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EGS-LAB

EU goes school

Lehrkräfte als EU-Botschafter:innen

Handbook



Finanziert von der
Europäischen Union

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Information on the Handbook

The European Union (EU) is more than a political and economic entity; it is a living, evolving project that profoundly influences the daily lives of its citizens and the educational landscape across the European continent. As the EU continues to expand and adapt to new challenges—ranging from Brexit to the COVID-19 Pandemic—the need for comprehensive and effective education about the EU has never been more critical. This handbook is designed to equip teachers and teacher students with the tools and knowledge necessary to deliver high-quality, academically rigorous, and didactically sound lessons on EU topics in different classes.

Recent research by the European Commission highlights a growing interest among students in understanding the EU more deeply. While students generally hold a positive view of the EU, they express a desire for more in-depth exploration of its complexities (Detjen et al. 2012). However, educators often face challenges in teaching these topics, particularly due to the EU's intricate processes, structures, and the rapidly evolving nature of current events (Detjen et al. 2004). Issues such as Brexit and the surge in anti-European populism further complicate the task of teaching about the EU in a balanced and engaging manner.

Against this backdrop, the project “EU goes school” aims to provide practicing teachers as well as teacher trainees and students with new skills and tools to meet this challenge. Since 2022, the project team around the Chair of Political Education and Didactics for Social Studies and the Munich Center for Teacher Training (MZL) at Munich University (LMU) has been developing digital learning platforms and conducting seminars, discussions and training courses. Central to all measures of the project, which is funded by the European Commission as part of Erasmus+, is the close integration of all phases of teacher training. For example, students, trainee teachers and seminar leaders cooperate with each other in seminars and exchange ideas on the possibilities of different aspects of European education through mutual feedback.

The objective of this handbook is to bridge the knowledge gap by providing a structured approach to teaching about the EU and to present current results of the project. It emphasizes not only the transmission of institutional knowledge but also the development of genuine “EU competencies” (Oberle 2015) among students. These competencies include critical thinking, the ability to analyze complex political structures, and an understanding of the EU's role in both the European and global context.

The handbook includes a section on sample lessons, offering practical guidance on how to implement these topics in the classroom. By engaging with this handbook, educators will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of teaching EU topics, ultimately empowering their students to become informed and active citizens in an



increasingly interconnected world. In addition, an exemplary overview of teaching materials provided by the EU is presented and analyzed with regard to their advantages and disadvantages.

The European Union: A Recap

To offer a summary one important aspects of the EU, the following part of this handbook is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a key aspect of the EU:

- **History of European (EU) Institutions:** This chapter traces the evolution of European institutions from their post-war origins to the present day, providing historical context for understanding the EU's current structure and functions.
- **European Institutions and the Principle of Balance of Power:** Here, we examine the interplay between the various EU institutions and the checks and balances that maintain equilibrium within the EU's complex governance system.
- **The European Parliament: Democratic Power or Deficit?:** This chapter explores the role of the European Parliament in the EU's democratic framework, addressing debates about its powers and the perceived democratic deficit.
- **The European Court of Justice and the Principle of Subsidiarity (Article 5(3) TEU):** Focusing on the judicial branch, this chapter explains the role of the European Court of Justice and how it upholds the principle of subsidiarity within the EU's legal framework.
- **Decision-Making Processes in the EU:** This chapter provides an in-depth look at how decisions are made within the EU, covering legislative procedures, the roles of various institutions, and the impact of these processes on member states.
- **Member States and the EU Rule of Law Framework (Article 7 TEU):** Here, we delve into the EU's mechanisms for ensuring that member states adhere to its fundamental values, with a particular focus on the Rule of Law framework outlined in Article 7 TEU.
- **Europe's Global Role:** The final chapter discusses the EU's role on the global stage, examining its institutional future.

