Europe in review 2017

DECEMBER 2017

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Make Europe great again

The worst is not always to come.

At the start of 2017, the EU was under the double shock of the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of EU- and Nato-sceptic Donald Trump as US president.

With far-right Marine Le Pen leading in the polls ahead of the spring elections in France, many were waiting for the third shock that would decidedly knock the European project to the ground.

As we approach the end of 2017, Brexit increasingly looks like a self-harming decision no one would reasonably imitate; a young and dynamic French president tries to lead the way to relaunch the EU; and EU leaders now have a ‘roadmap’ to take big decisions in the 18 months ahead.

Is Europe back on the right track, then?

The mood has certainly changed and the most pressing dangers have been warded off. But some cracks continue to tear the EU fabric.

Concerns for the rule of law in Poland, in Hungary, and for countries like Malta are growing.

The Catalan separatist challenge is also unlikely to wane.

Last but not least, when this magazine went to press, German chancellor Angela Merkel was unable to form a new government.

Uncertainty continues to threaten the anchor of EU stability.

But as the UK is about to leave, and the US, Russia and China are trying to reshape the world where European values could be sidelined, EU leaders must continue their efforts to relaunch the EU project and make Europe great again.

In 2018, as in 2017, the EU will be living between hope and worry. And in 2018, as in 2017, EUobserver will continue its work to keep you informed and help you understand the changing times.

As an independent, not-for-profit media, your support is crucial in allowing us to report the truth; to make sense of new trends and events; to hold EU powers to account; and to works against fake news and disinformation strategies.

From Brussels to all the member states, EUobserver will also take the pulse of societies across Europe as they prepare for 2019’s important event - the European elections. So the worst is definitely not to come.

We wish you all the best for the twelve next months. Happy 2018!

Eric Maurice
Editor-in-Chief
Michel Barnier: The UK's best friend in Brussels

The EU's chief Brexit negotiator is an atypical French politician, with a love for mountains and Europe. He has been steering Brexit talks with a steady hand, and a deal could catapult him to the higher echelons of EU politics.

By Eszter Zalan
His urbane style hides a methodological negotiator. His political sensitivity has earned him praise from all corners of Europe. EU sources commend his handling of the Brexit talks, with almost no criticism or reservations, except that he is French. Yet, he is a very atypical French politician. Michel Barnier is the best friend the UK has in Brussels today.

The EU’s top negotiator is no stranger in the European Commission’s Berlaymont headquarter.

Barnier – the 66-year-old former French foreign minister – served as the EU executive’s commissioner for regional policy between 1999 and 2004, and as commissioner for the internal market between 2010 and 2014.

He oversaw the financial sector’s reform in the wake of the financial crisis, including setting up the banking union – a key piece of legislation in reinforcing the bloc's immune system against financial shocks.

He persuaded Britain to accept most of the new EU financial regulations, and made an effort not to alienate London’s financial hub, although he did clash with the city of London over a proposed cap on bank bonuses.

The mountain-dweller, Barnier, was raised in the Alpine region of Savoie. He did not attend the prestigious Parisian Ecole National D'Administration (ENA), which traditionally educates France’s leading political class, but went to a business school.

Barnier likes to say his first vote was in a 1972 French referendum to allow the UK into the bloc.

Barnier (l), with his UK counterpart David Davis (l), briefing the press in Brussels after talks.

Photo: European Commission
His rise in Gaullist politics was a quick one, being elected in 1978 - at the age of 27 - to the French National Assembly. In 1992 he helped bring the Winter Olympics to his beloved native Savoy Alps.

His career did, however, receive a blow from French voters in 2005, when they rejected the EU constitution on which he worked. He lost his job as foreign minister, calling the results a "real disappointment".

He later ran for the president of the European Commission.

But at a European People’s Party congress in Dublin in 2014, Barnier was outvoted by rival Jean-Claude Juncker, who became the party's official candidate for Commission president, after the Luxembourgish politician received strong backing from German chancellor Angela Merkel, while Barnier lacked the support from France’s socialist president, Francois Hollande.

Barnier’s appointment as the EU’s Brexit point man in the summer of 2016 was met with disbelief in London. It seemed like a classic provocation from Juncker, but it also appears to be working – at least for the EU.

“Barnier turned out to be the man of the situation, no sleight of hand, he is methodical and determined,” MEP Jerome Lavrilleux from Barnier's Republicans party said, adding "he is not arrogant, he listens to people, and respects what they tell him.”

“He can be described by firmness, diplomacy, efficiency. All the more well perceived because it is not what one expects from a Frenchman," Lavrilleux added.

Barnier exposed a lighter, witty side of his character by telling British prime minister Theresa May to "keep calm and negotiate" – referring to the popular phrase from the second world war: "Keep Calm and Carry On".

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2017
BREXIT TIMELINE

'The clock is ticking'

3 JAN
Sir Ivan Rogers, the UK ambassador to the EU, resigns. In a letter to his staff, he warns of the dangers of “muddled thinking” in London.

4 JAN
Sir Tim Barrow, a career diplomat and former ambassador to Russia, is appointed as the UK’s new ambassador to the EU.

17 JAN
Prime minister Theresa May gives her Lancaster House speech in which she sets out her government’s priorities in the Brexit negotiations, including specifically leaving the EU's single market and customs union.

24 JAN
The UK’s Supreme Court rejects the government’s appeal in the Gina Miller case, ruling that the parliament must vote on whether Article 50 exit procedures can be triggered.

2 FEB
The UK government publishes its Brexit White Paper, setting out its strategy for exiting the EU.

13 MAR
The UK parliament passes the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill. Three days later, the bill was confirmed by ‘Royal Assent’, giving the green light to trigger Article 50.
Visiting Croatia, he tweeted from the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, asking "Guess where we are today?".

He attempted to calm British fears by emphasising at press conferences and in speeches that the financial settlement is not a punishment for Britain for leaving the bloc, but settling the existing accounts.

Iztok Mirosc, Slovenia’s state secretary for EU affairs pointed out that it is better to have a politician as chief negotiator, than a bureaucrat.

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"In a Union of equals, there can be no second class workers."

Jean-Claude Juncker,
President of the European Commission

2017 BREXIT TIMELINE

17-22 JUL
Second round of negotiations take place in Brussels. Both sides say they are committed to the Good Friday Agreement, which has secured peace and stability in Northern Ireland. Negotiators set out to compare positions on citizens’ rights. Barnier urges the UK to clarify its position on the financial settlement and its plans to secure a frictionless border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

28-31 AUG
Prime minister Theresa May makes a speech in Florence to clarify the UK’s Brexit position. Against the backdrop of hardline Brexiteers in her party, she pledges that no EU country would have to pay more or receive less from the EU budget as the result of the UK leaving the bloc, and that the UK would honour commitments it has made as a member. She also proposes a two-year transition period.

7 SEP
During the third round of talks, further progress is made on citizens’ rights, but the role of the European Court of Justice in enforcing them, and the extent of the UK’s financial obligations still remain outstanding key issues.

