The Spitzen process
– a coup that was never accepted

The travelling circus

The murky perks of an MEP

Russia and far-right to battle EU 'Gay Satan'

The gender gap at EU elections
The right to vote

It is difficult to acknowledge you don’t know something. A few months ago, several thousand Europeans were asked hundreds of questions for the Eurobarometer poll. One of those questions was: “Do you agree with the statement: ‘I understand how the EU works’.” Only 10 percent totally disagreed with that statement. Another 29 percent “tended to disagree”. Peculiarly, three percent said they did not know whether to agree or disagree.

In other words, only one-in-10 EU citizens were willing to admit they did not understand how the EU worked.

Those taking the survey were also asked to say if it was true that members of the European Parliament were directly elected by the citizens of each EU member state.

Strikingly, 15 percent said they did not know, while 26 percent said this was wrong: (incorrectly, because MEPs are, in fact, directly-elected by voters in each member state).

The result indicated that quite some work is still needed to inform EU citizens of how the EU works - an all-the-more pressing need as around 350 million European citizens will have the right to go to the polls in May 2019.

This magazine is meant to help readers prepare for the European Parliament elections, no matter their level of knowledge.

It explains what the EU’s only directly-elected body does, why its MEPs are dividing their time between Brussels and Strasbourg, and how much they are paid.

It also explores the ways in which Russia is trying to influence the outcome, and how the election result could help determine the next president of the European Commission.

Most of all, it encourages people to go out and vote.

Since the first EU elections in 1979, the voter turnout figure has, sadly, known only one direction: down. At the same time, the impact of EU politics on people’s daily lives has dramatically increased.

Whether you are a federalist, a moderate, or wholly opposed to EU integration, the right to vote is the source of envy in many countries across the world. Let’s use it.

Peter Teffer
While domestic political parties often use the European Parliament as a dumping ground for unwanted politicians - and a majority of citizens don't bother to vote - the parliament, over the years, has become a dominant force in the EU.

By Eszter Zalan

The European parliament takes pride in being the only EU institution whose members are elected directly by the European people.

That has been the case since 1979.

The parliament has used this political legitimacy to claim more and more legislative power over the years, sometimes irking member states that have to negotiate rules with parliamentarians.

Yet paradoxically, despite gaining influence, the parliament has at the same time been losing the interest and votes of EU citizens - of whom only 42.6 percent participated in the last European election in 2014.

WHO ARE ITS MEMBERS?

The parliament consists of 751 MEPs from the 28 member states.

After Brexit and the departure of the UK’s MEPs, the parliament will number 705 members.

The number of MEPs elected from an EU country depends on the size of the population, with the largest (Germany) having 96 members, down to Cyprus, Estonia, Luxembourg and Malta sending six members each.

They are elected for five-year terms. MEPs form political groups that can secure financial funding, important seats in committees, and their members can be tasked with overseeing and guiding legislative files.
Currently, the largest political group is the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) with 217 members. Centre-left socialists sit in the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) group, the second largest, while right-wing conservatives, liberals, greens, the far-left and far-right parties also have their own smaller groups to represent them.

MEPs earn almost €8,800 per month before taxes (that is EU taxes, with favourable rates compared to national ones), and in addition get generous funding for expenses and office costs.

**WHERE IS IT REALLY?**
It has been the focus of ongoing controversy and has fed eurosceptic arguments against the EU’s ‘bureaucracy’ for decades that the parliament divides itself between Brussels and Strasbourg.

Each month, thousands of parliament staff and a massive amount of paperwork travels from the Belgian capital to the French city for the plenary sessions, with special trains commissioned from Brussels.

Dubbed the ‘travelling circus’, the moves are said to cost EU taxpayers over €100m each year. In 2013, MEPs themselves voted to back a single seat for the parliament, but - sadly and perhaps peculiarly - it is not up to them to decide.

In 1992 EU governments agreed to lay down in a treaty that the parliament’s official seat is in Strasbourg, and since France is not willing to give that up, the circus will keep on rolling.

**WHAT IS IT DOING?**
The parliament has the right to adopt and amend legislation in tandem with member states and also participates in negotiating the EU budget. The vast majority of EU legislation happens in the so-called “ordinary legislative procedure”.

Under this procedure, the commission makes a proposal, the parliament appoints an MEP responsible for the file, and negotiations start with the member states once both parliament and the member states represented in the council of the EU agree their own initial position.
Negotiations on legislation are done in the secretive, informal "trilogue" meetings with representatives from the commission, the council and parliament sitting together hammering out compromises. There were 251 trilogues in 2017.

Once a consensus is reached, the legislation is then adopted by the council and voted in the parliament's relevant committee and later, the plenary.

The parliament is also responsible for electing the president of the European commission.

After a European election, EU governments haggle over possible candidates "taking into account" the result of the elections, as the Lisbon Treaty stipulates.

Since 2014, the parliament, under the so-called 'Spitzenkandidat' process, has attempted to force governments' hands by pushing them to elect the candidate that manages to secure a majority in the parliament.

Candidates for the different commission portfolios also have to go through a parliamentary grilling.

**WHO ARE THE POWER BROKERS?**

Some of the most powerful posts in the parliament are quite visible: the president represents the EP in meetings with EU leaders, and participates in key decisions.

The leaders of the political groups are key in deciding what gets on the parliament's agenda, who will be members of the committees, deciding on institutional issues, how politically-sensitive topics will be handled, and which party gets to steer important legislative files.

The fortnightly Thursday meetings of the "conference of presidents" is the governing body of the parliament. It consists of the president and the political group leaders.

A less visible, but no less powerful, hub is the "bureau", which deals with issues relating to the budget, administration, organisation and staff of the EP.

---

Around 8,000 staff work in the parliament, conversing in a total of 24 languages

*Photo: European Parliament*
It is composed of the president, the 14 vice-presidents of the parliament and the five quaestors, responsible for administrative and financial matters.

Behind both of these bodies stands the all-powerful secretary-general of the parliament - a post that has been held by the German Klaus Welle since 2009. He is responsible for what gets on the table of the president, the conference of presidents and the bureau.

Rapporteurs are MEPs responsible for specific reports on legislative files.

They are also key actors as they set the tone for the parliament’s position on a specific initiative or issue, and work together with shadow rapporteurs from other political groups in their committee to prepare a common position and then lead negotiations with member states.

The election of rapporteurs is done through a complicated points system, in which political party groups bid for a report or a topic, like in an auction. In other cases, groups themselves agree on an appointment.

IS IT A TOWER OF BABEL?

Almost 8,000 people work in the parliament, either in the administration or attached to political parties and their politicians. Some of them are based in Luxembourg.

Altogether, they speak the 24 official languages of the EU, and Brexit will not change that as English will remain one of the official languages.

To guarantee the same working conditions for everyone, all documents and debates are available in all the languages.

There are 552 possible language combinations, and around 300 staff interpreters and more than 1,500 external accredited interpreters to make sense of it all.

For the plenary session weeks, some 700 to 900 interpreters are on hand. The parliament also employs about 700 translators, who monthly translate more than 100,000 pages of documents.
Ready for your new adventure in Belgium?

