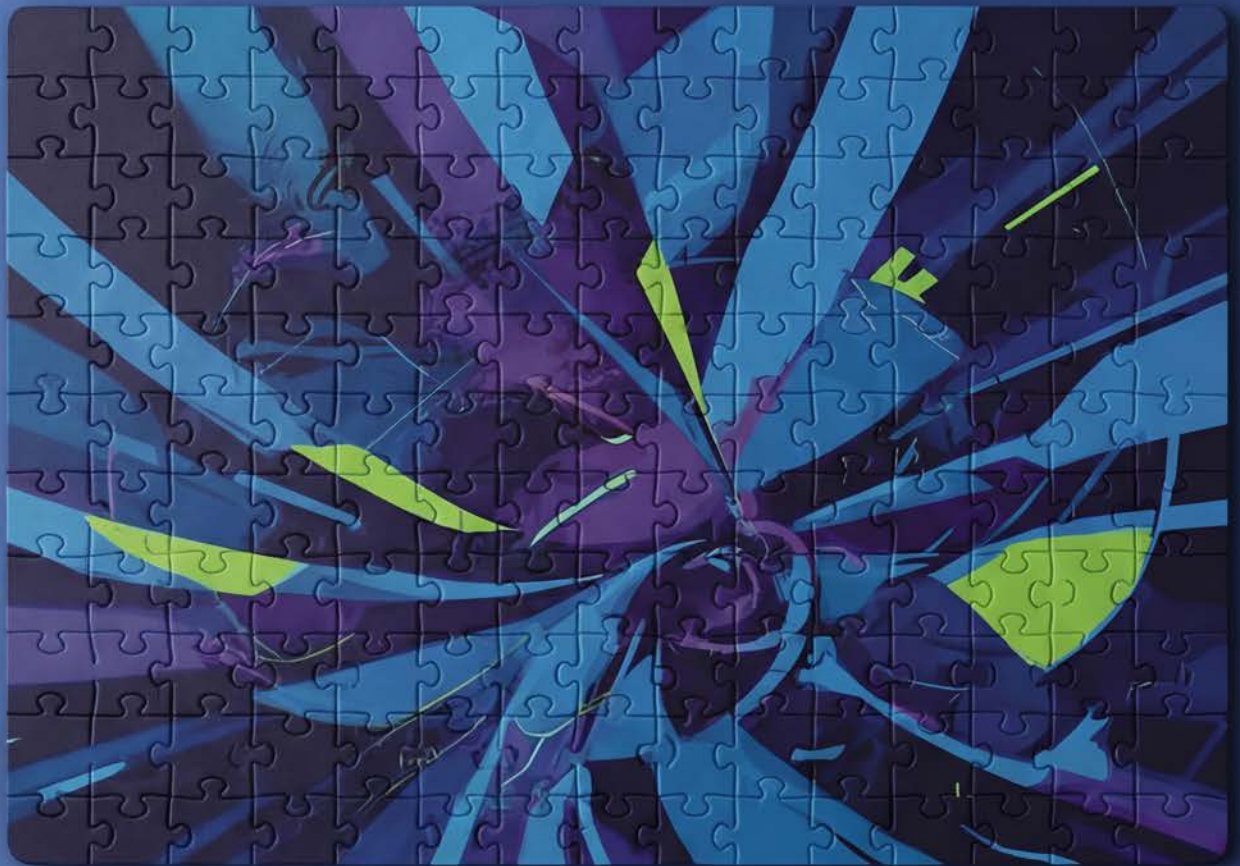
Perhaps we should take some reassurance from Leonard Cohen's observation: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."



"There is a crack in everything,
that's how the light gets in."
Leonard Cohen

7. The Jigsaw

Many Pieces, One Parliament



A suitable object to represent the European Parliament would be a jigsaw puzzle. If the Parliament were disassembled into all its constituent pieces, it would be difficult to see how that multitude of diverse pieces could be reassembled to constitute a coherent overall picture. Yet, with all its intricacies and diversity, the European Parliament jigsaw does work.

It stands out as the only significant democratic, directly-elected supranational parliament in the history of the human species.



Source © European Union 2018 - European Parliament. (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives CreativeCommons licenses creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

The European Parliament is an essential part of the democratic nature of the European Union. Democracy at European level is essential since, with the agreement of all Member States, that is the level at which many decisions are now taken. However, it is by no means the only important democratic element in the operation of the European Union since the Council and European Council are composed of representatives of the 27 Member States who are answerable to their electorates.