History of European Institutions

Central Themes

Beginnings and Treaties of the EU, Community Model, issues of sovereignty

European institutions have rapidly evolved, particularly in the last 20 years. This evolution reflects their changing nature throughout history. This chapter will briefly review the transformation of European institutions since their inception in 1952, exploring their progression within the EU's educational virtual space. Starting with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EU was founded on principles of peace and prosperity through European unification and integration. European integration is seen as the gradual harmonization of countries within Europe towards the supranational entity we recognize today.

Initially, these institutions were not supranational governing bodies; they began as intergovernmental agreements among the founding European states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). The Treaty of Paris (1952) and the Treaty of Rome (1957) emerged from intergovernmental conferences, establishing the first European rules and regulations that bound countries together through interstate agreements on the exchange of goods and services. These rules aimed to ease trade restrictions and promote economic well-being among states recovering and rebuilding from World War II. The Council of Europe, established after World War II, aimed to promote peace among the war-torn nations of Europe. However, it soon became apparent that due to a lack of consensus, this institution would face deadlock and could not function as the sole facilitator of peace in Europe. The Council of Europe, with its core values of protecting human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, must be distinguished from other European institutions (Council of EU 2020). Today, the Council of Europe is comprised of 46 member states and has not changed its aims to enforce human rights among its members. For instance, all members have concurred that capital punishment and torture should not be legal forms of punishment.

The founding fathers of the EU quickly understood that a separate form of institutions would have to be established to create a governing body that would not end in a deadlock and would be able to create a sustainable European future. Opinions on how this should be achieved were mixed. Jean Monnet, for example, believed in a supranational government for Europe, one that could govern and decide over its member states. This, he believed, should be done through economic integration, as countries that are economically interdependent are less likely to resort to violence in the event of conflicts. Others envisioned a federal system in Europe, similar to that of the United States. This vision of a united federal Europe was popular until the late '90s (Dehousse & Magnette, 2022). Other main aspects of Jean Monnet's vision for Europe were unity through diversity, bringing together people with different languages, cultures, and histories in a way that acknowledged and celebrated these

differences. Furthermore, Monnet envisioned incremental integration as a key aspect, where a steadily growing union would be built on shared core beliefs and values, driven by economic stability and prosperity. These ideas still resonate in the union as we know it today.

The community model is a pivotal element in understanding the growth of European sovereignty and supranationalism, particularly with the onset of the 'Empty Chair Crisis'. In 1965, this crisis was precipitated by a dispute involving French President Charles de Gaulle, concerning the decision-making process over a common agricultural policy within the then European Economic Community (EEC). A fundamental issue was the EEC's move towards qualified majority voting, which the French government feared would reduce their political power by eliminating their ability to veto common policies. Qualified majority voting meant that decisions could be made by a majority of the member states, potentially overriding the wishes of individual nations on specific policy issues. France, perceiving this as an existential threat to its influence, withdrew its representatives from the EEC, leaving an iconic absence in the meetings. The subsequent Luxembourg Compromise of January 1966, as noted by Dehousse (2011), was a significant resolution, allowing France to assert that certain areas within the EEC would remain subject to national control, while other sectors, such as certain aspects of internal trade, would be decided by qualified majority voting. This incident underscored the commitment of the Benelux states, especially the Netherlands, to enhancing supranationalism, thus countering the intergovernmental approach favored by France and showcasing the impact of smaller states in the EEC's development. Moreover, the crisis led to the reinforcement of the supremacy of EU law, as it was established that EU law would take precedence over national law in areas where it had been explicitly conferred. In instances where EU law was not yet in effect, national law would continue to apply (Weiler 1981).

The tension between intergovernmental and supranational decision-making endures within the EU and plays a crucial role in its evolving decision-making processes. It is widely acknowledged that the 'Empty Chair Crisis' catalyzed further integration within the European Community.