22 SEP
The EU Commission publishes several negotiating papers, including on Northern Ireland, emphasising that it is the UK’s responsibility to propose solutions for the post-Brexit Irish border.

25-28 SEP
The fourth round of talks are held in Brussels a week later than planned to give way for May’s Florence speech. EU negotiators were hoping to see a detailed commitment following May’s pledges in Florence, but the UK still did not disclose details about its financial obligations. The UK offered to transpose the withdrawal agreement into UK law and ensure the UK courts can refer directly to it, but there was no agreement on the future role of the European Court of Justice.
“There is a general need of political judgement, these are not technical negotiations. Political experience is very important,” Miroslav said when asked about Barnier.

Barnier has travelled to all the member states to hear their priorities in Brexit talks, and is regularly updating the EU countries, commissioners and MEPs.

He has been known to gently push for a softer approach among the 27 EU countries to reach an agreement with the UK, trying to tone down the somewhat less flexible positions of Germany and France.

“He has done a great job so far, and he has managed to keep the EP [European Parliament] under control, which means he has great political skills,” said an EU source, who asked for anonymity because of the sensitivity of Brexit talks.

“He would have a very good chance of becoming European Commission president, if he wanted to,” the source added.

That's the big question for Barnier, and another reason why the French politician is the UK’s best bet to push for a deal within the EU institutions.

Barnier, in a speech in Rome in November, ventured out of his usual rhetorical Brexit territory. At the end of his speech he outlined how EU unity should be reinforced and “what needs to change in Brussels”.

Could he be testing the waters for a possible campaign in 2019?

There is a historic Brexit deal to be done first.
HOW THE EU FAILED TO PREVENT THE CATALAN 'TRAIN CRASH'

The 1 October independence referendum in the Catalan region of Spain caught the EU off-guard. From Barcelona to Madrid and also in Brussels, everyone sleepwalked into the crisis.

By Eric Maurice

On 24 January 2017, in a packed auditorium at the European Parliament in Brussels, Carles Puigdemont already announced what was going to happen.

"At the latest in September 2017, Catalonia will hold a binding independence referendum," said the president of Catalonia’s regional government - although the vote eventually took place one day after that deadline, on 1 October.

"This is a European problem," he added, laying out his strategy to get EU support in pushing the Spanish government to accept the referendum.

He argued that "the Catalan proposal for a referendum follow[ed] a firmly Europeanist inspiration" and that "Catalonia as a whole is deeply involved in participating in the European project".

"Europe cannot look the other way. Europe should be part of the solution," he said.

Nine months later, on 31 October, Puigdemont was back in Brussels, briefing the press at a smaller venue - the Press Club - which spilled over with more journalists and media than his first appearance.

This time, he comes as a former, dismissed leader - fleeing what he said was "unfair justice" in Spain and calling on the EU to "react".
He insisted that EU inaction - in the face of Madrid's takeover of Catalan institutions after the region declared its independence on 27 October - would be "the end of the idea of Europe", "a mistake that we can all pay, at a very high cost, as European citizens".

While Puigdemont's first appearance was mainly covered by Spanish media and a few outlets in Brussels, the second was broadcast live across the EU.

**HEADING FOR A TRAIN CRASH**

Europe was finally forced to give its full attention on the region's crisis after images of Catalans being beaten by Spanish police while trying to vote were splashed across European and global media; the local parliament declared Catalonia's independence and the Spanish government took control of the region's institutions.

Puigdemont, along with twelve other members of his dismissed government were charged with rebellion, sedition and embezzlement and faced up to 30 years in prison.

After months of apparent disinterest, Europe was suddenly left contemplating how the crisis could be solved.

"We saw the problem growing politically. We saw that we were heading for a train crash. But we saw it very late, just a few weeks before the referendum," an EU official admitted to EUobserver in November, on condition of anonymity.

Despite Puigdemont's warning in January, EU institutions only started to look closer at Catalonia in early June, when the Catalan leader announced the date for the referendum

In an interview to a group of journalists, including EUobserver, Puigdemont warned in early July that "nothing" would stop him.
But there was no reaction from Brussels or EU capitals when the separatist coalition, on 5 July, presented the referendum bill, which said that independence would be declared “within two days” if the Yes side won. Or on 6 September when the bill was adopted by the Catalan parliament through an extraordinary procedure.

"We hoped there would be a dialogue, a solution, or that at least the referendum would be legal, as in Scotland," the official added.

Even when it was clear that Madrid and Barcelona would not talk, the EU still rejected calls for mediation, arguing that it was an "internal issue".

The European Commission, to whom calls to intervene were mainly directed, did not want to take a position before member states acted, and insisted it was not within its institutional role.

The Council of the EU, which represents member states, also kept quiet on the crisis

**TABOO FOR THE EU**

"If that is not a taboo, it looks like it very much," a source from a member state told EUobserver in September. "All member states are embarrassed."

"There is a very, very strong principle: we don’t meddle in domestic politics when it is about the constitutional order," the first EU official pointed out.

When images of police violence in Barcelona on 1 October were broadcast, EU institutions faced an "unexpected" situation, he added. But the principle of non-interference continued to prevail.

"I don’t think the EU was not interested [in what was happening]," political scientist Camino Mortera-Martinez told EUobserver. "Both the Spanish and the EU did not think it would go that far. It was unthinkable, even for Madrid."

While the EU, for political and institutional reasons, tried to contain the escalating showdown within Spain’s borders, both the Spanish and Catalan

"This is a European problem," then-Catalan leader Puigdemont said in January in Brussels.

*Photo: Carles Puigdemont/Flickr*
“We saw that we were heading for a train crash, but we saw it very late, just a few weeks before the referendum,” an EU official admitted to EUobserver.

Photo: Albert Solans/EUROIMEX/dpa

Governments careened obliviously into the deadlock.

In Madrid, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy relied on a constitutional ruling that a referendum would be illegal and refused to discuss its organisation, repeating right up to the 1 October referendum itself that the vote would not take place.

Rajoy is leading a minority government, after two inconclusive elections in 2015, and has been weakened by corruption cases against his centre-right Popular Party. The defence of Spain’s unity is a strong element in his party’s manifesto.

REALITY AND FANTASY

“The Spanish government was very naive,” noted Mortera-Martinez, who works at the Centre for European Reform, a think tank in Brussels. “It thought that it would be enough to say that the referendum would not happen, and that if it happened it would be enough to send the police.”

Meanwhile in Barcelona, the Catalan government fell into its own trap and convinced itself that it would have support from the EU.

It organised its communication very well, with unofficial ‘embassies’ in EU countries and press trips for foreign journalists — including EUobserver.

“They saw that people were eager to listen to them,” unlike the Spanish government, Mortera-Martinez said. “They thought that because people were listening to them, they were going to support them.”

In the end, “there was a very thin line between reality and fantasy”.