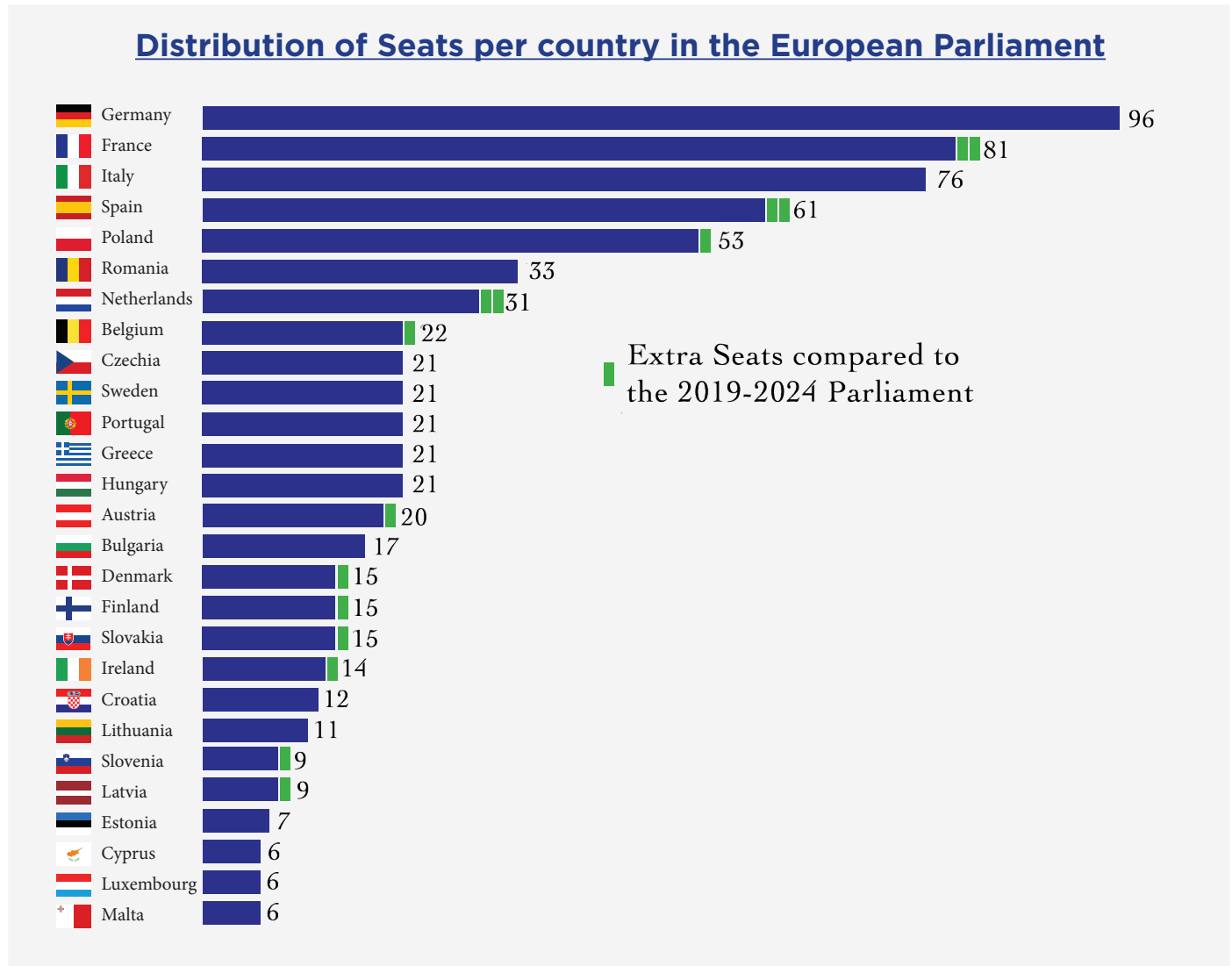
Composition

The European Parliament has 720 members, usually referred to as “MEPs”, elected by the citizens of the 27 Member States once every five years. The most recent election was in 2024. Each Member State uses its own electoral system in that election. Ireland uses the Single Transferable Vote system as in our national elections.

The electorate, in addition to being spread across 27 countries, is the second largest democratic electorate in the world, after India.

Each Member State is allocated seats in the Parliament based on its population size. However, the population calculation is weighted in favour of smaller Member States: the smaller a country, the fewer citizens are required to elect an MEP. Or, to put it another way, the smaller a country’s population, the higher the influence per voter in electing members of the European Parliament.

Germany, with 96 MEPs, has the largest number. The three smallest Member States have 6 each. Ireland elects 14.



Political Groups

Like the other major EU institutions (the Council of Ministers and the Commission, see Chapters/Objects 3 and 5 respectively), the European Parliament reflects in its own way the balance between European and national interests. MEPs naturally attach importance to the interests of their own home Member State, whose citizens elected them and for whom they will be accountable at the next election. At the same time, most of them, some more than others, are aware that they also have a significant responsibility to the wider European interest.

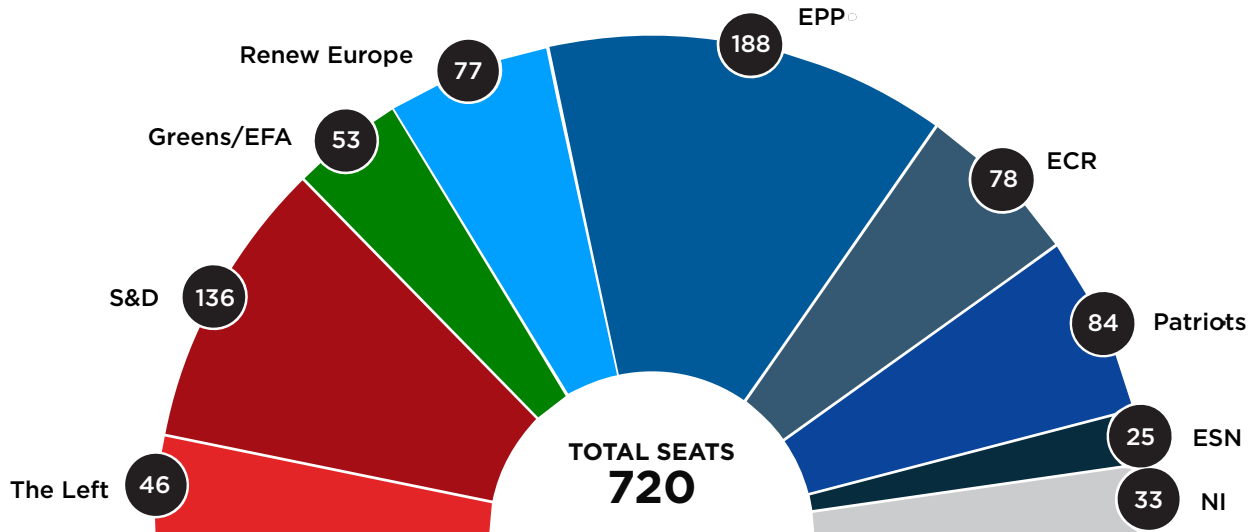
However, MEPs also have an additional, hugely important, allegiance, namely to their Political Groups. Members of the European Parliament organise themselves not into national factions but into ideological groups.