Over the subsequent two decades, multiple enlargements of the Union incorporated states from across Europe, in line with the founding fathers' vision that enlargement was essential to the European project. In 1976, a decision was made for the European Parliament's members to be directly elected by European citizens, increasing legitimacy and participation at the European level. Starting in 1985, the European Commission's President Jacques Delors initiated further institutional reforms. Key issues included establishing a monetary union to enhance trade efficiency and reduce transaction costs between member states, and a collective defense obligation. The fruition of these discussions was evident in the Single European Act (SEA) of 1992, which enhanced the European Parliament's role in decision-making and expanded the European Commission's collaboration in new domains, including environmental policy, research, and regional development (De Ruyt 1987; Moravcsik 1998). Thus,

the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 is seen as laying the groundwork for the monetary union that characterizes the Eurozone today.

The progression from the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 marked the culminating institutional steps in shaping the European Union as we recognize it today. Prior to Lisbon, the European Community operated under a tri-pillar structure. The first pillar consisted of the European Communities, responsible for economic, social, and environmental policies. The second was the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the third covered Police and Judicial Cooperation in Criminal Matters. The Lisbon Treaty, addressing public dissatisfaction (i.e., loss of national sovereignty, lack of transparency), revamped the institutional framework. It introduced the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP), streamlining the legislative process and providing clear competencies of the EU, distinguishing between exclusive and shared competencies, delineating areas where decisions are made in Brussels, and those remaining with member states, like educational policy (Moravcsik & Nicolaïdis 1999).

The EU went through constant institutional change throughout the years. The intervals between new treaties occurred too frequently for member states when looking at agreements ranging from Maastricht in 1993 to Lisbon in 2009. The countries had concerns of giving away too much institutional power to Brussels especially after the decision had been made for further enlargement in 2004, which included ten different countries. This scale was unprecedented as the EU enlargement had previously seen a maximum of three countries joining the group at a time rather than 10 new member states at once. The heterogeneity between the EU members before 2004 and could explain the solid pace of institutional change within from 1993 to 2007. This was made necessary by the different expectations and requirements of the EU and the wishes of the new member states (Moravcsik & Nicholdis 1999; Moravcsik 2012). This rapid change towards homogeneous rules and regulations in the EU has been the main goal of the European integration process since its beginning. Comparing European treaties of the past, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) stands forth as long lasting and as pivotal towards the latest changes within the institutional framework of the EU. European member states were able to agree that an enabled parliament is one of the most important factors to a functioning democracy in Europe. The Treaty of Lisbon markedly increased the European Parliament's influence by significantly expanding its legislative powers. The constant struggle between the big states and the small ones became evident and did not solve itself quickly as small states were holding on to their powers in EU institutions while bigger countries kept on fighting for keeping sovereignty. This resulted in the institutional change in the form of the commission being downsized and larger countries waived their right for a second commissioner. However, the parliament was resized according to the population of individual countries in including minimum and maximum seats in the lower house. Further increasing the importance of the vote from the Council. The Convention of Europe was a new form of negotiating and drafting EU treaties. It was used for example to draft the Future of Europe Convention

and helped form the EU in what it is today. This model was a more transparent and open process than the former Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) that was used before to draft all European treaties. This new form through the European convention included more representatives in the process having individuals from the Commission national parliament and EP included.

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

How did the EU become what it is today?

Who joined the EU when?

What are key aspects of the EU today?

European Institutions and the Principle of Balance of Power

Central themes:

Balance of power in the EU, Baron de Montesquieu and The Spirit of the Laws (1748), Holding EU institutions to account

Being one of the largest democratic systems and supranational entities in the world, the European Union requires distinct checks and balances to ensure its institutions operate sustainably and legitimately. The interplay among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches forms the pillars upon which the European balance of power rests. The theories of Montesquieu, dating back to 1748, are foundational in the concept of the balance of power. The central idea of this concept is to prevent the concentration of too much power in the hands of a single individual who could rule over entire countries or empires. This system is strongly associated with democratic governance, contrasting with the historical context of monarchic empires, where rulers maintained strict control over their political elites and, by extension, their citizens, to ensure a firm hold on power.