ING makes your life easy by helping you organize all your financial affairs. Call +32 2 464 66 64, or go to ing.be/expats
The Spitzen process – a coup that was never accepted

It is a divisive 'Brussels bubble' debate: whether to give the European Parliament more of a say on who becomes the next European Commission president. But the issue goes right to the heart of European integration.

By Eszter Zalan

National governments view it with suspicion, while diplomats talk of a 'coup' by the European Parliament.

EU officials argue it increases the democratic legitimacy of the whole bloc, giving voters an (indirect) say in who will run the next European Commission.

The spectrum of arguments for and against is almost as wide as the gap that remains between citizens and the leaders of European institutions, but the 2019 EU elections could finally decide the fate of the so-called Spitzenkandidat (lead candidate) process itself.

That piece of EU-jargon stands for giving a larger say to the European parliament in choosing the next head of the EU executive: created in 2014, the new process came to symbolise the serious and never-ending power struggle between the parliament and member states.

Two Germans, the European parliament's secretary general, Klaus Welle – no less shadowy and powerful than his compatriot heading the commission's services, Martin Selmayr – plus the parliament president at the time, Germany's Martin Schulz, came up with the idea of having political parties announce their 'lead candidates' for commission president ahead of the election itself.

The lead candidate whose party can muster a majority alliance in the new parliament would then lead the European commission, requiring only a nod from member states.

EU governments viewed the process with scepticism but woke up too late to lobby against it, finding themselves having to appoint Jean-Claude Juncker to head the EU executive, after German chancellor Angela Merkel finally caved in to the process.

The Spitzenkandidat process has its basis in the Treaty of Lisbon, which says that member states can propose a president for the commission "taking into account the elections" to the parliament, with the European parliament voting on the person.

Last time - which was the first time it was used -
both the UK prime minister David Cameron and Hungary’s premier Viktor Orban did not back Juncker.

But other member states were also unhappy with the parliament seizing the process of choosing the commission’s president - which had always previously been the preserve of EU capitals’ private horse-trading.

The parliament argued it created a “direct link” between voters and the commission president that would boost the democratic legitimacy of both the EU executive and the EU as a whole, create transparency in the election process and, not least, increase turnout at European elections.

However, the experiment did not, in fact, inspire voters. As citizens vote for their home parties and not EU-wide alliances, few were even aware of the top candidates.

In fact, voter turnout actually decreased slightly, from 43 percent in 2009 to 42.6 percent in 2014. It was an all-time low for the European parliament since direct elections were first introduced in 1979.

**WHAT ABOUT 2019?**

Currently, the Spitzenkandidat system can appear more of an institutional power struggle under the facade of promoting democracy, rather than actually giving tangible power to voters.

For one thing, it is unlikely that significant numbers of voters will either know of or be influenced by the lead candidate process - although it raises the parliament’s political profile without a watertight legal basis.

And as things currently stand, it cements the largest political group, the European People’s Party (EPP)’s hold on the commission.

The parliament is pushing ahead nevertheless, and has even raised the stakes.
In February 2018 it adopted a text saying that they would only accept a candidate for the commission if he or she had run in the 2019 elections as a lead candidate, ruling out any last-minute 'parachuted-in' candidates.

But member states are also on the lookout this time. They know if it successfully produces a commission president for a second time, the process will be increasingly difficult to scrap.

In February 2018, an informal gathering of EU leaders agreed that their governments "cannot guarantee in advance" that they will endorse one of the lead candidates for president of the European commission.

"There is no 'automaticity' in the process,' said EU council chief Donald Tusk at the time.

However, some EU officials warn that the process itself has gained political weight, and despite the scepticism and criticisms, it could have enough political momentum to force governments' hands.

"Imagine months of campaigning, a top candidate putting together a majority coalition in parliament and member states rejecting that person. Politically, it will be difficult to do," one senior EU official warned.

As yet, there has been little appetite among politicians to run for the presidency of the commission via the Spitzenkandidat process.

Months of campaigning makes it difficult for sitting prime ministers or other leaders in office to join the race.

The EU's largest political alliance, the centre-right EPP – which already runs the three key EU institutions – was nevertheless quick to push ahead.

The EPP is expected to remain the largest party in Europe, even if it loses votes to more hardline rightwing alliances and populists - but their top position is not in serious doubt.

This makes the EPP's lead candidate the most important to watch - but also raises doubts whether the process can truly be as transformative as parliamentarians like to think.

The EPP's group leader in the parliament, the Bavarian Manfred Weber threw his hat in the ring last September. Weber has held no executive job and has been an MEP for 15 years.

Weber secured the tacit support of Merkel, a key factor, and won the EPP's internal nomination process in November, which was more self-celebratory than a competitive showdown.

Speculation is rife in Brussels, however, as to whether Weber is capable of steering thousands of eurocrats while under immense political pressure from member states, whose governments are increasingly eurosceptic.

Weber's team argues that he is a bridge-builder and therefore right for the job.

But some predict Weber is merely the 'place-holder' for a last-minute candidate with a higher profile.

The EU's Brexit negotiator, Frenchman Michel Barnier (who last September ruled out running for the position), raised expectations again early in 2019 with a wide-ranging op-ed about the future of Europe.
Barnier’s achievement in keeping the EU-27 unified during the Brexit negotiations is seen as a key asset in a deeply-divided Europe.

However, it remains to be seen how much backing he would get from the Elysee Palace.

French president Emmanuel Macron has not backed the Spitzenkandidat system, as his party (La Republique en Marche/The Republic On The Move) has not yet entered the European parliament, making it difficult for him to throw his weight around in choosing the next commission chief. He is also from a different political family than Barnier.

Macron also previously proposed a new method of electing MEPs through transnational lists - but that idea had died in the parliament in 2018.

Weber’s main opponent will be the Dutch commissioner, Frans Timmermans, who runs as the lead candidate for the Socialists & Democrats after Maros Sefcovic, Slovakia’s current commissioner, withdrew his candidacy.

The Greens have two top candidates, as is traditional for them, with Germany’s Ska Keller and the Netherlands’ Bas Eickhout.

The rightwing anti-federalist European Conservatives and Reformists put forward the Czech Jan Zahradil, while the liberal ALDE group will put together a team of candidates.

While the Spitzen system is a deeply institutional and ‘EU bubble’ discussion, it highlights the core power struggle between member states and transnational institutions that goes to the heart of the debate over European integration.

It also raises questions over what exactly democratic control means.

In that sense, it is very much an issue that concerns every citizen. How many will actually vote - or even pay attention to a process specifically designed to
THE CANDIDATES

Manfred Weber, EPP *(b. 1972)*
National party: Christian Social Union (Germany)
The Bavarian politician has been a member of the European Parliament since 2004. He has been leading the jittery European People’s Party group in the parliament that has had to deal with its Hungarian member, Fidesz, and its leader, prime minister Viktor Orban - one of the vanguards of elected far-right leaders, centralising his grip on his country and undermining independent institutions. Weber has scolded Orban, but the EPP has never sanctioned Fidesz.