There are currently eight political groups in the Parliament (as well as a small number of independent MEPs). These Groups broadly reflect the ideological differences that are thrashed out at national level in national elections.

The principal advantage of belonging to a Political Group in the European Parliament is that it increases an MEP's potential influence, given that majorities in the Parliament depend very significantly on what deals are negotiated between the Political Groups and on how they vote. Groups are also accorded some procedural privileges, some financial support, and a staff allocation.

Currently, the two largest Political Groups are the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). Eurosceptic parties and parties tending towards the far-right increased their representation in the Parliament in the 2024 election. This in turn is reflected in the composition of the Parliament’s Political Groups. However, less extreme and pro-European MEPs of the left, centre and right, and the Political Groups to which they are affiliated, still maintain what is, for the most part, a majority in the European Parliament .

The European Parliament 2024-2029 - Seats



Irish MEPs in the European Parliament, 2024-2029

Dublin	Midlands-North West	South
<p>Barry Andrews European Parliament group: RE National party: Fianna Fáil Constituency: Dublin First elected to the European Parliament: 2020 (After the post-Brexit seat redistribution)</p> 	<p>Nina Carberry European Parliament group: EPP National party: Fine Gael Constituency: Midlands-North-West First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 	<p>Kathleen Funchion European Parliament group: LEFT National party: Sinn Féin Constituency: South First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 
<p>Lynn Boylan European Parliament group: LEFT National party: Sinn Féin Constituency: Dublin First elected to the European Parliament: 2024 (Previously served as MEP 2014-2019)</p> 	<p>Barry Cowen European Parliament group: RE National party: Independent Constituency: Midlands-North-West First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 	<p>Billy Kelleher European Parliament group: RE National party: Fianna Fáil Constituency: South First elected to the European Parliament: 2019</p> 
<p>Regina Doherty European Parliament group: EPP National party: Fine Gael Constituency: Dublin First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 	<p>Luke 'Ming' Flanagan European Parliament group: LEFT National party: Independent Constituency: Midlands-North-West First elected to the European Parliament: 2014</p> 	<p>Seán Kelly European Parliament group: EPP National party: Fine Gael Constituency: South First elected to the European Parliament: 2009</p> 
<p>Aodhán Ó Riordáin European Parliament group: S&D National party: Labour Party Constituency: Dublin First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 	<p>Ciarán Mullooly European Parliament group: RE National party: Independent Ireland Constituency: Midlands-North-West First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 	<p>Michael McNamara European Parliament group: RE National party: Independent Constituency: South First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 
	<p>Maria Walsh European Parliament group: EPP National party: Fine Gael Constituency: Midlands-North-West First elected to the European Parliament: 2019</p> 	<p>Cynthia Ní Mhurchú European Parliament group: RE National party: Fianna Fáil Constituency: South First elected to the European Parliament: 2024</p> 

European Political Parties

The Political Groups in the European Parliament mirror, to a significant extent, the “European Political Parties” that are organised outside and beyond the European Parliament, at broad European level. Through those “European Political Parties”, there are regular meetings, outside formal EU structures, between representatives of those national governments that share a political ideology.

For example, those Heads of State or Governments whose national parties belong to a particular European Political Party meet in advance of every European Council. While such meetings are of increasing significance, those ideological political affiliations are still less important within the Council and European Council than the pursuit of national agendas. By contrast, in the European Parliament, affiliation to a Political Group tends to be the predominant allegiance.

How the Parliament Operates

The European Parliament elects its own President. The President presides over its plenary sessions, ensures the Parliament’s rules are adhered to, and represents the Parliament in its dealings with the other EU institutions and with the wider world. The President is assisted by 14 Vice Presidents who constitute the Parliament’s Bureau.

The Parliament establishes a few dozen Standing Committees, each covering an area of the European Union’s responsibilities. The Parliament’s Agriculture Committee, for example, examines agricultural issues; its Committee on Budgets, budgetary matters, and so on. The composition of each Committee reflects proportionately the overall political make-up, as between Political Groups, of the Parliament.

The Committees develop expertise in every area of the Union’s competences and prepare the work and eventual resolutions of the Parliament’s plenary sessions. Committees appoint a “rapporteur” for each significant report they are working on. These “rapporteurs”, each working in their own areas, shape much of the Parliament’s output.

Individual MEPs have significant potential to influence the European Parliament, often more influence than individual backbenchers in national parliaments. MEPs can do this through their role as “rapporteurs” on particular issues, through their influence within their Political Groups and, sometimes, through their personal standing in plenary.

John Hume, although the only SDLP MEP at the time, was one of the most influential members of the European Parliament. Pat Cox, elected as an independent MEP in 1994, went on to become the President of the European Parliament. The current President comes from the Member State with the smallest population, Malta. The point worth noting is that an MEP who is intelligent, knowledgeable and politically astute can exercise real influence. An MEP who prioritises a high domestic profile is likely to have no real influence whatever.