Today, this historical system bears resemblance to autocratic regimes, where one or a few leaders maintain a tight grip on the political landscape of their country. Montesquieu's fundamental principle was to divide power into three separate branches: the executive, legislative, and judiciary. The executive, known in modern society as the government, is the body that oversees daily operations, establishing norms and regulations, and ensuring their implementation.

In the context of the European Union, which cannot be entirely compared to a national government, the equivalent would be the European Commission. The Commission's role is to propose laws, guide general EU legislation and give innovative approaches on governance for the Union as a whole. It consists of several commissioners, each in charge of different policy areas, appointed by a joint process involving national governments and ratified through the European Parliament, a procedure that is relatively recent. There has been substantial criticism directed toward the Commission's process for selecting its President.

A system known as the 'Spitzenkandidaten' process was introduced to present the leading candidates from each political group in the European political arena transparently. However, this process was not applied in the 2019 European election when Ursula von der Leyen unexpectedly received the post of Commission President, a decision that was largely made behind closed doors. Since the 'Spitzenkandidaten' system was the first of its kind at a European level, it will be intriguing to observe how subsequent European Parliament elections might affect the application and efficacy of this system. Looking at the 2024 elections, the 'Spitzenkandidaten' of the respective factions received less attention compared to 2019 due to the dominance of the EPP candidate.

While the European Commission acts as the main initiator of new legislation, the European Parliament plays a significant role in the ratification process, which essentially involves creating EU laws. Alongside the Council, the Parliament decides which laws are to be adopted and which are not. The detailed procedure for how legislation is enacted through the ordinary legislative process will be explored in a subsequent chapter.

The European Parliament, one of the largest democratically elected bodies in the world, comprises over 700 members representing various political factions within the Parliament. The number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) can fluctuate, as was the case after Brexit when seat allocations were adjusted among the remaining member states. Each country is allotted a certain number of seats based on its population size, although there is a minimum seat quota to ensure representation for smaller member states, such as Malta or Cyprus. Consequently, demographic changes that affect a country's population can lead to adjustments in its seat allocation within the Parliament.

Within the Parliament, MEPs are grouped not by nationality but by the political parties they represent. The European Parliament currently (as of August 2024) consists of eight major political groups, ranging from the European People's Party, analogous to center-right Democrats or Conservatives, to the Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). Additionally there are approximately 30 non-attached members. Each political group is affiliated with national party systems within each country's political landscape. For instance, if the Green Party in Sweden wins a European Parliament seat, that MEP would join the Greens/European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament. Similarly, if a candidate from the Spanish party Vox, which is a right-wing populist party, were to win a seat, they would join the Patriots for Europe group, known as one of the far-right factions within the European Parliament. They are one of the two successors of the former Identity and Democracy faction.

In academic discourse, the concept of a 'democratic deficit' is a major criticism levied against the European Parliament. Scholars argue that the absence of a pan-European citizenry undermines the legitimacy of a functioning democracy within the EU (Abels 2020). The concept of a 'democratic deficit' within the European Union is often associated with the 'no demos' theory. Critics argue that the lack of a transnational European electorate hinders democratic representation (Abels, 2020). For instance, citizens within individual member states can only vote for European Parliament candidates from their own country; a German can only vote for German MEPs and not for a Swedish MEP they might support, despite the candidates belonging to the same political group.

In most liberal democracies, parliaments are structured with an upper and a lower house, though the arrangement varies by country. In the United Kingdom, for example, the upper chamber is the House of Lords, and the lower chamber is the

House of Commons. Germany's federal system features a Bundestag composed of elected representatives, while the Bundesrat, serving as the upper chamber, is made up of the Minister-Presidents and representatives of the 'Landesregierungen' from each federal state. This is somewhat analogous to the United States, where Congress is divided into the Senate (upper house) and the House of Representatives (lower house).

For the European Union, the distinction between upper and lower chambers is more complex. The 'upper chamber' includes the Council of the European Union and the European Council. The European Council, composed of the heads of state or government of the member states, meets at least four times a year to set the political direction and priorities of the EU. It is tasked with outlining the political agenda and responding to significant European issues as they arise. The Council of the European Union, often referred to as the Council of Ministers, acts similarly to an upper house but is more engaged in the day-to-day legislative process within the EU.