Weber argues he is a bridge-builder, but the schism among his group members boiled to the surface recently over Hungary, with the EPP giving its back to a parliament report critical of Budapest. One of Weber’s main themes for the campaign is ‘Christian Europe’ and he rejects Turkey’s membership to the EU. He calls for better security, and backs an additional 10,000 staff for the EU’s border guard agency. Weber is also promising to be a bulwark against populism – but here his track record is disappointing. He also wants Europe to be in the forefront of finding cures for diseases like cancer and Alzheimer’s.

Frans Timmermans, S&D *(b. 1961)*
National Party: Labour Party (Netherlands)
Timmermans is currently second-in-command at the European Commission. While he was given the unenviable task of reigning in member states posing a challenge to the rule of law or democracy, namely Hungary and Poland, it sometimes seemed he lacked political backing from EU commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, to press ahead.

Timmermans is credited with being a charismatic orator, who speaks Italian, German, Russian, French and English, as well as his native Dutch. Back home, he served as foreign affairs minister between 2012 and 2014, and state secretary for EU affairs between 2007 and 2010. He also served in the national parliament for a decade. Timmermans said he decided to run to defend the EU and its values as it came under attack in recent years from both within and outside. The Socialists and Democrats, currently the second largest group in the parliament, are also expected to lose dozens of seats, while Timmermans is unlikely to make the socialists more attractive in central and eastern Europe, where he is viewed with suspicion and accused of interfering in domestic affairs.

Jan Zahradil, ECR *(b. 1963)*
National Party: Civic Democratic Party (Czech Republic)
Zahradil is the only central and eastern European candidate in the running to lead the commission. He used to be a deputy in the Prague parliament. He has been an MEP since his country joined the EU in 2004. Zahradil served as advisor to former president Vaclav Klaus who was head of state for the Czech Republic for ten years.

Zahradil has been described as both a libertarian
and a eurosceptic. He has little chance of becoming the commission president. There is also the question what will become of his political group, the European Conservatives and Reformists, as the UK’s Conservatives are leaving the EU, and Poland’s ruling Law and Justice (PiS) may team up with Italy’s far-right leader, Matteo Salvini.

Ska Keller (b.1981) and Bas Eickhout (b.1976), Greens

National Parties: Alliance 90/The Greens, and Groenlinks (Germany and the Netherlands)

Both MEPs for the Green group, Keller and Eickhout aim to bring an alternative to the rise of populism while defending EU values and promoting a leftist economic policy that would put human well-being at the centre of economic policy. The urgent need to tackle climate change also puts the Greens in a favourable position, following 2018’s heatwave and the subsequent Green ‘surge’ across some EU member states. However, since there are only a few member parties in the eastern and southern parts of Europe, it is unlikely the Greens could produce such an unprecedented surge at the ballot box to give them the next commission chief.

Violeta Tomic (b.1963) and Nico Cue (b.1956), Liberals

National Parties: Levica/no listed affiliation

At the end of January 2019 the European left (part of the far-left parliamentary group) nominated a Slovenian MP Violeta Tomic from the Levica party and former secretary general of the Metalworkers’ Union of Belgium, Nico Cue as their lead candidates. The leader of European Left, Gregor Gysi said that their candidacy tells voters that the party is on the side of those “who do not accept the growing contradiction between wealth and poverty”. He added the party will fight for preventing a “militaristic” EU, for environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

THE ‘MAYBE’ CANDIDATES

Michel Barnier, EPP (b.1951)

National Party: Les Republicains (France)

Barnier has repeatedly ruled out running for the top job, but the suave and unruffled French politician enjoys broad support, at least within the EU bubble. He served as a minister in several positions, and French commissioner, later losing to Jean-Claude Juncker in the 2014 EPP contest for the lead candidate position.

In 2016 Barnier returned to Brussels as the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator. He is credited with a methodological negotiation strategy that kept the EU-27 united throughout the talks, a rare achievement on any issue. He also hails from the EU’s powerhouse EPP, which gives him an advantage, but he (so far) lacks the support of his own president, Emmanuel Macron.

Mark Rutte, Liberals (b.1967)

National Party: People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (Netherlands)

Rutte has been prime minister of the Netherlands since 2010, which is an achievement in itself, considering the fragmented political landscape in the country. He has been credited with keeping the far-right and populist forces at bay in his own backyard after reinforcing his party’s leading position at the 2017 election against Geert Wilders. He nevertheless did so by pushing his own party somewhat to the right.

After seeing the political turmoil following the Brexit referendum in the UK, Rutte has emerged as one of the strongest pro-business voices remaining in the bloc. He has toned down his euroscepticism, while uniting fiscally-conservative and liberal trading countries to defend their interests as the UK leaves the EU. There has been speculation that Brussels might be a good exit for him from Dutch politics, although he has not hinted so far that he is interested.

Of course, the liberal nomination could be always upset by Denmark’s competition commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, a favourite for many in Brussels for her no-nonsense, pro-European stance. For her part, Vestager has said she would like to continue as competition commissioner.
Symbolism matters in politics and there is perhaps no greater negative image shaping perceptions of the European Union than what has been dubbed the 'travelling circus': twelve times a year members of the European Parliament relocate from Brussels to Strasbourg for a plenary session.

It is not just MEPs that have to change their working location each month by some 400 kilometres to the south-east, but also civil servants from other EU institutions, lobbyists, and journalists.

If the plenary no longer met in Strasbourg, the parliament alone could save €114m per year, according to a 2015 European Court of Auditors report.

And the commute is used by eurosceptics as evidence of the EU's lack of efficiency.

Earlier this year, Italian deputy prime minister Luigi di Maio, of the Five Star Movement, decried it as a "symbol of arrogance". His argument was why should Italy's government be scolded for breaking EU budget rules, when the EU's own parliament continued with this "waste of money".

Eurosceptics "hijacking" the Strasbourg argument is exactly what centre-right Swedish-Italian MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt is trying to avoid.

"Their goal is to destroy Europe by showing that Europe is inefficient," she told EUobserver.

By contrast, the Campaign for a Single Seat for the European Parliament, which Corazza Bildt chairs, is "pro-Europe and pro-efficiency", but not "anti-Strasbourg".

The French city of Strasbourg is not as well-connected to other European capitals as Brussels is.

 Centre-right Swedish-Italian MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt
Photo: Single Seat campaign
"Strasbourg is a very lovely city. All of us, we love it. It’s historical, beautiful, cultural, artistic, everything. But we go there to work; we are not tourists in Strasbourg," said Corazza Bildt.

Contrary to what citizens may think, MEPs themselves are sick of their forced nomadism. In fact, a majority of MEPs have repeatedly called for a single location for the EU parliament in resolutions. However, it is not up to them.

The location of where MEPs meet is laid down in a treaty, which can only be changed by a unanimous decision of the EU’s national governments.

The history of the venue issue dates back all the way to the early days of European integration.

In the 1950s, the assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community met in Strasbourg, while its secretariat was located in Luxembourg. The decision to meet in Strasbourg was partly due to the fact that a separate organisation, the Council of Europe, had a plenary hall with translation facilities available.