“What astonished me the most is that Catalans were disappointed [not to get the support they expected],” the EU official observed. “Even Kosovo, which was supported by the US, the UK, France and Germany” struggled to be recognised when it declared its independence in 2008.
From Puigdemont's January address to the weeks that followed the referendum, and Madrid's takeover of the region's institutions, Catalan separatist leaders based their demands for EU support on what they said were Spain's violations of civil rights and democracy.

"Maybe what is happening with Poland gave them the impression that the European Commission would intervene," the official noted, referring to the rule-of-law monitoring launched by the EU executive in 2016.

BELIEVING RAJOY
So could the EU have avoided the escalation and deadlock?

"I cannot really see what could have been done differently," the official said, insisting on respect for the internal constitutional order of member states.

He noted that "maybe" some member states "could have sent messages" to the Spanish government to suggest dialogue with the Catalan leadership. But national elections in France and Germany probably diverted the attention of EU leaders.

"What EU leaders should have done was to explain to Rajoy that he should not be so closed to a solution," said Mortera-Martinez. But she noted that the Spanish PM's colleagues were also dependent on his view of the situation.

"If Rajoy tells you that nothing will happen, you believe him and think: 'Why bother?';" she said.
THE EU AND US IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

America’s face changed when Donald Trump replaced Barack Obama. But one year on, the foundations of the transatlantic relationship are still intact.

By Andrew Rettman

America’s face changed when Donald Trump replaced Barack Obama. But one year on, the foundations of the transatlantic relationship are still intact.

At the same time, the EU itself has also changed due to Brexit. The wider European neighbourhood is almost unrecognisable, with Russia at war in Ukraine and with the Syrian conflict.

The switch in the US from Nobel laureate and first black president, Obama, to Trump, a billionaire populist who tweets fake news and insults, and defends white supremacists, could hardly have been more extreme.

Trump began his tenure by praising Brexit in what looked like the dawn of a new age of populism in the west.

He also praised Russian leader Vladimir Putin and threatened to tear up Nato’s mutual defence pact if EU nations did not spend more money, amid a swirl of allegations that he had colluded with the Kremlin to win the US election.

Obama had advanced an EU-US free trade treaty

Trump astonished Nato in Brussels in May by refusing to pledge to the mutual defence pact over spending complaints.

Photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
The EU needs "patience" and "trust" in the deeper US state, an EU diplomat said.

Photo: consiliuim.europa.eu

designed to deepen transatlantic relations, but Trump, under his 'America First' policy, cancelled the so-called TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) trade pact.

Obama had also signed up to the Paris accord on climate change, but Trump pulled out of the international agreement.

The new US leader also threatened to tear up an EU-sponsored deal on Iran's nuclear proliferation, opening up multiple fronts of disagreement.

One year on, Trump continues to astonish EU diplomats. In November, he called the North Korean leader "short and fat" in a tweet amid escalating risk of a nuclear confrontation.

**BLUNTING THE TRUMP EFFECT**
On the other side of the transatlantic equation, the EU also changed in the past 12 months.

Brexit talks threaten to get ugly, in what could cause a trade rift if the UK crashes out in 2019 with no exit deal.

The far-right AfD party has entered parliament in Germany with nearly 100 MPs, and populist parties are kicking at the EU in Hungary, Italy, and Poland.

But the populist wave is in abeyance. The far-right Marine Le Pen lost elections to EU daring Emmanuel Macron in France, the anti-EU Geert Wilders came second in the Netherlands, and chancellor Angela Merkel won a fourth term in Germany.

France and Germany are also spearheading a push for deeper integration - on the euro, on defence, and on migration - amid opinion polls that signal a post-Brexit revival of pro-EU feelings.

Trump's Putin controversies have done little to alter the main pillar of US-EU ties - Nato's mutual defence.
US military chiefs have repeatedly pledged their commitment to Nato. The US is also leading a Nato battalion in Poland to deter Russian aggression.

The US extended the life of joint EU economic sanctions on Russia over Putin's war in Ukraine and stands ready to ship defensive weapons to Kiev.

US are still in uncertain waters on trade.

But any significant impact on EU-US trade remains to be felt. The trillion-sized transatlantic trade relationship in goods and services was down €93 billion in the year so far as of November, but this was part of a wider trend and better than pre-Trump trade, which shrank by €103 billion in 2016.

The impact on global free trade also remains to be felt - the EU has concluded a free-trade treaty with Canada, ratified one with Ukraine, and advanced on deals with India and Japan.

If Trump leaves office in 2020, or earlier if a US investigation into the alleged Kremlin collusion unseats him, TTIP could come out of the freezer.

The age of Trump is a period of heightened volatility in EU-US relations and in the stable world order they underpin. The damage done to transatlantic ties is real, but limited and could be repaired.

EU VIEW

Speaking to EUobserver on condition of anonymity, one senior EU diplomat said Trump's antics were no laughing matter.

"The biggest danger for Europe is a paralysis with regard to the question of Russia ... the US is emerging as the weakest point of the Western alliance", he said.

He said the harm done to EU-US diplomacy was real.

"Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Madrid are unwilling to work with Washington on a number of crucial international issues," he said, mentioning Nato spending, Iran, Syria, climate change, and energy security.

The EU diplomat indicated that the harm could be repaired.

He said the EU needed to "be patient" and to show that "trust was intact" in the deeper US state - the "State Department, Pentagon, and intelligence agencies".

But Trump's harm to America's international reputation, which underpins the legitimacy of its superpower status, is another matter and could be harder to heal.
The asylum files: deadlock and dead-ends

The EU is reforming a number of internal asylum laws, but lack of staff, politics, and the sheer complexity of the bills means deadlines - like those announced by EU council chief Donald Tusk - are likely to come and go.

By Nikolaj Nielsen

The past year has yet to deliver any meaningful reforms of the EU’s fractured internal asylum system.

The half-dozen bills under discussion remain either mired in political standoffs, or left on the desks of understaffed and overworked EU delegations.

In October, the EU’s council president Donald Tusk set a deadline to finalise the asylum package “with a view to reaching a consensus in the first half of 2018.”

It is a familiar refrain that ignores the more practical aspects of national staff at the Council – representing member states – of having to sift through the fine print.

EU laws and reforms proposed by the European Commission are agreed between the Council and the European Parliament.

But when it comes to asylum reforms, so-called working parties (where member states sort their differences at the lower echelons in the Council) are confronted with logistical nightmares.

Each state has a delegation of people in Brussels working on EU laws. Depending on the files, some have more staff than others.

“There can be two meetings happening at the same time, but there is only one councillor,” noted one member state official working on the asylum reform files at the Council.

The official said some of the biggest member states have also offloaded numerous complex asylum reform files onto a single person in their delegation, rendering the task of reaching an agreement even more difficult.

“This is the choice of the capitals,” said the official.

FACT VERSUS REALITY

Despite the packed weeks of meetings on asylum under the Maltese and Estonian EU presidencies in 2017, actual results have been sparse.

Of the seven EU asylum files under negotiation, only one ended in an inter-institutional agreement, as of mid-November.
The EU presidency under Malta earlier this year had managed to wrap up the reform of the EU’s asylum support agency, Easo.