The Council of the European Union, often referred to as the Council of Ministers, includes ministers from all 27 member states, each contributing their expertise in specific areas of government. For instance, when discussing foreign affairs, all the foreign affairs ministers convene to debate and potentially ratify legislation or return it to the Commission for revision. The key difference in the EU's political system is that, unlike most democracies with a bicameral legislature, the EU's 'upper house' includes both the European Council, which consists of the heads of state, and the Council of Ministers, made up of ministers from various governmental departments (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006).

It is crucial to note that the ECJ, located in Luxembourg, plays a pivotal role as a supervisory body for EU legislation. The Court comprises one judge from each member state, totaling 27 judges. Should a member state fail to follow EU law, the ECJ acts as the adjudicative body providing the definitive judgment on legal disputes across various competencies.

The EU delineates its powers into categories of competencies: exclusive, shared, and supporting. Exclusive competencies, such as foreign trade, are areas where only the EU can legislate. Shared competencies, like consumer protection, are sectors where the EU and member states can both legislate, whereas supporting competencies are fields where the EU can only provide support without superseding national policies, such as in education, which remains a prerogative of each member state.

Understanding these competencies is critical, as the ECJ's authority to issue rulings is contingent upon EU law being applicable within the relevant competency domain. The three pillars of the European Union demonstrate the balance of power wherein the institutions check and balance one another, ensuring that no single entity gains excessive influence or becomes weakened. The most significant criticisms of authoritarian regimes and dysfunctional democracies focus on how one or more of

these foundational pillars are impaired or ineffective. A case in point, even within the EU, was when the previous Polish government sought to pass legislation that would diminish the authority of the Polish Supreme Court. Such an act was seen as a threat to the integrity of the balance of power, illustrating the challenges faced in maintaining democratic principles.

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

Which European institutions are there?

What are their roles and tasks?

How do these institutions interact?

What are they criticized for?

How do these institutions uphold a balance of power?

The European Parliament: Democratic Power or Deficit?

Central themes:

Political parties within the parliament, The parliaments influence on the EU, Democratic Deficit, Representation after elections

The European Parliament's history is marked by a gradual increase in recognition, power, and legitimacy. As the directly elected legislative body of the European Union, it stands as one of the largest democratic parliaments globally. It is made up of seven distinct political groups, covering a broad political spectrum. European elections take place every five years, during which citizens across Europe vote for their preferred MEPs, making it the sole direct democratic exercise at the EU level.

The Council of the European Union and the European Council, on the other hand, consist of national heads of state or government and ministers, respectively. These bodies are formed of representatives from democratically elected national governments. Their democratic mandate, while indirect, comes from national elections, even though EU policy issues may not always be at the forefront of these elections.

The European Parliament has the unique role of directly elected institution within the EU, tasked with overseeing the European Commission and the Council and with passing European legislation. It is a key player in the decision-making process, offering a vital counterbalance to the other EU institutions, as detailed in Chapter 2. The journey to its current status has not been straightforward, with the EP often fighting for full acknowledgment by other entities.

In 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) laid the foundations for what would become the European Union, establishing the Common Assembly as a precursor to the European Parliament. This body was tasked with holding the ECSC's executive accountable, albeit with limited influence compared to today's EP. Over time, the Common Assembly saw an increase in power and legitimacy. With the creation of the European Economic Community in 1958, the Common Assembly's role was expanded to include oversight over the 'high authority' and consultative assistance.

In 1962, the Common Assembly underwent a rebranding to become the European Parliamentary Assembly. The Treaty of Luxembourg, between 1970 and 1975, marked a significant advance, bestowing budgetary powers upon the European Parliament. The year 1979 was another turning point, as it saw the introduction of direct elections for EP members. This established a direct democratic link between the MEPs' decisions on EU budgetary matters and their electoral accountability. These changes reflected a notable shift in public opinion across Europe regarding the EP's role, a topic that will be further explored in the following sections.

The Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties significantly bolstered the European Parliament's (EP) role within the EU's institutional framework. Through these treaties, the EP became part of the co-decision procedure, granting it a substantial say in the Union's legislative process and establishing it as a functionally democratic entity. Yet, many contend that the EP's power does not rival that of the Council even to this day.

In preparation for the eastward enlargement, the Parliament underwent a reorganization in 2001 to integrate new member states. A pivotal shift occurred in 2009, when the EU transitioned from the three-pillar system to the current institutional structure. The introduction of the Ordinary Legislative Procedure streamlined the decision-making interaction between EU bodies, placing the EP on a theoretically equal footing with the Council, though this parity remains a subject of debate among scholars, such as Dermot Hodson, Uwe Puetter, and Sabine Saurugger (Hodson et al. 2022).

The Ordinary Legislative Procedure mandates that the European Parliament must pass or reject legislation before it becomes EU law. It allows up to three readings for deliberation, providing opportunities to amend, contest, or veto proposals from the European Commission. As the sole directly elected EU institution, the EP today not only supervises the Commission but also plays a decisive role in budgetary matters. It is crucial to recognize that, although the EU budget comprises only a small portion of member states' GDPs, it wields considerable influence over funding for projects throughout Europe and beyond (Corbett et al. 2016).

During European Parliament elections, the 'Spitzenkandidaten' (lead candidate) system is employed, wherein political parties designate lead candidates for the European Commission presidency as part of their campaigns. This process, however, has faced criticism for not working as intended; for instance, the lead candidate from the last election did not become the Commission President. Instead, Ursula von der Leyen was appointed following closed-door discussions, which critics have condemned as an opaque and undemocratic decision by the EU's political elites.

Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping the European institutional framework. Historical examination reveals that various reforms within this framework were responses to shifts in public sentiment (Hooghe & Marks 2009). The European Parliament has evolved to become more legitimate, transparent, and democratic as a reflection of these changes.

One seminal work by Hooghe and Marks (2009) delves into this dynamic, introducing the concepts of 'permissive consensus' and 'constraining dissensus' within the context of European integration, which continues to evolve. European integration has historically been influenced by public opinion (Hooghe & Marks 2009). The 'permissive consensus' era refers to the early period of European unity, when there was a broad agreement among Europe's political elites that forming a union would

yield economic prosperity. The creation and development of various institutions, resulting from treaties enacted between the 1950s and 1980s, proceeded with the tacit endorsement of European political elites and national governments. These leaders supported deeper integration to foster internal trade and bolster the continent's standing in global commerce, all while encountering little public contestation.

'Constraining dissensus' marks a shift in this dynamic, particularly from the 1980s onward, when the public began to engage more critically with the European project. Growing skepticism prompted demands for heightened transparency, accountability, and democratic governance within EU institutions to preclude any turmoil amongst the member state populations. This debate considers several pivotal events, including the 'empty chair crisis' precipitated by Charles de Gaulle, among others.

As European integration deepened, a significant debate emerged over member states ceding national competencies to the European Union's supranational institutions. This transfer of power from national governments to the EU level has been met with varying degrees of acceptance by citizens, who have been keenly observing the implications for their country's autonomy and sovereignty. Some member states have argued for retaining more control, which some citizens view favorably, while others have emphasized the need to show how European institutions have made legislative processes more transparent. This can be seen through the transparency act in Article 10 of the treaty of the European Union, describing how legislation should be carried out as closely as possible to the citizen. This is done through public access to several databases and other public sources.

The evolution of the European Parliament highlights how political leaders have, to some extent, heeded the calls of their constituents by enhancing the Parliament's role in the EU's decision-making framework. This move towards increased transparency and democratic involvement is indicative of the responsiveness of European leadership to public opinion.