Location of the European Parliament

Like the other institutions, the Parliament has its own Secretariat composed of permanent officials who support the work of Committees and of the Parliament as a whole.

The European Parliament faces the awkward challenge of organising its work across three cities. Its regular monthly plenary sessions, attended in principle by all MEPs, take place in Strasbourg, while several additional plenary sessions take place in Brussels. The Parliament’s Committees generally meet in Brussels and its Secretariat is spread between Brussels and Luxembourg.

The European Parliament itself has pressed for this merry-go-round to be resolved but the Member States have been unable to resolve the issue because of the intractable sensitivities of the Member States most concerned – France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. If the European Union were a “business”, a single location for the Parliament would have been settled long ago. The EU is not, however, a business but a delicate and complex experiment in which the sensitivities of individual countries must be respected.

No other EU institution faces a similar geographical challenge, although the Council of Ministers, which normally meets in Brussels, meets - for similar reasons of historic national sensitivities - in Luxembourg in April, June and October.

The Parliament’s Role and Influence in the European Union

The European Parliament’s most important role is in the *legislative* area, in relation to which the Parliament is assigned distinct roles on different matters.

Its greatest legislative powers are under the *co-decision procedure* in which the Parliament acts a *co-legislator* with the Council of Ministers. Following a complex negotiation between those two institutions, in which the Commission is also involved as the initiator of the legislation, both the Parliament and Council must approve an identical legal text before it becomes law. The co-decision procedure applies to a wide number of areas that have expanded with each EU Treaty, including now the internal market, the environment, and agriculture.

In areas where the *consultation procedure* applies, the Parliament is just consulted for its opinion.

The *consent procedure* gives the Parliament a veto over certain acts.

The European Parliament also has a highly influential role in the negotiation of the *EU’s budget*. It is now on an equal footing with the Council of Ministers in the annual budgetary procedure. Moreover, it must give its consent to the Multiannual Financial Framework that shapes the EU’s long-term budgetary planning.

The Parliament has another important role in relation to *scrutinising the EU’s executive*, that is the European Commission. Parliament must at the outset approve the European Council’s nominee for President of the European Commission and subsequently the appointment of the Commission as a whole. It also has the right, voting by a strengthened majority, to censure the European Commission, thus forcing its resignation.

The European Parliament has over many years been skilful and determined in exercising these and other competences. Individual Commissioners have, for example, been withdrawn between their initial nomination and approval of the Commission as a whole due to objections by the European Parliament. While the Parliament has never passed a motion of censure on the Commission as a whole, its imminent threat to do so in 1999 forced the resignation of the Commission led by Jacques Santer. The *threat* of a *possible* censure motion plays an important part on an ongoing basis in the strategy of Commission Presidents and in relations between the two institutions.

The European Parliament can put oral or written questions to the Commission, the Council and the President of the European Council. Its role in relation to the European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy is limited although it must be consulted on certain key aspects.

The European Parliament also organises dialogue with national parliaments.

A jigsaw therefore seems to be the most appropriate symbol for the European Parliament which, amongst the EU's many complex institutions, is probably the most complex of all. With 720 members from 27 countries, with its eight political groups, with its several dozen Committees, and with its work scattered across three countries, it is remarkable that it functions at all, let alone with an effectiveness that strengthens the democratic nature of the European Union and very much keeps both the Commission and Council on their toes.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, the various pieces that make up the Parliament seem impossibly fragmented; and yet, month by month as the Parliament plenary meets, they are brought together into an efficient and coherent whole.



8. The Safe

Protecting EU Values



Important values lie at the heart of the European Union. I have therefore chosen a safe to symbolise those values because of the importance of protecting them.

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) summarises the values of the European Union:

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

In 2009, the European Union adopted a Charter of Fundamental Rights designed to further promote human rights in the EU. The Charter brings together many rights that had already been set out in the EU Treaties, in the European Convention on Human Rights, in the national constitutions of Member States and in the case law of the European Court of Justice. It must be respected by the European Institutions and by the Member States when they are implementing European law.

The EU’s commitment to its fundamental values is not limited to the aims set out in the EU Treaty or to the aspirations contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Aims and aspirations are the easy bit. After all, many authoritarian countries and dubious democracies around the world pay lip service, including sometimes explicitly in their constitutions, to values and rights that they do not have the slightest intention of respecting. Governments that lock up their citizens without justification often pontificate about human rights. Countries that invade their neighbours still speak, without apparent irony, about their commitment to international law.

The European Union attaches real importance, in practice as well as in theory, to respect for the values on which the common European endeavour is founded, including respect for human rights.

The European Commission is responsible for ensuring that the EU Treaties, in all their dimensions, are respected. The European Court of Justice is the ultimate arbiter in guaranteeing that that is the case.



Source - Adobe Stock, Credit olrat - The European Court of Justice in Luxembourg

Many specific EU policies are directed towards the protection and promotion of its values, including for example:

- Promoting non-discrimination and equal treatment on the basis of sex, race, or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation
- Promoting freedom of expression
- Empowering civil society as well as EU citizens and consumers

The European Union also prioritises its values in its external relations. Article 3 of the TEU provides that, in its relations with the wider world, the EU will contribute *“to the eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for principles of the United Nations Charter.”* Article 21 of the TEU refers further to the principles inspiring the Union’s external action, including democracy, the rule of law, and the universality and indivisibility of human rights.