Over the years however, more and more meetings were held in Brussels, where most of the EU institutions had begun to concentrate.

That situation was always provisional, and not defined by law.

This continued after the first direct elections of the European parliament in 1979, following which deputies decreasingly met in Luxembourg. It was not until a summit of national government leaders in Edinburgh in December 1992 that the location of the EU parliament was finally enshrined in law: Strasbourg would be the seat of 12 plenary sessions per year, while parliamentary committees would meet in Brussels.

The treaty, however, did not say how many days the parliament should meet in Strasbourg, and since 2001 it has been custom for MEPs not to meet on a Friday during Strasbourg week.

LOCATION DUPLICATION
The location duplication, however, remains an issue in legal disputes, with France doing all it can to defend the status quo. Luxembourg often sides...
with France at hearings in the Court of Justice, as it still hosts the secretariat of the parliament.

In one such case of France v Parliament, in October 2018, the court ruled that the parliament was within its right when it adopted the annual budget for 2017 in Brussels rather than in Strasbourg.

MEP Corazza Bildt sees enough reasons for optimism, and noted the issue was previously "taboo". She spoke to French president Emmanuel Macron twice about the seat issue. "He didn’t close the door to dialogue," she said.

Another positive sign was a public remark by German chancellor Angela Merkel in mid-2018. "The work of the European Parliament should be in one location," the German leader declared at a meeting of the European People’s Party, the largest political family in the EU.

"That’s been an absolute game-changer," Corazza Bildt said about Merkel’s statement.

"My assessment is that it’s not a mission impossible. It’s a matter of time."

Germany’s support is vital, because ‘Strasbourg’ also has a symbolic value beyond mere voting.

The surrounding Alsace region played an important role in Franco-German wars of the 19th and 20th centuries - one of the many reasons behind the original foundations of the current-day European Union.
Distribution of seats after Brexit

Graphics: Tobias Andreasen
As this magazine went to print, the United Kingdom was still expected to leave the EU on 29 March. If it does, the European Parliament will decrease its number of seats from 751 to 705. Some of the seats British MEPs vacate will be redistributed among other EU member states.
The murky perks of an MEP

Accountability and transparency are in short supply when it comes to how MEPs spend €40m every year on "office supplies". Efforts to pry open this secrecy have been met with strong resistance from many of the parliament's most powerful MEPs.

By Nikolaj Nielsen

MEPs in the European Parliament are entitled to generous perks on top of their monthly salaries of over €8,000.

But weak oversight, and the lack of a proper paper trail on these 'expenses', may have helped generate some of the backlash against an EU institution which already often struggles to connect with the public.

Turnout at the elections went from a high of 62 percent in 1979 to only 42 percent in 2014, official figures show.

Sensing this voter antipathy, even antagonism, recent manifestos from the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the liberal Alde groups have all demanded greater transparency in the EU institutions.

Yet the voting records at committee level since those manifestos were published point to a concerted effort to maintain a culture of secrecy at the European parliament - a position largely pushed by the EPP.

The EPP in January even imposed a secret ballot of MEPs on pro-transparency measures regarding lobbying. They lost.

Internal deliberations among political party presidents and vice-presidents had also overruled wide support by MEPs for greater transparency on how they spend taxpayers' money on themselves.

Among those seeking to keep a lid on it all is German centre-right MEP and vice-president Rainer Wieland.
Wieland had been entrusted to spearhead reforms to build public trust in the EP ahead of elections in May. But he has opposed proposals which would require MEPs to keep receipts for expenses, and have MEPs only meet with registered lobbyists.

THE SALARY

Up until 2009, an MEP’s salary was pegged to their domestic national counterparts. This created some large salary gaps between MEPs from different member states. For example, MPs in Malta earned around €21,000 a year compared to some €170,000 in Italy.

To counter such a divide, a decision was made to set an MEP’s monthly pay check at 38.5 percent of the basic salary of a judge at the European Court of Justice.

It means that today an MEP, regardless of nationality, receives €8,757.70 per month - €6,824.85 after taxes.

A whole range of benefits come on top of that, some of them controversial. Some perks continue to pay out even if they no longer work at the European Parliament.

For instance, European commissioner for climate Miguel Arias Canete, a former MEP, continues to draw a pension from the European parliament, despite the approximately €20,000 he now takes home every month for his job at the commission.

He draws the money from a controversial voluntary pension scheme that last year was running a €326m actuarial deficit.

The pension scheme was stopped in 2009 but continues to pay out - and is likely to go bust in a few years, leaving the EU public with the bill.

THE MEP TOP-UPS

In addition, MEPs receive an extra €4,500 a month for office expenses, tax-free. This money goes directly into their personal bank accounts, and costs a total of some €40m a year.

Unlike most employees' ‘expenses’, MEPs are not required to keep any receipts, leaving it an open question as to what extent they actually spend the money on things like office supplies.

A group of journalists in 2017 from across Europe had attempted to find out but were met with either
derision, silence, or partial responses.

Of the MEPs they approached, some 249 either said they had no office, or refused to reveal their addresses. In some cases, the location of their alleged office could not be found.

Manfred Weber, a German centre-right MEP who is vying to become the next president of the European Commission, has his local office in an annex to his private home in a small village in the Bavarian countryside.

He did not reply to questions, when pressed by the journalists to explain. Yet he is also asking, as part of his campaign to become commission president, for greater transparency.

In a resolution in late 2017, the European parliament backed plans for greater transparency on how such monthly expenses are spent. The following year, some 540 MEPs voted in favour.

Those MEPs in favour demanded that the monthly expense sum be deposited in a separate bank account; that MEPs should keep receipts; and that the unspent share of the general expenditure allowance (GEA) should be returned to the parliament’s coffers at the end of an MEP’s mandate.

But only the demand to have the money go to separate account, still with no oversight, was allowed following a behind-closed-doors meeting by the Bureau in 2018.

Other efforts to allow willing MEPs to voluntarily publish an audit of their monthly expenses on the European parliament website have also been met with resistance, mostly from centre-right MEPs. And the EPP resistance to such measures has found allies with the liberal Alde group.

HOTELS AND TRAVEL

Aside from the €4,500 tax-free general allowance expenditure, MEPs are also entitled to a flat-rate of €320 per day to cover things like hotels when on official business in Brussels or Strasbourg.

They also receive a daily allowance of €160 whenever they meet outside the European Union. They can get up to €4,454 per year reimbursed for any travel outside their own country. Another two-thirds of their medical expenses are also reimbursed.

Despite all this, many still hold second jobs in the private sector, posing further questions on their mandate to serve the public that voted them in.

Among the biggest outside earners is Lithuanian MEP Antanas Guoga, a poker champion and entrepreneur who pulled in just under €800,000 in outside income in 2018.

Nigel Farage, the British eurosceptic MEP who often rails against a ‘Brussels elite’ but has used a private jet to attend the plenary sessions in Strasbourg, earned up to €420,000 in outside income as well, mostly from lucrative broadcast contracts.
Russia and far-right to battle EU 'Gay Satan'

Sexual hate speech is set to be an ugly meme in Russia and the EU far-right's campaign for the May elections, but the pro-EU side also has a compelling story to tell.