A central critique of the European Parliament relates to the 'no demos' theory, which contends that Europe does not possess a homogenous citizenry with shared values, culture, and beliefs, leading to a form of citizenship that is inherently non-democratic within the EU construct. Proponents of this view argue that, consequently, the EU lacks the essential characteristics to function as a legitimate supranational entity composed of various nation-states. Additional critiques point to the limitations within the European electoral system, particularly that citizens are unable to vote for European Parliament candidates outside their own countries, restricting a pan-European democratic exercise (Hodson et al. 2022).

To address such democratic concerns, the European Parliament's role in electing the European Commission is crucial, representing one of its most significant contributions to the balance of power among EU institutions. This process enhances democracy and transparency within the Union by directly involving the only EU body

elected directly by its citizens in the appointment of the Commission, the EU's executive arm.

Today, the interplay between public opinion and EU governance, as discussed by Hooghe and Marks (2009), remains a critical issue. As right-wing, identitarian movements gain traction in the European Parliament, and Euroscepticism becomes increasingly visible, the need for transparent and legitimate governance is more pressing than ever. The European Union, and particularly the European Parliament, faces the challenge of demonstrating its democratic legitimacy through elected representatives who shape the direction of the European Commission.

Amidst this political landscape, other EU institutions like the European Council and the Court of Justice are focused on safeguarding democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights, both within the European Parliament and the member states they represent. Public engagement with the European Parliament is on the rise, reflected by increased voter participation in EU elections, signaling a heightened collective interest in the democratic processes that govern the European Union.

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

What's the history of the EP?

What is permissive consensus?

What is constraining dissensus?

What is the EP's role?

What political positions are currently represented by the factions in the EP?

Which challenges is EP facing?

The European Court of Justice and the Principle of Subsidiarity Article 5(3) TEU

Central themes:

European judicial system, Judicial activism

Legal scholars didn't give much attention to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) until the late 1970s. From this point on, focus was given to how European integration could be brought forward through European law, with the ECJ at the center of the institutional triangle within the European institutional setup (Cappelletti et al. 1986; Weiler 1981; Stein 1981). Several political scholars also became interested in the court for various reasons, including the court's activism, the power of its rulings, and its basis for political direction as a European supreme court (Stone Sweet 2004; Alter 2009; Schmidt & Kelemen 2014; Larsson & Naurin 2016). These areas demonstrate how the court has significantly influenced the European integration process since its establishment in 1952 through its rulings in certain cases, directives, and regulations. Generally, it can be argued that as all member states have to adhere to the court, the ECJ is favorable towards European integration and further harmonization of the rule framework (Saurugger & Terpan, 2022). Ensuring that European law is upheld by its members has been a process since the court's establishment in 1952 and continues to be an evolving process. The supremacy of European law over national law has always been contested by various member states, as they often feared a loss of sovereignty over their own national judicial apparatus. However, as more competencies and the harmonization of EU legislation came into place, rulings have become more visible and dominant in the European legal landscape (Dehousse 1998; Saurugger & Terpan 2018).

The Treaty of Paris (1951) and the Treaty of Rome (1957) gave the court its first standing. It was decided within these treaties that the court's rulings should take precedence over national law. However, these provisions were not clear regarding the supremacy of directives and regulations over national constitutional law. The court argued that member states had signed the treaties and therefore agreed that EU law would enjoy primacy over secondary national law. The Luxembourg Compromise of 1966 enabled European member states to have a veto towards European legislation, resulting in majority voting being impossible. This also led to the Empty Chair Crisis of 1964, in which France saw its sovereignty at stake. As it was extremely hard to gain consensus in the council, the European Court of Justice was pushed into a situation of giving out legislation with a lot of leeway for member states to interpret at their own discretion (Saurugger & Terpan 2022). This all led forth to the even stronger economic entanglement and the European Single Act in 1986. Several scholars argue that the court's influences and decisions had wider implications than initially thought (Burley & Mattli 1993; Alter 2009). On the other hand, scholars from the opposing spectrum argue that the court's implications favored the bigger member states of the EU (Garrett 1995; Larsson & Naurin 2016).