Based in Malta, the agency will now be able to monitor how EU states implement asylum standards and rules. It was also granted the power to tell EU states, in a non-binding nature, how to apply laws on asylum applications.

Such a move is not insignificant, as it lays a possible foundation for creating a centralised asylum system where decisions are taken by a sole European authority.

That was the easy part. The rest risked upending the EU as governments clashed over migration.

Malta had been tasked to find a consensus among EU states on the biggest and most politically sensitive file, the so-called ‘Dublin regulation’, before the end of its presidency in the summer. It was a non-starter.

Dublin determines the member state responsible for processing asylum claims. But its underlying idea of imposing a new mandatory quota on asylum claims reached a political impasse.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, also known as the Visegrad Group, balked at being told to take in asylum seekers.

The Visegrad Group had also resisted separate efforts to relocate asylum seekers from Italy and Greece. The two-year relocation scheme, which ended in September, would somehow be replaced with the new quota system under Dublin.

The Maltese EU presidency then attempted to strike a balance between solidarity and responsibility under Dublin, by allowing states hostile to taking migrants to trade off technical and financial support instead of actually hosting asylum seekers.

The plan never took off and the following Estonian EU presidency had no new ideas. Dublin was shelved until a later date.
BIG STATES AND LITTLE STATES

In the Council, France and Germany appeared to resist changes to their own entrenched national systems. Smaller member states, with less developed systems, were less reluctant.

“The Visegrad is very constructive in other files and I would say that other bigger member states are actually more problematic in giving up their systems,” noted a second EU official.

But the remaining bills, while politically less volatile than Dublin, are not easy. Among them is the reception conditions directive and the asylum procedures directive.

Both are tough but by far the most difficult is the asylum procedures regulation.

Currently a directive, the plan to turn it into a directly applicable regulation includes over 60 articles. The Council is not getting anywhere on the bill.

“The Council is still at the very initial stage, it hasn’t moved from the first technical level,” said Kris Pollet, a senior policy officer at the Brussels-based European Council on Refugees and Exiles (Ecre).

The regulation instructs member states on how to grant and withdraw international protection from people. But its complexity and reach has left many EU states nervous.

Issues like creating an EU list of safe third countries have not even been discussed. Debates on ‘admissibility’, where a person’s asylum status is determined, are also difficult.

The reception conditions directive is only slightly less difficult. Member states appear lost on the file. The directive touches on things like education, access to the labour market, and detention.

One major problem is labour market access for asylum seekers. Another is stripping away benefits of asylum seekers who end up in an EU state that is not responsible for them. Other questions, such as providing guardians to unaccompanied minors, are also without answers.

Which leaves the qualifications regulation. Both the Council and the EU Parliament have adopted their positions and are now in talks but expect no agreement this year.

Issues on residency permits for refugees and people with subsidiarity protection have yet to be resolved.

Of all the files, only Eurodac appears to have any chance of reaching some sort of agreement before year’s end. Eurodac is a biometric database for migrants and asylum seekers.

Children as young as six will have their fingerprints taken and faces scanned for police access. It is a controversial proposal. Some argue it is needed to protect and identify lost children, others say it is a fruitless exercise in data collection.

All of these bills and reforms, including legal routes under the ‘Blue Card’ work placement and resettlement, will have to be sorted by the upcoming EU Bulgarian presidency to meet Tusk’s deadline. It is a prospect that has raised some concerns.

A woman and her baby wait for a bus that will take them to the center for asylum seekers near Roszke, southern Hungary.

Photo: Freedom House

In May, the Bulgarian government appointed Valeri Simeonov, one of the founding members of the right-wing National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria party, to head ethnic minority integration.

A government that appoints a man who once described Roma as "brazen, feral, human-like creatures" appears unlikely to find the solidarity solution that has so far eluded everyone else.
EU agencies: The road to 'douze points'

The European Medicines Agency and, to a lesser extent, the European Banking Authority, was the most sought-after EU agencies in 2017, as no less than 21 member states competed to host them after Brexit.

By Peter Teffer

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) and, to a lesser extent, the European Banking Authority (EBA), were the most talked about EU agencies in 2017, with no fewer than 21 countries lobbying to host them after Brexit. How did the EU choose the two new seats for the EMA and the EBA?

APRIL

Mere weeks after the United Kingdom triggered Article 50 of the EU treaty - which kicked off negotiations over the terms of its exit - London still had some hope of continuing to host the two EU agencies. "No decisions have been taken about the location of the European Banking Authority or the European Medicines Agency, these will be subject to the exit negotiations," a spokeswoman for the UK's Brexit department said in a statement. But it was already to no avail: the 27 remaining EU states would not forgo the opportunity of clinching a prestigious agency.

MAY

Past discussions on selecting homes for EU agencies had resulted in ugly quarrels between government leaders. To avoid repeating history, European Council president Donald Tusk and European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker proposed a "recommended procedure" for the relocation of the EMA and the EBA. A draft version from 19 May, seen by EUobserver, introduced the idea of "objective criteria", which would then be the subject of a neutral "assessment" by Juncker’s civil servants.

JUNE

On 20 June, EU affairs ministers met in Luxembourg to discuss the procedure. Two days later, it was adopted at a summit in Brussels, with a slight change to the timetable. Instead of October, the final ministerial vote was postponed to November. To emphasise the leaders' unity on the subject, European Council spokesman Preben Aamann tweeted that the debate on the procedure only took four minutes.

JULY

In a behind-closed-doors presentation to members of the European Parliament, representatives of the medicines agency revealed that the cost of relocating was estimated, in a worst-case scenario, at €528.5 million. A large part of that figure was due to early termination costs for the building lease, which was estimated at €429 million. When signing the rental contract, which does not end until 2039, the EMA failed to include an exit clause.

Meanwhile, several countries had already launched campaigns to promote their candidate cities. On 11 July, the Dutch government and Amsterdam municipal authorities came to Brussels to present their bid to host the EMA.

Then minister for health, Edith Schippers, said there was "strong competition", and made an analogy to the Eurovision song contest, often echoed by other rivals. "We all want the 'douze points'," she said.
Former finance minister Wouter Bos, appointed as ambassador for the Dutch bid, said he could not remember a time in his career "when a European institution was loved so much, by so many".

AUGUST
The deadline for countries to register their bids closed on 1 August. Nineteen cities applied to host the EMA: Amsterdam, Athens, Barcelona, Bonn, Bratislava, Brussels, Bucharest, Copenhagen, Dublin, Helsinki, Lille, Milan, Porto, Sofia, Stockholm, Malta, Vienna, Warsaw, and Zagreb. Eight cities applied to host the EBA: Brussels, Dublin, Frankfurt, Paris, Prague, Luxembourg, Vienna, and Warsaw.

The presentations in Brussels were also attended by representatives from other countries, who were there to check out the competition. Most of them had asked EUobserver for insight on the competition - the latest rumours and evaluations of their own bids. "There are many talks. Everybody is talking to everybody else," said Italian state secretary of European affairs Sandro Gozi. But politics was still the most important game-changer.