EU and UN flags flying together

Thus the European Union, and its Member States, work hard both to promote their shared values internally and to project them externally.

As indicated in Chapter/Object 6, the EU doesn’t always get things right and sometimes makes mistakes, often because many specific actions, including in the foreign policy area, require the unanimous agreement of all Member States, or because of failures at national level.

However, there can be little doubt that there are few countries in the world where citizens can be as confident about the protection of their rights and the rule of law as they are in the European Union.

Similarly, there are few international actors who could claim to be as committed as the European Union to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law, or as effective in doing so. The EU’s inadequate response to Gaza represents a serious anomaly.

The European Union's values face very significant challenges of which the following *three* stand out.

First, *internally*, a few Member States have challenged the functioning of their own national democracy, the independence of their judiciary and the domestic rule of law. Thus they risk undermining the EU's fundamental values and purpose. It is not easy for the EU as a whole to act in such cases. Paradoxically, its attachment to the rule of law makes it difficult for the EU to take decisive action against threats to the rule of law in an individual Member State. Given its attachment to the rule of law, the European Union has no alternative to respecting its own complex and binding decision-making procedures that often provide for no easy solution. It is also aware that many of the citizens of the countries in question remain attached to the EU and its values. Patience has, however, been wearing increasingly thin, notably with the Hungarian Government. However, the defeat of Prime Minister Orbán in the recent general election and the prospect of a new and constructive relationship between Hungary and its EU partners is very encouraging.

Second, as regards the *further enlargement* of the EU, protection of the EU's values are an essential consideration. Although the Union has coped well with its enlargement thus far from six to 27 countries, the accession of more countries will pose huge further challenges, especially at a time of significant instability on the European continent. There are currently ten countries involved in an accession process for possible eventual membership of the EU. The EU's values represent one of the principal attractions of EU membership for the countries concerned, and the EU, for its part, will attach particular priority to ensuring that any new Member State is totally committed to and able to deliver on the EU's values, including the rule of law.

Third, as regards *external action*, the EU is bound by its Treaties and rules to act unanimously. One Member State alone, legally, can block decisions designed to reflect and implement Europe's values. This was seen, for example, in the Hungarian Government's foot-dragging on measures in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The unanimity required for foreign policy decisions also means that a minority of Member States have been able to block the European Union's assertion of its values in relation to the war crimes and gross abuse of human rights in Gaza.

Europe's values are its most precious commodity. Without them, Europe could still perhaps continue to function after a fashion and to promote certain practical interests abroad. However, without its values, Europe would lose its purpose and direction as well as the support of its citizens. The world would be a poorer and more dangerous place.

Both outside and inside the European Union, there are those who despise Europe's values and work to undermine them. A strong safe to keep them in is therefore a symbol of the European Union. The safe is, of course, only a symbol of safe keeping. Europe's values are not to be hidden away but to be asserted confidently and proudly.



EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice

9. The Chair

Presiding over European Institutions



Presiding over European institutions, and over the plethora of European meetings that take place every day, is a crucial element in how the European Union functions.

I have therefore chosen a chair to represent the importance of presidents and chairpersons in the European Union.



Source © European Union 2025 - European Parliament. (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Creative Commons licenses creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) From left to right: António Costa, President of the European Council; Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission; and Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament -

Arguably, the most important individual job in the European Union is that of President of the European Commission. The Commission (see Chapter/Object 5) plays a central role in the EU. Its President must chair and lead a diverse and potentially unwieldy Commission college, inspire and manage a large bureaucracy, handle tricky relations with each of the 27 Member States and with the other EU institutions, represent the European Union in the wider world (working alongside the President of the European Council), and play a significant role of leadership in the European Union as a whole.

The abilities and effectiveness of the President of the Commission are thus of immense importance. As Europe has become larger and more complex, and its challenges greater, the case for a forceful, hands-on leader of the Commission has grown. Its current President, Ursula von der Leyen, now in her second five-year term of office, is a former German government minister. She probably exercises a firmer grip on the institution, and on the other individual Commissioners, than any of her predecessors. Her international profile as the principal international face of the EU has evolved commensurately.

The *President of the European Council* leads and presides over the meetings and work of the European Council comprising the Heads of State or Government of the 27 Member States (see Chapter 3). The role is currently held by António Costa, a former Prime Minister of Portugal. The Council Secretariat, which services the work of the Council of Ministers and the European Council, works to him. Together with the Commission President, he represents the EU externally at the highest level. Although the European Council President has a less dominant role within his institution than the Commission President has within hers, he can nevertheless exercise significant influence.

Given the shared roles of the Commission and European Council in driving forward the work of the EU, as well as their joint role in representing it externally, it is of particular importance that the working relationship between the Presidents of the two institutions is a good one. While the two current Presidents work well together, this has certainly not always been the case in the past.

The European Parliament also elects its own President. The present incumbent is Roberta Metsola from Malta. Assisted by a Bureau of Vice Presidents, she chairs its plenary sessions, represents it in its dealings with the Presidents of other institutions, manages its Secretariat and ensures that its rules are respected (see Chapter/Object 7).

Another important role in chairing meetings falls to the “High Representative” (full title: High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council that brings together the Foreign Ministers of the 27 Member States. The High Representative is also a Vice President of the European Commission and the chief coordinator of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. The current High Representative is Kaja Kallas, a former Prime Minister of Estonia.