By Andrew Rettman

In 2018, prosecutors around the EU working to solve serious cross-border crime turned to Eurojust for assistance in more than 4,000 cases.

Eurojust provides hands-on support to criminal justice across borders, ranging from quick action through the on-call 24/7 service to setting up joint investigation teams and coordinating joint action days for complex investigations. Over 2,000 cases concerned the types of crime that pose the most serious threat to Europe: terrorism, migrant smuggling, cybercrime and organised crime.

Criminal Justice On-Call

Want to find out more?
Follow the presentation of our Annual Report 2018 in the European Parliament (LIBE Committee) on 2 April.
Follow us on Twitter @Eurojust
Sexual hate speech is likely to be an ugly meme in Russian anti-EU propaganda ahead of European Parliament (EP) elections in May.

The Kremlin wields formidable media firepower and also uses more sinister “technologies” to meddle in EU democracies.

The stakes are high, as Russian president Vladimir Putin tries to help the EU far-right to reach unprecedented levels in the EP, thereby destabilising Europe’s institutional architecture.

Propaganda can make an impact in a political environment where narrow margins decide outcomes.

But the pro-EU side also has a compelling story and it remains to be seen how many hearts Russia and its far-right EU friends can win.

**West as ‘Gay Satan’**

The archetypal image of ‘the West’ as a black, gay, Satan-figure was incanted on stage by Russia five years ago.

It came in a pageant by the Night Wolves, a Kremlin-sponsored biker club, in the Crimean city of Sevastopol.

In the show, Alexander Zaldostanov, the biker chief, intoned the words of Russian writer Alexander Prokhanov.

“The black sperm of fascism splashed upon Kiev,” he said. “In the golden apse of St Sofia [Kiev’s cathedral] ... was conceived a deformed embryo with hairy face and black horns”, he added.

It was August 2014 and Russia had just annexed Crimea from Ukraine.
This ‘satan’ was meant to be Barack Obama, the then US president, who is black, and the West more broadly speaking.

The embryo was meant to be the pro-EU revolution in Kiev earlier that year - the Euromaidan, which Russia blamed on Western conspiracies.

The Crimea pageant was broadcast on Russian TV and was meant primarily for a Russian audience.

But it was part of a wider anti-EU campaign which uses similar sexual motifs.

It also showed Ukraine was a front line between Russia and the West not just in military terms, but in terms of a culture war.

"There was a moment in Russian politics in 2010 or 2011, when Russia gave up on becoming a European-type rule-of-law state and moved instead into what Putin called Eurasia, where the issue is not what we can do, but who we are, and who we are is supposedly straight and white," Timothy Snyder, a historian at Yale University in the US, told EUobserver in January.

The culture war against the EU began shortly afterward, said Snyder, who chronicled the developments in his new book, The Road to Unfreedom.

"In terms of Europe, it came in 2013, when France legalised same-sex partnerships, and French far-right politicians, such as Marine Le Pen, started coming to Russia, giving speeches on how wonderful Russian civilisation was," Snyder said.

"It’s at that moment that this Russian idea - that we’re going to protect Europe from itself, that we’re going to protect heterosexuality from homosexuality - starts to become foreign policy," he added.

CRUCIAL MOMENT

The European Parliament vote will be of special interest to Russia, its EU embassy in Brussels told EUobserver.

"The EU elections in May are of crucial importance ... for the future of Russia-EU relations," it said.

"All key Russian media ... will continue to cover political processes in the EU in the broadest possible range," it added.

Russia denies trying to foment hostility to the EU, or targeting minorities.

"While covering such sensitive themes, they [Russian media] have to comply with the provisions of the constitution of the Russian Federation, which states
that no one may be insulted or discriminated either by country of origin or by sexual orientation," the Russian embassy said.

But, even setting aside the Crimea pageant, there is an embarrassment of evidence to the contrary.

Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, have personally endorsed Prokhanov and other Russian ideologues who use pornographic hate speech.

Putin himself repeated one false story, in 2016, that Austria had acquitted a migrant who raped a boy, while Lavrov repeated an untrue story that migrants raped a girl in Germany.

Putin’s top aide, Vladislav Surkov, commands a media machine worth at least €980m a year, parts of which, such as RT and Sputnik, firehose racist and homophobic memes onto European TVs, computers, and smartphones.

“There is a strongly-rooted Russian propaganda slogan to call Europe ‘Gay-Europa’,” an EU diplomat told EUobserver.

“It helps to recruit people who oppose liberal European values,” he said.

Looking ahead to the EP vote, Snyder predicted that Russia will "engage ... against homosexuals, who provoke disgust, against refugees - associating Europe in people’s minds with their deep anxieties".

Jakub Kalensky, a Russia expert at the Atlantic Council, a US think tank, said "migration will be the chief topic of the Kremlin’s [EP] disinformation campaign, and sexual minorities might be number two".

**POLITICAL TECHNOLOGIES**

The Kremlin is also expected to use other influence operations, known as "political technologies" in Russian jargon.

US investigators have shown that Putin’s military intelligence service, the GRU, conducts psychological warfare via fake accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as "bots", or automated software.

The GRU has been hacking pro-EU candidates in France and Germany in search of compromising material.

Putin’s domestic intelligence service, the FSB, also previously funneled millions of euros to Le Pen’s far-right party, the National Rally, in France.
That was just the tip of an iceberg of Russian funding for radical anti-EU groups, according to Yehor Bozhok, the head of Ukraine’s foreign intelligence service, the SZRU.

"It is in the scale of hundreds of millions of euros a year," Bozhok told EUobserver in Kiev in January.

He said he gave further details, based on classified evidence, to the heads of Nato states’ intelligence services at a recent meeting.

But other Russian options for swaying the EP vote are even more disturbing.

Nato, in 2016, accused Russia of "weaponising" refugees by prompting people to flee to Europe via military aggression in Syria.

Similar concerns now hover round the European elections, another EU diplomat said.

"There’s about 1.5 million potential refugees in Idlib [a Syrian region] and whether they go to Turkey and then the EU depends entirely on Russia," the diplomat told EUobserver.

"Russia’s attack on Idlib is just a matter of time, and Putin will pick the moment that suits him best," the EU source said.

'GAY' MACRON
For his part, French president Emmanuel Macron has declared himself the leader of a liberal, pro-EU front in the EP battle.

He will cross swords with Matteo Salvini, the far-right and pro-Russia Italian deputy prime minister, who aims to form an anti-EU league with like-minded parties in Austria, France, Germany, Poland and further afield.

Backed by Russian propaganda and other technologies, the EU far-right is waging its own culture war.

Salvini, like Putin, portrays himself as a defender of white and straight Europeans against Muslim migrants and "Gay-Europa".

"Europe must return to its identity, to its Judeo-Christian roots - which is being rejected in Brussels in a crazy way, where family values are rejected," Salvini said in Warsaw in January.
He invited the World Congress of Families (WCF), a homophobic US group with links to Russian oligarchs, to a summit in Verona, Italy, in March.