OCTOBER
Following the European Commission’s publication of its assessment of the 27 bids to host the two agencies, disappointment was voiced in some corners. The commission’s assessment was little

SEPTEMBER
The month of September saw a promotional spree by most of the 21 EU countries bidding to host the EMA – while the competing countries that wanted to host the EBA took a stealth-like approach.

At its peak, the scramble for the media’s attention saw three EMA events a week. Journalists that attended all presentations were given a total of four kilograms of brochures, as well as souvenirs ranging from small snow globes to mouse pads. Greece even flew several journalists from Brussels to Athens for interviews and a tour of the proposed building.

more than a stripped-down version of the countries’ original bid presentations, often a summary of what was presented in the bid. The EU’s executive had not fact-checked any of the statements made by member states - to the chagrin of some member states. "The commission’s assessment was very technical and didn’t bring anything essentially new to the race," said Helsinki mayor Jan Vapaavuori.

At a confidential meeting in Brussels, some EU ambassadors criticised the commission’s work, saying that the paper it published was "not an assessment". One diplomat reportedly said: "An ‘evaluation’ is more than just stapling a number of papers together."
During the month, the file moved up the diplomatic ladder, with a ministerial meeting followed by an EU summit of government leaders. Publicly, politicians said little about the procedure. However, some did admit that intensive lobbying took place behind-the-scenes at the summit.

NOVEMBER
On 20 November, EU affairs ministers met in Brussels for a series of voting rounds. They first voted on the new seat for the EMA. Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Milan were shortlisted after the first round. Copenhagen was then eliminated in the second round. In a dramatic twist, Amsterdam and Milan tied in the third round. Estonian deputy minister for EU affairs Matti Maasikas, chair of the meeting, then drew a lot. Chance decided - EMA went to Amsterdam.

Slovakia offered to host the European Medicines Agency in Bratislava, but it failed to get passed the first round of voting.
Photo: Peter Toffer

Voting for the EBA also ended in a tie. After the first round Dublin, Frankfurt, and Paris were left standing. Then, Frankfurt was eliminated. In the last round, Dublin and Paris also received an equal number of votes. Maasikas again drew a lot and EBA went to Paris.

The European Banking Authority is one of two EU agencies that needed a new home after the UK triggered article 50 of the EU treaty.
Photo: EBA
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BIO-BASED INDUSTRIES JOINT UNDERTAKING:
Leading the transition towards a post-petroleum society

The Bio-based Industries Joint Undertaking (BBI JU) initiative is a €3.7 billion public-private partnership between the European Union (EU) and the Bio-based Industries Consortium (BIC). It is an autonomous EU body operating under Horizon 2020 rules and procedures, dedicated to investing in research and innovation projects.

BBI JU is dedicated to realising the European bioeconomy potential and contributing to a sustainable circular economy, by turning biological residues and wastes (from agro-food, forestry and municipal sources) into greener everyday products, through innovative technologies and biorefineries.

Bio-based industries and their value chains are faced with complex and substantial technology and innovation challenges.

BBI JU was created to act as a catalyst to tackle these challenges by de-risking investments for private research and innovation, structuring the sector to allow it to reach critical mass in a focused and coherent way. This will enable long-term stability and predictability for the sector.

The BBI JU initiative’s ambition is about connecting key sectors, creating new value chains and producing a range of innovative bio-based products to ultimately create a new bio-based community and economy.

THE ADDED VALUE OF BIO-
BASED INDUSTRIES JOINT
UNDERTAKING

By bringing together key stakeholders from across a diverse range of relevant industrial sectors, including large companies and SMEs, academia, regional and technological clusters, relevant knowledge is combined to achieve the sector innovation objectives, and to leverage significant private investment. As an example, where BIC members had around €2 billion of investments in Europe in the pipeline in 2014, this has increased to almost €5 billion in 2017, meaning that Europe is back on the map as an attractive area to invest in this double-digit growth sector.

The BBI JU initiative’s multi-sectoral approach creates cross-border collaboration at European level to help overcome market failures in the bio-based industries. No single company, industrial sector or Member State has the capacity to deal with the challenges and financial risks facing the industry and other stakeholders. BBI JU brings together bio-based activities under one pan-European structure, pooling national and regional assets, strengths and skills.

BBI JU fosters a culture of collaboration across EU players, de-risks investments in the bio-based industries, and mitigates current market obstacles that are slowing down the transition from a petroleum-based economy to a bio-based economy.

In 2014, this sector already accounted for 3.3 million jobs and a turnover of €674 billion in Europe.

BENEFITS FOR EUROPEAN CITIZENS

Overall, everyone benefits from a strong European bio-based industrial sector which can significantly reduce Europe’s dependency on fossil-based raw materials. It will help the EU meet its climate change targets, and lead to more sustainable and more environmentally-friendly growth, preparing the EU for a post-petroleum era.

BBI JU has as its guiding principle the need to maximise and valorise the complexity of nature so that developed products and applied processes make the most of materials’ natural properties. This results in the development of a sustainable sector, and goes a step further in improving the environment and our quality of life.

More concretely, bio-based industries are capable of delivering sustainable everyday products that are comparable or superior to fossil-based ones by their outstanding performance, competitive price and availability.

BBI JU’s projects will develop the potential of waste as well as agricultural and forestry residues. They are perfect examples of the circular economy in action, meaning sustainable, resource-
efficient and largely waste-free utilisation of Europe’s renewable raw materials for industrial processing.

The creation of a competitive bio-based infrastructure in Europe is expected to significantly boost employment, as well as support regional development by expanding local economies by regenerating underdeveloped and/or abandoned regions. This will result in new, higher and more diversified revenues for farmers and cooperatives and create up to 700,000 skilled jobs by 2030, 80% of which will be in rural areas.

MORE RESOURCE-EFFICIENT AND SUSTAINABLE LOW-CARBON ECONOMY

The BBI JU initiative focuses on using Europe’s biomass and wastes to make high value products and bring them to market. Advanced biorefineries and innovative technologies are at the heart of this process, converting renewable resources into sustainable bio-based chemicals, materials and fuels, allowing the EU to reduce its dependence on finite fossil resources.

BBI JU’s activities clearly reflect the ambitions of the industrial partners to contribute to a sustainable society in the longer term. The Strategic Innovation & Research Agenda (SIRA) sets as an objective to reduce the EU dependency upon the import of strategic raw material like fossil raw materials but also protein for animal feed. The aim is to replace at least 30% of existing petroleum-based products with better, more sustainable and economically viable versions by 2030, with the consequence of reducing GHG emissions by 50%.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Europe has always been at the forefront of science, innovation and the development of new technologies. Even when it comes to industrial biotechnology, some European companies are world leaders.

Yet, there is no such thing as a coherent, single bio-based industry. Instead, our bio-industries consist of a wide array of actors, from large companies and SMEs to academia and regional clusters, often working in isolation.