The appointments to the four positions described above are treated as a political “package” to ensure, insofar as possible, an overall balance. Whereas the President of the Parliament is formally elected by Parliament, the other three positions are filled, according to complex procedures, by the European Council and Parliament working together. The overall balance aimed for in the four appointments has many dimensions: a balance between large and small Member States (three of the four positions are currently held by smaller Member States); between left and right (the current incumbents represent a variety of political affiliations); male/female (three of the current four are women); new Member States and old; northern and southern Member States. Perceived national interests also plays a big part in the appointments.

While the primary requirement for each appointment should obviously be competence in all its dimensions, this can sometimes be partially lost sight of in the horse-trading necessitated by the need to shape a balanced package of appointments with so many variables. The process is complex, subtle and democratic but the outcome may well be far from perfect. It is partly due to good fortune that the four current office holders are widely perceived as being competent and suited for their roles.

Another important aspect of chairmanship in the European Union is the *rotating national Presidency*. Each Member State in turn, according to a system of strict rotation, holds the six-month Presidency. It will be Ireland’s turn to hold the EU Presidency again from July to December 2026. As the need has grown for long-term coherence in an enlarging Union, the role of the rotating national Presidency has been somewhat diluted. For example, two of the roles outlined above that are now filled by longer-term incumbents, namely the chairing of the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council, used to fall to the rotating Presidency.

However, the Presidency is still significant in helping to drive forward the European Union’s agenda. It chairs nine of the ten formations of the Council of Ministers (the exception, as explained above, being the Foreign Affairs Council), as well as the Council’s many preparatory bodies, including the influential Committee of Permanent Representatives (which meets in two formations, Coreper II and Coreper I). The Presidency also represents the Council in many of its dealings with the other EU institutions, notably in seeking to negotiate agreement with the European Parliament and Commission on legislative proposals.

Each Presidency draws up in advance a programme of work. That programme is not plucked out of thin air. Rather a Presidency assesses the European Union’s ongoing priorities and challenges, and tries to shape those into a coherent and agreed set of collective ambitions for its six-month period. Each Presidency brings its own energy but is at the same time a link in a coherent chain. Continuity is strengthened by the fact that each Presidency forms part of a “trio” of succeeding Presidencies covering an 18-month period and that each is closely supported by the permanent Council Secretariat.

Each Presidency is essentially an honest broker that seeks to take forward the interests of all Member States. This year's Irish EU Presidency, while it can bring its own flavour and ordering of its priorities, would fail if it simply tried to advance a national agenda, rather than the wider European interest. Holding the Presidency brings a country right to the heart of the EU's workings. If it is successful, as all previous Irish Presidencies have been, that country's standing and influence will be enhanced.



10. The Globe

Part of a Wider World



The European Union does not exist in isolation. It is part of a wider world in which it faces threats, challenges, opportunities and responsibilities. If the EU is to be represented by a dozen objects, a globe is amongst the most appropriate ones.

Under its Treaties, the EU is committed to promoting both its values and its interests. It aims to contribute to peace, security, sustainable development, mutual respect between peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, international law and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Sometimes, as with its internal policies, the EU's success in contributing towards its external policy aims is imperfect and occasionally it is disappointing. However, there is no doubt that the EU is, broadly speaking, an important supporter of international law, democracy, human rights and respect between nations.

Amongst major global players, only the EU these days has both the will and the heft to provide leadership in support of those values, working closely of course with likeminded countries. In 2012, it was rightly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The EU has many diverse instruments through which it engages with its neighbours and with the international community.

Enlargement

The EU has been able to influence the world around it and the shape of the wider European continent through its own process of enlargement. By assimilating many countries that, not long before EU membership, had been dictatorships of the right or left, it has copper-fastened democracy across much of Europe and enabled a leap forward in the prosperity of its peoples.

While further enlargement of the EU is problematic in several respects, it is not surprising that many other countries want to join or that their aspiration to become part of the EU, including Ukraine's ambition in that regard, is already shaping the future of the wider Europe.

Trade Policy

The European Union is the world's largest single market which brings enormous benefits to its businesses and consumers. It has been progressively removing the internal trade barriers between its Member States. Some of those barriers, however, remain and the potential benefits of the single market have not yet been fully exploited.

Through the EU's external trade policy, often referred to as the Common Commercial Policy, the EU advances the trade interests of its Member States around the world. By acting collectively in this area, the EU is far more powerful and influential than any of its Member States could hope to be acting individually.

The EU, as one of the world's most outward-orientated economies, has been a strong supporter of an open, rules-based approach to international trade. It remains a strong advocate of that approach even as those rules have come under increasing threat and attack.

EU Member States have agreed in the European Treaties that external trade policy is an exclusive responsibility of the EU rather than of the national governments of the Member States. The European Commission therefore negotiates trade deals with trading partners on behalf of the EU. The Council authorises the Commission to conduct those negotiations and can provide it with certain directives to be followed. The Council of Ministers and the European Parliament must then decide whether to approve the final deal negotiated by

the Commission. Importantly, most trade deals can be approved by a qualified majority of the Member States in the Council. Thus, no individual Member States can block such a deal. The central role of the European Commission and the absence of veto rights in the Council add greatly to the effectiveness of the EU's trade policy.

However, when a trade deal negotiated by the Commission includes matters that remain matters of national rather than European competence (such as trade in services or intellectual property), the unanimous agreement of Member States is required for its approval.