“It’s no surprise they’re doing it in March, right before the [EP] elections,” Katrin Hugendubel from Ilga-Europe, an LGBTI rights NGO in Brussels, said.

The WCF stunt aside, the EU far-right will probably focus on “refugees, migrants, and Islam rather than gay people” in their EP election campaigns, especially in more liberal societies in western Europe, Anton Shekhovtsov, an expert on far-right politics at the Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, a think tank in Kiev, predicted.

His views seem to be borne out by Frank Creyelman, a pro-Russian MP from Vlaams Belang, a far-right Belgian party.

“I don’t care what people do between the sheets,” Creyelman told EUobserver in January.

“[We] have been fighting Islam since the year 756 ... and now we’re just letting them [Muslims] in,” he added, referring to an Arab conquest in medieval Spain and to current-day EU asylum policy.

Macron, the archetype of EU liberalism, already faced a homophobic attack in the French election campaign in 2017, however.

And the man who did it - Nicolas Dhuicq, a pro-Russian and far-right French politician - is repeating the same stories ahead of the European elections.

According to Dhuicq, speaking to EUobserver in January, Macron was bisexual, had a gay love affair, and was backed by a gay cabal who wanted to buy babies.

“I think he [Macron] loves both sexes,” Dhuicq, who is also a practicing psychiatrist, said.

“I also know from people I can’t name, in the [French intelligence] services ... that there was a very rich gay lobby behind him [Macron],” he claimed.

**STORY TELLING**

It remains to be seen to what extent such stories win EU hearts.

Racism and homophobia appealed to “fragile masculinity” in Europe - to white men who feared losing their jobs to foreigners, robots, or women, Snyder, the US academic, said.

“You can't measure the exact impact on voters”, Ben Nimmo, a propaganda expert at the Atlantic Council think tank, warned.

But a recent Gallup poll indicated that Russian disinformation did help to convince 81 percent of
Bulgarians that Russia did not try to poison Sergei Skripal, a former spy, in the UK last year - despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary.

False Russian stories have also included one that Ukrainian soldiers crucified a boy in east Ukraine - a fiction later cited by Russian fighters as a motive for going to war there.

"When you go murdering people quoting disinformation messages as your motivation, it's pretty hard to deny that Russian propaganda has an impact," the Atlantic Council's Kalensky said.

The concerns on Russian interference come in an environment where votes were being decided by narrow margins, he added.

Recalling recent Austrian and Czech elections and the Brexit referendum, "to swing these votes, you would need just two or three percent, Kalensky said.

Propaganda's "impact may be marginal, but even a marginal change can, in a tight race, make a difference," the Atlantic Council's Nimmo added, in his recent study on Russia's meddling in the 2016 US election.

TIGHT RACE

If Salvini's group got 140 out of 701 seats in the EU race, it would become a force to be reckoned with.

If it pulled together 200 MEPs in ad-hoc coalitions on divisive policies, such as migration, "it would be very, very hard to get things done without them," according to Votewatch, a think tank in Brussels.

But those numbers were "not very likely, given the diverse positions of right-wing nationalist parties" in Europe, Votewatch said.

For its part, the EU foreign service in Brussels is staffing up its East Stratcom office, set up to counter media propaganda, from 14 to 18 people and boosting its budget from €1.1m to €3m "specifically to address Russian disinformation", an EU official said.

Civil society groups, such as Ilga-Europe, have also launched debunking and hate-monitoring projects.

That might not sound like much, but transparency can be powerful, Snyder, the US historian, noted.

"What's important is framing - if people are asked: 'Do you want lies or do you want the truth?', they generally say: 'Gosh, I'd like the truth!'," Snyder said, referring to stories that were red-flagged as Russian or far-right lies.

Pro-EU forces also had a compelling story, if they told it right, Snyder added.

"The current European story is: 'We stopped bad things from happening 70 years ago'; and Europe needs another story," he said, referring to the EU's post-WW2 origins.

"The way the EU wins is by saying our protection of human rights, including gay rights, is part of a larger style of life which people find enviable," Snyder said.

"Things young people care about - like labour mobility, digital privacy, global warming - these are things the European Union is doing the best job in the world of dealing with," he said.

LOVE STORY

The appeal of the European romance came to light in a recent referendum on banning same-sex marriage in Romania.

Romanian voters last October faced an onslaught of homophobic propaganda by state and oligarch-owned media, far-right groups, and shady NGOs.

Russian media and social media also pushed 'Gay-
Europa’ memes to provoke tension.

But voters "did not take the bite" and the referendum failed, Teodora Ion-Rotaru, from Accept, an LGBTI rights group in Bucharest, told EUobserver.

Romanians rebelled against "intrigues organised from above" and "Russian trolls ... irritated people", she said.

The well-known love story of Adrian Coman also played a role, she added.

Coman is a Romanian who won an EU court ruling last year which forced Romania to recognise his Belgian marriage to another man.

His story helped, Ion-Rotaru said, not because it converted Romanian conservatives, but because it showed that minority rights were part of a larger EU-lifestyle that people wanted.

"Coman was just another Romanian trying to make a better life for himself abroad, in a way that everybody could relate to," she said.

"Romanians use the EU almost more than any other people in terms of freedom of movement, jobs, and sending money back home," she added.

"The EU is essential for us to exist," she said.
The post of president of the European Parliament can be (almost) whatever the person elected makes out of it. Some stick to their ceremonial duties - while others have used the presidency for more Machiavellian power games.

By Peter Teffer

One of the tasks of the president of the European Parliament is to chair votes on new bills. Hans-Gert Pottering, who was president from 2007 to 2009, has candidly described this task as "a mental and physical effort".

"Sitting in a full plenary assembly and conducting votes swiftly and in due fashion demanded total concentration, and after voting had taken place I had invariably worked up a sweat," wrote Pottering, a centre-right German, in his autobiography, United for the Better: My European Way.

"Also my thigh muscles became so tense that I often found myself tottering the first few metres after leaving the president’s chair."

Such physical duress aside, to a large degree the parliament presidency is what the president makes of it.

There have been 15 presidents since the European parliament became directly-elected by citizens in 1979.
Political science professor Ariadna Ripoll Servent analysed in her book, The European Parliament, how the parliament's rules allow plenty of room for interpretation on what kind of president the parliament chief should be.

"Over the years, we have seen a range of presidential styles that have reflected the personality of the different presidents and their personal agendas," she wrote.

That style can range from being timid and focused largely on ceremony, towards the very politically active.

**THE MACHIAVELLIAN CHARMER**

The most bullish example in the parliament's history is centre-left German Martin Schulz, the only politician to have served two terms in the president's chair, from 2012-2017.

Ripoll Servent said that before Schulz, centre-left Spaniard Josep Borrell (2004-2007) was probably the first to engage in what she called "presidential activism" - but that Schulz, with his confrontational style, took it to a new level.

Nils Torvalds, a Finnish liberal MEP, called Schulz "a very charming, but very Machiavellian, German".