As to the construction of large-scale biorefineries, central to the transformation of organic waste streams into new materials and components, Europe needs to promote itself as an attractive destination for investment, in order not to get left behind by the US, Brazil or China.

Additional challenges lie in providing a secure and sustainable supply of biomass feedstock and in the optimisation of its conversion, the ultimate goal being ‘zero-waste’ bio-based operations.

Bio-based industries can deliver many environmental, economic and social benefits, helping us meet EU objectives in areas ranging from job creation to circular economy and resource efficiency, as well as climate change, agricultural production diversification, rural and regional development. However, for Europe to reap those benefits and become a worldwide leader in all-things bio-based, we must maximise our efforts in developing its potential today, rather than tomorrow.

Only by overcoming fragmentation and joining public and private forces can we further de-risk private investment, provide incentives for both sides to cooperate, and allow for the development of a competitive bio-based industry sector. This, in turn, will lead to the creation of innovative technologies, new business models and greener everyday products.

A strategy which is proving its worth: by the end of 2016, every euro invested by the EU was leveraging €2.6 of private investment – proof that already, bio-based industries are actively boosting European economy, and creating sustainable value for its citizens.

ACCELERATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A BIO-BASED ECONOMY

BBI JU has already a relevant portfolio of 65 funded-projects helping to tackle the challenges of moving Europe to a post-petroleum era. These projects are covering value-chains based on agro-food by-products, forest biomass, bio-waste and aquatic biomass, being well-balanced between research & innovation, demonstration, flagship and coordination actions. New value chains, new cross-sector interconnections, new bio-based materials and new consumer products are being created. Due to BBI JU projects, sectors that have never collaborated before, are now working together.

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MACRON —
HEGELIAN HERO
OF EU HISTORY?

The election of the 39-year old newcomer injected new hope and
dynamism. But the French president still has to find solid allies in the
EU and deliver his ambitious agenda at home.

By Eric Maurice

In 2017, Europe staked its future in the
hands of a 39-year old who had never
held an elected office, who celebrated
his victory in front of the Louvre pyramid,
and believes in the German philosopher
Hegel’s ‘cunning of history’ theory.

But can new French president Emmanuel Macron
be Hegel’s ‘man that embodies his time’? Can he put
his country on the right track after years of economic
and social stagnation, and give a new momentum to
EU integration?

His election victory in May against far-right leader
Marine Le Pen was greeted with sighs of relief in EU
capitals and especially in Brussels. After the Brexit
teilded, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the
near victory of a far-right candidate in the Austrian
presidential election, Macron was seen as the last
defence against populism, anti-EU forces.

“He has a nonstandard majority, he can do whatever
he wants,” De Marcilly noted.

“But the window will be short, domestically and at
EU level,” he warned.

FRANCE IS BETTER BUT NOT
CURED
According to the European Commission, France’s
growth will be 1.6 percent in 2017 (below the EU
and eurozone average), unemployment will remain
around 9.5 percent and while the deficit will decrease
to reach the EU-required three percent of GDP, it is
expected to increase again in 2019.

“France is getting better but is not cured,” De
Marcilly said.

During his campaign, Macron insisted that France
must reform itself to be competitive in a globalised world, but also to be in a position to ask its EU partners - Germany in particular - to change policies which many Europeans reject.

Macron’s main reform since he took office was a set of new labour laws, which were enacted in September via decrees in order to bypass opposition in parliament and trade unions.

The new rules make hiring and firing more flexible and less costly for companies. In addition, the budget for 2018 abolished the wealth tax - an additional tax on property over €1.3 million - and introduced a flat tax on capital instead.

In 2018, Macron plans a politically-risky reform of the pensions system, under which all existing schemes will be merged. Under the new system, which is still undergoing preparations, people will accumulate points instead of years of contributions and will be able to stop working if they accept receiving less money when retired.

“France cannot be reformed, it must be transformed,” the president said several times to justify what many in the country consider as too far-reaching and too liberal measures.

**ECONOMIC DYNAMICS**

Reforming or transforming the country to reduce unemployment is Macron’s main challenge, explained De Marcilly.

“His reforms must be underpinned by the economic dynamics from which Hollande did not benefit, like low interest rates, low energy prices, or an EU growth that is superior to the one in the US,” he said.

“This dynamic is awaited by France’s European partners and would add economic and budgetary credit to Macron’s personal and political credit.”

Despite rapidly declining approval ratings at home, Macron has used his international kudos to push for ambitious EU reforms. In a speech at the Sorbonne university in September, just two days after the German elections, he called on fellow EU leaders to
"shoulder [their] responsibilities" and make the EU more integrated, even if that means a 'multi-speed' union.

"Today, I take responsibility for making proposals, forging further ahead, being bold enough to talk about Europe and finding words of affection and ambition for it again," he said.

Among his main propositions are a eurozone budget, a smaller European Commission, new agencies for innovation and security, a trade prosecutor to protect the EU against unfair practices, and a carbon tax at EU borders.

He also proposed to create transnational lists for the European elections and said that he would organise "democratic conventions" across the EU.

Macron, who consulted with German chancellor Angela Merkel before his speech, also insisted that "France and Germany can inject decisive, practical momentum" to his plan.

At an EU summit two days later, Merkel said there was "a wide agreement between France and Germany when it comes to the proposals" but that leaders still had to "work on the details".

**ADDING UP VARIABLE GEOMETRIES**

At another summit in October, leaders endorsed a 'Leaders' Agenda' prepared by European Council president Donald Tusk for the next 18 months.

The document has "no lyricism, no Mona Lisa or comments on the shape of Greek temples," a top EU diplomat in Brussels quipped, in a reference to Macron's high-blown rhetorical style - suggesting that not all of Macron's ideas were taken on board.

Merkel, for one, needs to have a governing coalition to be able to position herself in regards to Macron's propositions. Other EU leaders were wary to take more integrationist steps.

Macron's election however created "a more positive spirit in the EU", according to a diplomat who works close to an EU leader. "There are more concrete ideas on the future of the EU" than before.
In an unusual move, both the Commission and the European Parliament published studies in which they showed the similarities and differences between Macron's ideas and both institutions' own proposals.

"Institutions look at the debate about the EU's future in comparison to the French propositions," De Marcilly noted.

But Macron, who transcended the traditional left-right divide in France, will have to find stable allies in European political parties, in particular ahead of the 2019 European elections.

Until now, the French president has found different alliances according to the issues on the table.

"His equation is to add up variable geometries," De Marcilly said.

Macron found support in Germany and Italy to push the European Commission to propose a screening of foreign investments in strategic sectors - a measure mainly aimed at China.

He allied with Germany, Italy, Spain and eight other countries from all parts of the EU to demand a quick taxation of internet firms where they make their profits.

ENERGY FACES RESISTANCE
On the revision of the posted workers directive - an issue he took up as a domestic and EU fight against social dumping - he worked closely with Germany, Austria and the Benelux countries, while at the same time touring eastern European countries to overcome their opposition to changing the rules.