Common Foreign and Security Policy

The EU Member States work to coordinate and, where possible to speak and act collectively, on foreign and security policy matters. They do this through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The CFSP is quite distinct, as regards both subject matter and procedures, from the EU's trade and commercial policy (described immediately above). Through the CFSP, the EU and its Member States seek to advance their international political and security interests and to promote their values, including by preserving peace, strengthening international security, promoting international cooperation and supporting democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The principal decision-making body of the CFSP is the Foreign Affairs Council (one of the formations of the Council of Ministers) in which the 27 Member States are represented by their Foreign Ministers. As in other areas, the work of the Ministers is prepared by officials of the 27 Member States who meet every day at different levels.

The Foreign Affairs Council is chaired by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (often referred to simply as the "High Representative"). With a view to ensuring consistency and coherence across the EU's external action, the High Representative is also a Vice President of the European Commission (which, as indicated above, has primary responsibility for trade).



Source ©European Union - Current EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas

A European External Action Service (EEAS) has been established, effectively the diplomatic service of the European Union. Again, with a view to maximising coherence across the EU's external action, the staff of the EEAS is drawn both from the Commission and from the diplomatic services of the Member States.

Common Security and Defence Policy

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is an integral part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

It provides the EU with the capacity to undertake peacekeeping and conflict prevention missions and to contribute to the strengthening of international security. It draws on both civilian and military assets.

The security and defence dimension of the EU is set to grow very significantly, including in budgetary terms. This is an inevitable consequence of Russia's brutal war on the Ukraine, its imperialist ambitions, and the obvious threat it already poses to the security of the European continent, including to that of all EU Member States.

While Ireland's geography sometimes makes that threat seem less immediate, Ireland already faces direct threats to its underwater cables, and from cyber-attacks and political disinformation.

Decision-making under CFSP and ESDP

One of the biggest challenges the EU faces is that all foreign policy statements and actions essentially require the unanimous agreement of all Member States. One Member State alone can prevent the EU from condemning blatant human rights abuses, gratuitous military aggression or even war crimes; or from imposing sanctions.

Hungary in particular, but occasionally others, have taken unprincipled positions that undermine the EU's values and foreign policy and the obligation of Member States to demonstrate loyal cooperation.

This is a highly sensitive issue but also a difficult one to deal with because even those Member States that most forcefully call on the EU to take principled positions on, say, Gaza and Ukraine have so far been reluctant to end or dilute the unanimity requirement on foreign policy issues. In an increasingly dangerous world, this is an issue that will have to be looked at again.

It is worth emphasising that when the EU is accused of inaction on some foreign policy issue, it is not because some vague monolithic "EU" is prevaricating in Brussels or Strasbourg. Rather it is largely because of the unanimity requirement on foreign policy matters that few Member States have seriously contested and because one Member State, or a small group of them, is therefore in a position to block a decision that the majority wish to take.

Development Policy

Another important pillar of the European Union's external action is its development policy. The EU aims to foster sustainable development and stability in developing countries, with the ultimate goal of eradicating extreme poverty. The EU implements international objectives which it helped to develop and is committed to achieve, including the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is also deeply committed to the UN's climate change objectives.

The European Union is striving to maintain the priority it attaches to helping developing countries, even as the United States and other countries have dramatically downgraded their commitment in that regard. The

Russian war in Ukraine and its military threat to Europe more generally will inevitably create further pressure on the EU to shift some expenditure towards its own defence.

The European Union is potentially a very significant actor in a dangerous world that sometimes these days seems to be spinning out of control. We have the strength to defend ourselves on trade. We have the potential, working with NATO, to resist military aggression. We have the values to help us to shape a better world. The question is whether we have the ambition and the will.



11. The Window

Ensuring Public Understanding of the EU



Retaining public support is an ongoing, potentially existential, challenge for the European Union. The Member States and EU institutions must therefore take particular care as to how it is perceived by European citizens.

I have therefore chosen a window to represent the importance of perception and understanding, the window through which the public can see and judge the European Union.

The European Union does some things very well but also makes serious mistakes (see Chapter/Object 6). However, there are many obstacles that stand in the way of the public's capacity to make a balanced and accurate assessment of the EU's work.

In many ways, the EU seeks to be as transparent as possible. The deliberations of the European Parliament are largely held in public. The legislative process in the Council of Ministers is also formally held in public, although almost all of the real negotiations take place behind closed doors. While *meetings* of the European Commission are held in private, it is generally more open as an institution - to Member States, civic organisations and other interest groups - than most government departments are at national level, including in Ireland.

In addition to the difficulty that any organisation would face if it had to negotiate everything in public, the EU legislative process faces a further particular challenge. Unlike at national level, where the negotiation of national legislation generally takes place publicly in the national parliament, the EU's legislative process is a hybrid one. The negotiation of new European laws in the Council of Ministers is, in an obvious sense, a legislative process. However, it is also, at the same time, an international negotiation between Member States. Such international negotiations are not generally held in public because the possibility of fully frank exchanges and the necessary willingness to compromise would be undermined. The necessarily hybrid nature of this process goes a long way towards explaining the limited transparency in the workings of the Council of Ministers.

Moreover, the ability of EU citizens to understand the European Union is seriously challenged by three specific factors.

First, people naturally tend to be most interested in what they feel closest to. Everywhere, the primary interest of most people is in what is happening locally, in their own city, village, locality, neighbourhood or community. Beyond that, it is normal that they take significant interest in what is happening at national level in their own country to which they owe their primary civic allegiance. The European Union, understandably, seems to many to be just that bit more remote. Even though Ireland is every bit as much part of the EU as Brussels and Strasbourg, the work of the EU's *institutions* seems to be at a further remove from people's daily lives. This is inevitable and represents a significant challenge.