To Schulz, it was clear that the president of the European parliament should be on equal footing to the presidents of the European Commission and of the European Council, where national governments meet.

Journalist Martin Winter, who wrote a biography of Schulz, said that the German wanted to be "a president that has never before been seen in Brussels", describing the era as the "Schulz Show".

Schulz’s successor, centre-right Italian Antonio Tajani, is a more traditional president.

One MEP who hails from Tajani’s European People’s Party (EPP) said, on condition of anonymity, that Schulz - from the rival socialist group - had been much better than Tajani in raising the parliament’s profile in the international media.

On the other hand, Tajani has introduced the series of plenary debates with prime ministers and presidents.

Eleonora Evi, an Italian MEP from the Five Star Movement, told EUobserver she did not have a high opinion of Tajani. "He is very much interfering [in] the political debate at national level in Italy," she complained.
"I believe that the role of the European parliament president should be very much impartial and neutral, in order to bring forward the entire views and positions of the entire parliament".

Tajani did indeed interfere - several times - in the debate about Italy's budget, put forward by the coalition government consisting of Eví's Five Star Movement and the far-right League party.

At a press conference last December, Tajani said that Rome's row with the EU commission was a "needless power game" which "wasted an awful lot of money", calling on the Italian government to be "a bit more serious".

For Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, a Swedish MEP with Italian roots, and fellow EPP member, Tajani did nothing wrong, because the proposed Italian budget had violated EU rules. "If you stand for the treaties, you are neutral," she said. "It is not at all a ceremonial job," she added.

Since 1987, the president has been welcomed to EU summits, where he or she delivers a speech giving the parliament's view.

However, the parliament president has to then leave the room when the real discussions begin. Thus, even journalists covering the summit often skip the press conference given by the parliament president.

At the summit in December 2018, EUobserver asked Tajani what he thought his influence was on EU leaders?

"I think the European Parliament's voice is heard, definitely," he replied. However, he also stressed that the summit was not really where the parliament exercised its influence.

Rather, this is done in the so-called trilogues - negotiations on specific legislative files. "There is a legislative process, but that is not done here, is it? The concrete results you are asking about are in trilogues."

A MAN'S JOB?
Most of the parliament presidents have come from one of the two largest groups, the centre-right EPP and centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D). Only two of 15 have been women - the most recent being the French centre-right's Nicole Fontaine (1999-2002).

And it is not even necessarily the most sought-after job in the parliament.

Centre-right German Jens Gieseke has been an MEP since 2014 for a constituency in Lower Saxony, as successor to former parliament president Pottering. But Gieseke does not desire the highest office per se, he told EUobserver.

He would rather serve as chairman of a parliament standing committee, of which there are some 22, on issues ranging from trade to fisheries.

"Perhaps it is even more interesting to be chair of a committee, with a real influence on a limited issue, than just to have the opening speech and to give the blessings," according to Gieseke.
The gender gap at EU elections

Proportionally, more men vote in the European elections than women – in a trend that has widened since 2009. Yet the European parliament’s outreach strategy to voters targets only young people, students and “people who exert a certain influence.”

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Womencross Europe don’t tend to vote as much in European elections, compared with men. That fact poses questions on the growing gender gap in both politics and representation in the European Parliament.

Data, based on the European parliament’s 2014 post-electoral survey, found France was the worst culprit in terms of a voting gap between the sexes.

Some 11.6 percent fewer women in France voted than men in the EU elections, followed by Portugal (-11.3 percent) and Poland (-7.4 percent).

Elsewhere, such as in Sweden, the opposite occurred, with 16.6 percent more women than men voting, followed by Malta (+8.7 percent) and Lithuania (+7.0 percent).

Total combined turnout was just over 42 percent.

Of that total, the EU average spread across the 28 EU states had 45 percent of men voting, compared to 40.7 percent for women.

The overall gap between male voting and female voting is getting wider and has now reached a four point spread, compared to two points in 2009, according to a TNS Opinion field survey.

“This survey also reflects the fact that men become more active in the EU elections than women,” said Simona Pronckute, an expert at the Brussels-based European Policy Centre think tank.

SIX ‘TRIBES’

A separate Chatham House study in 2017 identified six political ‘tribes’ of voters, following a survey of 10,000 people.

The ‘Federalists’ were identified as the most pro-European, but also the smallest, of the six, and were composed primarily of wealthier and older men.
"If we look at these key findings, we can see that citizens who support the EU are more likely to participate in the EU elections," said Pronckute.

The biggest tribe are referred to as the ‘Hesitant Europeans’, or those that sit in the middle on many issues and tend to be apathetic about politics.

Yet some experts, such as the Carnegie Europe think tank, are making predictions of big gains for both the far-right and far-left populists at the May 2019 poll.

Such gains would likely tip the decades-long broad alliance of big mainstream parties, and usher in a new age of lawmakers.

Women also tend not to be so visible in local politics, for a variety reasons - an issue that is set be tackled in April by the Committee of the Regions, a Brussels-based EU institution of local and regional representatives.

The Vilnius-based European Institute of Gender Equality reports that only 13 percent of elected mayors, 29 percent of members of regional parliaments and assemblies, and around 36 percent of members of regional governments are female.

The figures at the EU parliament are similarly telling.

Out of the 751 EU lawmakers listed in 2018, only 36.1 percent were women, although that was a marginal increase of 0.3 percentage points more than the previous term.

Women in positions of powers in the EU parliament have increased somewhat.

There are now five female vice-presidents, compared to only three in the previous term, and the number of women chairing a subcommittee has risen from eight to 12, out of a total of 24.

Internally, the parliament appears more proactive in its strive for gender equality. Earlier this year, MEPs in a resolution demanded a gender-balanced composition of the bodies governing the European Parliament.

Yet the parliament’s own campaign strategy for 2019 appears to skirt the issue, and is instead aimed at reaching out to so-called "weak abstainers" - that is, people who don’t have a particularly strong drive to vote but are typically pro-European.
A leaked parliament document from late 2017 lumped young people, students and people who exert a certain influence over others in their professional lives, such as managers, into this "weak abstainers" category, in the hope of convincing them to vote.

"Their abstention rates in the European elections remain high, meaning that they represent a clear and logical target group for the campaign's get-out-the-vote effort," notes the document.

"For women, you see that there are always priorities given to social issues and they are more anti-European than men at the moment in France. There is a feeling that Europe doesn't care, that Europe doesn't matter," she said.

On average, fewer women vote in the EU elections than men.

Photo: European Union 2018 - European Parliament

She also said women in France, and in general, have less political knowledge when compared to men but attributed this to a "socialisation effect".

In other words, men more often tend to say they know something and will attempt to guess a correct response in a quiz, while women tend to leave such answers blank.

"Women are not brought up to take risks, like men, even now," she said, adding however that women are generally as knowledgeable as men when it comes to social rights and local political issues.

Mayer says the movement in France has also helped mobilise women but that a certain 'who cares, it won't change' mentality has since surfaced.