Macron "took a risk" over the issue but won a "personal victory" when EU ministers agreed on a deal in October, after 18 months of discussions, De Marcilly admitted.

But in the long run, if he wants to avoid being dependent on other leaders - and mainly Merkel - to succeed, Macron will have to "create a new political offer at EU level" as he did in France, the think tank official pointed out.

Preparing for the European elections will be his priority in 2018.

At the October EU summit, Macron assured other leaders that he "still has much energy" and that it is "normal that energy faces resistance."

"It is the characteristic of movement in physics," he explained. "Otherwise you are only a moving body on air cushion, going nowhere."

After a spectacular start this year, the EU's 'wonderboy' will have to make sure he does not fall off that air cushion.

"There was such a relief because he is a new man, who campaigned on a pro-EU platform, who is quite rational and understands what is going on here," said Charles de Marcilly of the Robert Schuman Foundation.
Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron both won the elections in their home countries, reinvigorating the German-French engine of EU integration.

Photo: Council of the European Union

UK prime minister Theresa May gambled and lost in the June elections. She had called a snap election to quash dissent on Brexit and instead lost her majority.

Photo: Prime minister’s office

Prime minister Mark Rutte’s Liberals party came out first in the Dutch elections on 15 March, despite losing seats. Rutte presented a new cabinet in October after record-breaking coalition talks.

Photo: Roel Wijnants

Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat (l), seen here with European Council president Donald Tusk, called a snap election during the six-month period his country chaired the Council of the EU. Although his party lost two seats, Labour remained in power.

Photo: consilium.europa.eu

Sebastian Kurz, born in August 1986, gave Austria’s People’s Party (OVP) an electoral victory in October 2017. The OVP came out on top, although when this magazine went to print, a coalition deal was still being negotiated.

Photo: Sebastian Kurz/Flickr
VISEGRAD CRACKS AND DIVISIONS

The V4 countries have become one of the most vocal and recognised groups within the EU. But 2017 has seen a shake-up in the informal eastern and central European power bloc.

By Eszter Zalan

The Visegrad Four (V4), a loose alliance of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia grabbed the limelight in 2016 with its vocal and uncompromising resistance against taking in asylum-seekers from overwhelmed frontline EU states. Although the group was established only in 1991, the migration crisis has transformed the V4 into a political factor to be reckoned with at EU level.

However, 2017 saw the group’s members diverging on how they relate to the EU. Against the backdrop of the migration crisis, and Poland and Hungary promoting an illiberal form of democracy (with several EU probes launched against them), the V4 has become synonymous with euro scepticism.

Meanwhile – frustrated particularly with what is seen as a lack of solidarity by the V4 countries on migration – some in the EU have suggested that it is time for core member states to move ahead with integration and leave reluctant member states behind.

Debating how to move the EU forward after Brexit, various scenarios were drawn up before the Rome

Junker hosted the V4 prime ministers for dinner in October to mend ties with the Commission

Photo: European Commission
Summit in March, marking the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Rome treaty. One scenario - a ‘multi-speed’ Europe - has played into the deep-seated fear of the V4 countries, of being treated as second-class members in the EU, and have vehemently warned that a multi-speed Europe could lead to the disintegration of the EU.

References to a multi-speed Europe were eventually watered down in the Rome Declaration, but the idea has not gone away. Newly-elected French president Emmanuel Macron floated it again later in the year, irking the V4 countries.

DIVISIONS RISE TO THE SURFACE
The political divide between eastern and western EU member states has become more palpable. The issue of posted workers, the different quality of some goods distributed in central and eastern European markets, and the reform of the EU’s asylum system exposed cracks in V4 solidarity, which, some have argued was not new, just previously hidden.

"It is not a fundamental issue, maybe more visible now [than before]," said Konrad Szymanki, Poland’s EU affairs minister.

However, European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker felt it was important to address these countries in his state of the union speech in September, as he urged eastern member states to join the euro with the help of a new pre-accession assistance fund.

Juncker also told other member states to allow Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen zone, as he attempted to dispel fears that eastern Europeans were second-class EU citizens. Ahead of the October summit, Juncker hosted the V4 prime ministers for dinner to mend relations between the EU executive and the four countries.

Juncker’s strategy has been to lure the V4 closer to the core by reminding them that some – including powerful leaders such as Macron – would not mind leaving others behind as they pursue a speedier integration.

When it came to the relationship with the EU core, it has become evident in 2017 that the V4 is not, in fact, a homogenous group.

Slovakia, after holding the EU council’s presidency for the second half of 2016, toned down its rhetoric on migrants, and accepted around a dozen asylum-seekers. Prime minister Robert Fico stated explicitly
in August that Slovakia’s place is with the EU core.

"The fundamentals of my policy are being close to the [EU] core, close to France, to Germany. I am very much interested in regional cooperation within the Visegrad Four but Slovakia’s vital interest is the EU," he said. Slovakia is the only eurozone member among the V4.

In an interview with Germany’s Handelsblatt, Austria’s then prime minister Christian Kern shed light on that point, saying the group is now split - with the Czech Republic and Slovakia on one side and Hungary and Poland on the other.

Hungary objected, with foreign minister Peter Szijjarto retorting: "We have bad news for them: these attempts will not succeed. The Visegrad Group is the closest and most effective alliance within the European Union and it will remain so, whether the Austrian chancellor likes it or not."

However, Poland and Hungary's illiberal leanings (notably over the rule of law and the reluctance to respect common EU decisions) was becoming toxic.

Romania denied wanting to join the V4. Bulgaria, which will hold the rotating presidency of the EU council in 2018, wants to join the euro, and highlighted its multicultural historical background - emphasising that its attitude towards migrants is fundamentally more positive than that of the V4.

**FINAL TWIST**

But in a twist of events, the V4 had found new fans of power in various capitals. The election victory of populist Andrej Babis in the Czech Republic raised questions on whether Prague will now follow the lead of Budapest and Warsaw. While the victory of conservative leader Sebastian Kurz in Austria meant that the governments in Hungary and Poland had gained an important ally in central Europe, and even suggests the possibility of Austria joining the Visegrad grouping.

The V4 works together where there is common understanding. It does not have a seat, or a secretariat, it is a political lobby group of member states. It worked well during the migration crisis to amplify the populist voices coming from Poland and Hungary.

The upcoming talks on the seven-year EU budget will give it a chance to work together - but also the threat of being even more divided, based on which country could get the most EU subsidies.

The V4's future direction may be both more fragmented and less dramatic.

The V4 before the Czech elections in October: (left to right) Bohuslav Sobotka (Czech Republic), Beata Szydło (Poland), Viktor Orbán (Hungary) and Robert Fico (Slovakia)

**Photo:** Polish prime minister’s office
Eberhard van der Laan was a much-loved mayor of Amsterdam who died in October 2017. EU commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker (l) called him “a great friend of Europe”.