Second, the way in which the European Union, of its nature, is compelled to do its business, seeking to reconcile the perspectives, priorities and aspirations of 27 vibrant independent democracies, is immensely complex. Its agenda is vast and continues to grow. Understanding the procedures and detail of its work is more challenging than understanding the politics and economics of a single country. Yet the amount of media coverage of the EU across the Member States, however professional in some cases (and it is better in Ireland than in most countries), is a mere fraction of the coverage given to domestic issues. Neither national media nor ordinary citizens have sufficient time or head space to devote, respectively, to explaining and understanding the European Union anything like as well as they do in respect of their own country.

Third, the European Union, like every democracy, is challenged by deliberate misrepresentation. The propagation of "alternative facts", the circulation of "fake news", the labelling of truth as "fake news", and the interference of malign foreign actors in our democracies are all becoming more widespread. The EU is particularly vulnerable to such distortion, falsehood and malevolence because of its complexity. The

challenge of understanding the intricacies of the European Union provides fertile ground for those who wish to find fault with everything it does, without themselves needing either to understand it or to justify their own views. As we have seen in our Irish EU referenda, simple falsehoods are always easier to get across than the complicated truth.

How this deficit of explanation and understanding can be addressed, in Ireland and elsewhere, would require its own detailed analysis. As far as Ireland is concerned, it is clear that it must involve our education system at every level. It also requires greater genuine prioritisation within our political system and public service. Our Government, and national politicians more generally, should not only proclaim, as most of them rightly do, their broad support for the European Union, they should understand the detail of what it is and what it does far better than most of them currently do. This would enable them to lead and enrich the deeper public debate that is needed.

It is important to emphasise that the European Union is not something that happens “out there” in Brussels or Strasbourg. Its achievements and failures affect the lives of every citizen in Ireland and in every other Member State. Moreover, a crucial point, inadequately appreciated, is that Member States remain the principal driving force in the European Union. Ordinary citizens therefore largely determine the direction and policies of the European Union through their elected national Governments, which sit in the European Council and Council of Ministers, and through the Members they elect to the European Parliament.

The Irish Permanent Representation to the European Union, Ireland’s largest Embassy, is staffed by officials from every Irish Government department. They, as well as the Ministers and officials who travel from Dublin every day to represent Ireland, have a seat at the European table and a real opportunity to advance Ireland’s agenda in Europe. In common with every other Member State, they rarely obtain everything they want but almost always ensure a relatively positive outcome for Ireland. Moreover, the work of those who work in or travel to Brussels to represent Irish interests, is backed up by many staff in every Government department at home, and by arrangements for close coordination at political and official level.

The window through which the public perceives the European Union should ideally be more effective. This means devoting time and resources not only to explaining what happens in Brussels but also to deepening the awareness that we ourselves, at national level, can and do substantially shape those outcomes.



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12. The Drawer

What does the EU's Future Hold?



The final item I have chosen to represent the European Union is a drawer.

The European “drawer” is the one in which all the answers about the European Union’s future are apparently stored away. Many people confidently predict Europe’s future. They seem to believe that some hidden “drawer” exists where the secrets about Europe’s future are locked away. It is, of course, a fictional drawer. But it is nevertheless an important fiction that can shape our thinking.

These days, predictions frequently envisage the decline of the EU’s influence. They prophesy its inability to address successfully the challenges it will face on issues like security, migration, further enlargement, euro-scepticism or other forms of populism. Sometimes the prophets of doom even call into question the future of the European Union itself.

But the question is, if there were such a drawer in which all the answers about Europe’s future could be squirrelled away, where would it be found? Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, certainly doesn’t have one. Nor does French President, Emmanuel Macron, nor German Chancellor, Fredrick Merz. No Member State or European Institution has all the answers or can know the future. We all face political uncertainties and difficult choices every day and will continue to face them in the years and decades ahead.

Europe’s future, in truth, depends on the complex and unpredictable interaction of its Member States and institutions, and ultimately on the priorities and ambitions of its people.

The European Union faces threats to its security from Putin’s Russia, to its economic wellbeing from Trump’s America, to its competitiveness from emerging economies, and to its values from those who don’t share its belief in democracy and peaceful coexistence. It faces broad global challenges such as trade competition, climate change, migration, future pandemics, assaults on the rule of law, as well as the risks posed by uncontrolled social media and artificial intelligence. Domestically, it risks being undermined by populism and by the emergence of rogue regimes that don’t share its fundamental values.

However, it is not those threats or challenges that will define Europe’s future. Our future depends rather on how we, the people of Europe, in Ireland and elsewhere, respond.

The simple truth is that there is no drawer in which the answers about what lies ahead for Europe are to be found. The imaginary “drawer” has been chosen as one of my items to represent the European Union, in order to highlight the crucial reality that nobody knows what Europe’s future holds. Its destiny lies in our own hands.

Europe, with all its faults, has delivered unprecedented prosperity and security for its people. Despite its mistakes on the global stage and its weaknesses at home, it remains the world’s most important advocate for multilateralism and the rule of law. There is nowhere that most of us would rather live.

We Europeans owe it to ourselves, to our children and to their children, and to the world more generally, to reassert our support for our complex, infuriating and magnificent European Union. We should be determined to remedy its weaknesses and mistakes. We should be ambitious for its continued success and development.

There is no predetermined future for Europe.

If we fail, the fault, to borrow Shakespeare’s words, will not be... “in our stars, but in ourselves”.

the fault will not be...
“in our stars,
but in ourselves”

William Shakespeare



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