"It is a pity because Europe did a lot for the rights of women," she said.
Energy is essential for economic development, growth and social well-being. It is a vital commodity for our everyday lives and a driver for progress and prosperity. As the world’s energy needs increase, fossil fuels – responsible for environmental pollution and climate change – still represent around 80% of the global energy mix. We need to find a way to continue to grow without putting our future at risk. Fusion can play a role in the sustainable energy mix of the future.

Fusion is the process that powers the sun and the stars - harnessing it on earth would have extraordinary potential rewards. The fuels required are widely available and virtually inexhaustible. Small amounts can generate plenty of energy: 60 kg of fusion fuel can release the same amount of energy as 250 000 tonnes of oil. Fusion does not emit any greenhouse gases and does not produce any long-lasting radioactive waste. Fusion reactors will be inherently safe and will be able to complement renewables, as they will be able to provide “baseload” electricity, supplying a steady supply when needed.

Harnessing fusion is a major scientific and engineering endeavour requiring the development of complex fusion devices. The EU has been leading the world’s efforts in fusion research for decades. It is now hosting ITER (“the way”, in Latin), not only the most powerful fusion device ever but also the biggest international scientific collaboration in the area of energy. ITER is the next major milestone on the road to fusion energy. It will allow scientists to study a ‘burning plasma’ that releases more energy than used to produce it, and requires the development of an impressive range of cutting-edge technologies.

ITER brings together the countries of the EU plus Switzerland, China, Japan, India, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US, collectively representing 80% of the global GDP and half of the world’s population. ITER is an incredible technological and organisational puzzle, which will not only move us closer towards a new energy resource but also advance our scientific knowledge. The EU is not only hosting ITER in Southern France but is providing one-half of its components and all of the buildings. F4E is responsible for providing Europe’s contributions to ITER.

F4E is working together with hundreds of
industries and research centres to design, develop and fabricate the complex elements making up the ITER device. This investment in ITER is producing significant benefits to the European economy. Independent studies have measured them to be 4.8 billion Euro and 34,000 job years from 2008 to 2017, resulting from F4E placing more than 900 contracts and grants of a total value of 4.5 billion Euro in 24 EU countries. ITER offers companies and research centres the opportunity to collaborate, grow and improve their competitiveness.

The scale and complexity of the project invites companies to innovate, demonstrate their expertise and develop new skills. ITER’s technological challenges promote the transfer of knowledge and expertise from research to industry and generate spin-offs beyond fusion. ITER offers companies an unprecedented opportunity to operate in an international context and to build long-lasting commercial partnerships.

ITER has now reached 60% of completion to switching the machine on for the first time in December 2025. ITER is an essential step to bringing the "power of the sun to earth" and will provide a great leap forward in our scientific knowledge as well as in our quest for abundant, safe and sustainable energy for the future. At the same time, investment in fusion is generating growth and jobs, stimulating new business opportunities and fostering innovation.
The European Parliament will hold its last session in Strasbourg (15-18 April) before MEPs wrap up their current five-year term and travel home for new elections in their respective member states (23-26 May).

From this point, a whole chain-reaction of events will unfold which will culminate in November with a complete new political set-up to govern Europe for the coming five years.

Here is an overview of the changes to come.

As soon as the final result of the European Parliament election is announced after the May elections, the MEPs will start forming political groups.

Some are already members of a European political party and belong to an established group, but many new entrants would negotiate terms and policies before joining a group.

The deadline to report group formations to the secretary general of the European Parliament is 26 June.

On 1 July, Finland takes over the European Union council presidency from Romania.

The new parliament will elect a president in an inaugural session starting on 2 July - the position currently held by Italian MEP Antonio Tajani. He has openly declared an interest in continuing in the post, which is possible - provided his EPP group wants him, and can muster enough support for his candidacy.

Next on the new parliament's to-do-list is to elect a new European Commission president to replace Jean-Claude Juncker, a Luxembourger, before MEPs can go on holiday in August.

The new commission president will not have much of a holiday, however.

He or she must use the summer to put a new team of commissioners together, in order to have it ready for presentation to the parliament in September. Suggestions for possible names will come from prime ministers in the member states.

The commissioner-designates must pass hearings in their respective European parliament committees, before the new commission can be approved by the parliament in October and sworn in by November 2019.

But not only the parliament and the commission will get new faces in 2019.
Another major EU institution, the European Central Bank, will have a new boss, when president Mario Draghi, another Italian, ends his eight-year term on 31 October 2019.

His successor will be elected by the European Council, acting by a qualified majority - 55 percent of the member states representing 65 percent of the population.

And to complete the European 2019 facelift, the council’s current Polish president Donald Tusk ends his 2.5-year term on 30 November 2019.

His successor will also be elected by the council, acting by a so-called reinforced qualified majority.

With national elections due in eight EU member states this year the current EPP dominance of the council may not last long enough to secure one from this party’s ranks to replace Tusk. (It takes 72 percent of the countries, representing 65 percent of the population, to elect a new president of the council.)

National elections are expected in nine EU member states later this year; Estonia (March 2019), Finland and Spain (April 2019), Belgium and Lithuania (May 2019), Denmark (May or June 2019), Greece and Portugal (October 2019) and Poland (before November 2019).
Watching MEPs during a plenary session in Strasbourg shows that members from across Europe and from all political backgrounds display behaviour that a school teacher would not allow.

They walk around to chat with other MEPs, leave the room to take a phone call, or make that all-too-familiar scrolling movement on their smartphone or tablet, to refresh a social media page. But at least they showed up.

During a plenary debate with Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, in January, EUobserver counted a mere 52 MEPs in the plenary hall. This number increased to 132 by the end of the debate, which was, in any case, more a collection of short speeches than a genuine discussion.

Romanian leader Viorica Dancila also faced a tiny group of MEPs (69) when she spoke at the EU assembly the same day.

Liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt, a Belgian MEP, heavily criticised the centre-left Romanian prime minister.

But by the time Dancila’s slot to respond had come up on the clock, the former Belgian prime minister had left.

In 2017, EU commission president Jean-Claude Juncker called the EU parliament “very ridiculous” for showing up in low numbers to hear Malta’s PM speak.

During the 12-times-a-year Strasbourg sessions, MEPs also have meetings with their own political groups, discussions on bills, meetings with journalists, and host visitors.

“I don’t expect all the members to sit here, because then they are not doing their other work,” German Green MEP Ska Keller told EUobserver.

To individual MEPs it may seem unfair that they are being scrutinised closer than MPs at home, where empty plenary chambers are also common.

Perhaps they are right. But the effect of their actions on the image of European politics cannot be dismissed.

Citizens going to the polls in May to vote in the next generation of MEPs might well expect their EU representatives to at least show up during important debates with European leaders.

If the format of the debate is not sexy enough, then the parliament is free to change the set-up.
EUobserver
Making sense of the EU
Get the latest news, analysis and investigations

Subscribe today. Cancel anytime
Special discount
Save 50% €150 €75 per year or €15 per month

Discount code: EUOBS50
YOUR PARTNER FOR DIGITALIZATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

T-Systems empowers public authorities across the EU through a secure global network, safe and reliable cloud services and best-in-class cyber security.

www.t-systems.be