Niels Helveg Peterson (1939-2017) was Denmark’s foreign minister for most of the 1990s. Helveg Peterson is seen here signing the Amsterdam treaty in 1997, but resigned in 2000 because he could not defend Denmark’s opt-outs.

Photo: European Commission


Photo: European Commission

Former chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl was the first European citizen to receive a ceremony in the Strasbourg plenary of the European Parliament. Kohl received praise for his role in EU integration, including setting up the euro.

Photo: European Commission

Daphne Caruana Galizia was one of Malta’s most outspoken journalists, spending years exposing corruption on the Mediterranean island for the Malta Independent. She was killed by a car bomb in October 2017, aged 53, shocking the EU’s smallest member state.

Photo: Daphne Caruana Galizia

Simone Veil, president of the first directly elected European Parliament from 1979 until 1982, died this year.

Photo: European Parliament
Although the Remain side lost 2016’s UK referendum, British Europhiles still have come out to demonstrate their love.
Photo: Ghaled Ahmed

The Catalan issue elicited many emotional responses from both sides.
Photo: Sasha Popovic

The European Commission has put pressure on Poland over rule of law issues. Ordinary Poles have taken to the streets in protest against their government’s actions.
Photo: Aleksandra Eriksson

Activists worried about possible side-effects on human health wanted the EU to ban the weedkiller glyphosate. On 27 November, a member states committee decided to renew the substance’s licence for a period of five years, instead of the normal fifteen years.
Photo: Felix Kindermann / Compact

Although the far right Alternative for Germany party democratically won 94 seats in the Bundestag, supporters of far left Die Linke (69 seats) protested against their accession in the German parliament.
Photo: Die Linke
EU 'solidarity' on migration focuses on Africa

Photo: © UNICEF/Romenzi
EU states appear to have found common ground in trying to prevent people with no right to international protection from ever leaving for Europe. The EU is ready to use any means necessary to convince 'origin-and-transit' countries to cooperate.

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Migration is an EU policy issue that has exposed national divides, boosted far-right groups, and helped elect a young Austrian to head of state.

While unable to find a common ground on internal EU asylum policies, capitals have instead shifted the bulk of their attention on stopping immigrants from reaching EU shores in the first place.

"In a sense, this is also a kind of a cynical way out of the solidarity deadlock," said Kris Pollet, a senior policy officer at the Brussels-based European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

The 31-year old Austrian leader Sebastian Kurz wants to toughen up external borders and have refugees interned offshore, similar to a controversial Australian model. His ideas may gain wider traction once Austria takes the helm of the EU presidency next summer.

Such political issues invariably link back to Libya, which has been a focal point in EU endeavours to curb migrant flows. Money is also being poured into programmes throughout much of Africa via the EU's €3.1 billion trust fund.

But the general chaos and lack of security throughout the north African state is worrying. Around 1,500 armed militia groups appear to operate with impunity amid rampant oil, migrant, and weapons smuggling.

Among the biggest is Khalifa Haftar, who was hosted this past year by both Paris and Rome, and whose Libyan National Army is now in possession of Czech Mi-24v attack helicopters. Haftar controls large swathes of eastern Libya and is a rival of the UN-backed government of national accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

The mess in Libya has policy makers scrambling for more creative solutions, including EU-backed efforts in and around Sabha in the south.

SECURITY OVER DEVELOPMENT
Notorious for its trafficking and open sale of slaves, Sabha is surrounded by powerful tribes. It is also an area where the Geneva-based International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is working with local authorities to try to improve the living conditions of surrounding communities.

But finding ways to prevent people from venturing into Libya in the first place has become one of the EU's main objectives.

Niger is key. Its capital city Agadez is a major smuggling hub for people wanting to reach war-torn Libya. Amid information campaigns and schemes to return people to their countries of origin, fewer people are now venturing into Libya.

But war and conflict throughout much of the nearby Lake Chad basin continues to rage, pitting EU funding priorities against those of NGOs like Oxfam.

"The EU is prioritising more the security sector, investing more on the military in this fight against counter-extremism but there are millions of people in need of humanitarian assistance," said Nafkote Dabi, an Oxfam policy expert.

Niger, along with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania, now make up a French-led G5 Sahel military joint force that received some €50 million in EU funding. The 5,000 troops are said to be needed to provide security before further development can take place throughout the region.

Dabi warns overlooking issues like humanitarian aid in the Lake Chad area could instead lead to even more chaos as people face the scourge of the Boko Haram militias. "People are desperate, they are not able to go back to their homes or resume their lives," she said.

The conflict and the lack of central authority in many of these areas means the EU is having to measure its success in terms of how many migrants are attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

It means stepping up efforts to close down the routes and putting in place a system where people are returned home more quickly.
It entails a renewed push to get international aid organisations up and running in Libya as people, plucked from its territorial waters, are returned and sent to any number of notorious detention centres.

**CRIMINAL SYSTEM OF ABUSE**
Those efforts have been heavily criticised by Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), whose president Joanne Liu accused the EU of "feeding a criminal system of abuse" by forcing migrants back to the country.

Some 142 Libyans have now been trained by the EU’s naval operation, Sophia. A first training package included 93 Libyan trainees, which had spent 14 weeks on board the Italian ship San Giorgio and the first two weeks on board the Dutch ship Rotterdam.

Another 20 senior officers at the rank of captain or commodore were trained in Greece. Malta hosted 20 trainees and a module in Italy has been started for another 66 personnel.

The Libyan coast guard has since intercepted almost 19,000 people since the start of the year until October. Over the summer, a UN security panel said the guard was directly involved in human rights violations.

From the start of the year to mid-October, some 110,000 people arrived in Italy - a 25 percent decrease compared to the same period in 2016. Taking the period July and August alone, it represented an 80 percent drop, and was hailed as a victory by Italy’s interior minister, Marco Minniti.

Donald Tusk, the EU council president, in October
said the EU stands behind Italy in its work with Libyan authorities. "We have a real chance of closing the 'Central Mediterranean' route," he announced.

But the same route compared to last year has also become more deadly in terms of drownings versus arrivals.

In November, the bodies of 26 trafficked women, found on inflatable boats, arrived in Italy. "It is very likely that these girls were, in fact, victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation," said the IOM.

SMUGGLERS AND ARMED MILITIAS
In a seeming never-ending game of ‘cat-and-mouse’, smugglers are now cramming people onto rubber floats, fearful that the EU’s naval operation Sophia would seize and destroy more seaworthy alternatives.

Sophia has so far arrested 117 suspected smugglers and traffickers and destroyed 491 boats.

But the sharp drop in arrivals over the summer also points to insider deals between Italian authorities and Tripoli, who reportedly paid off local armed militias to prevent people from disembarking.

That the recognised Libyan authorities in Tripoli are intertwined with armed militia groups renders the EU’s policy response on migration all the more dubious. The UN-backed GNA is said to have helped broker the deal, which sparked a major clash between rival militia factions in the smuggling city of Sabratha.

The fighting revealed thousands of stranded migrants and forced the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and IOM to step in and help them.
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