Judicial activism, in which courts make decisions to deepen their stands within the institutional setup, is said to have led to further integration in the union. Landmark court cases have ensured that the European Court of Justice has had a steady influence on harmonizing laws and asserting its supremacy over national law, thereby ensuring further integration (Alter 2009; Vauchez 2015; Cohen 2010). Another aspect strengthening the court was member states or lower national courts making use of the ECJ even in cases where it was not obligatory. Asking for preliminary rulings further enhances integration through law, as EU courts, national courts, and private entities made use of the legal system to further their interests. The influence of the European Court of Justice could have been hampered through treaty provisions by the national governments. However, several scholars also agree that the European Court of Justice still respects national governments' authority, and that this interaction between national and EU laws continues to shape the European legal landscape (Schütze 2015, Hodson 2022).

Before the subsidiarity principle was formally incorporated into the constitutional law of the European Union by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, it had already gained significant attention among European policymakers. The principle was intended to help legally manage the expanded powers of the European Economic and Monetary Union introduced by the Maastricht Treaty. The debates around subsidiarity, primarily led by the European Parliament since 1984, highlighted two distinct interpretations.

One view, primarily supported by the British, saw subsidiarity as a safeguard for the free market against governmental intervention, aligning with a liberal interpretation of fundamental rights. The other perspective, notably held by the German Federal Republic, interpreted subsidiarity as a means of preserving the hierarchical competence structure within federal systems, where smaller units take precedence over larger ones, reflecting a democratic understanding of subsidiarity (Kempen 2016).

The principle of proportionality, established in Article 5(4) of the Treaty on European Union, ensures that actions by EU institutions are within defined limits. According to this principle, EU measures must be appropriate and necessary to achieve their intended objectives without imposing an excessive burden on individuals relative to the goals pursued. In EU treaty texts, the market-liberal interpretation of this principle was integrated as the "principle of proportionality," while the democratic-competence function was clearly defined as the subsidiarity principle. This subsidiarity principle requires that the EU only acts when objectives cannot be sufficiently achieved by member states at the central, regional, or local levels and are better realized at the Union level.

The principle of subsidiarity, thus, strengthens smaller administrative units within member states by transferring European competencies to them. The German Basic Law (Grundgesetz), particularly Article 23, reflects this subsidiarity principle, although the specific impact on local governance and the broader democratic

implications are nuanced. The principle also raises questions about democratic legitimacy, especially in relation to local governments, where the extension of voting rights to EU citizens in local elections has been debated, though faced with legal challenges (Kempen 2016).

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

Why and when was the ECJ established?

How did the ECJs jurisdiction expand?

How is the ECJ structured?

What are examples of important verdicts of the ECJ?

What is the ECJ criticized for?

Decision Making Processes in the EU

Central themes:

Ordinary legislative process, Conflict and compromise through negotiation

As we learned in the past chapter about how the balance of power between the institutional setup of the EU safeguards the rule of law and democracy within the European Union, we see that this balance of power is based on Montesquieu's idea of safeguarding democratic values in the institutional setup accompanied by the constitution, in either codified or uncoded application. In the case of the EU, it is a form of a codified constitution in the form of the union's treaties, such as the Treaty of Lisbon, which clearly divides the powers between the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, and the Court of Justice.

The Treaty of Lisbon further established the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, which is the basic method by which European law and decisions are made within the union. Joint adoption is required through the OLP, where the European Commission proposes a new law, and the European Council and the European Parliament decide on the proposed law by the Commission. After the procedure has gone through and the proposed law becomes EU law, it is then the Commission and the European Court of Justice that ensure that the European rules and regulations are upheld by the member states.

The member states, by being part of the European Union, have already agreed that European law has supremacy over national law in cases where the European Union has competence or shared competence, as discussed in other chapters regarding the European Court of Justice and the chapter regarding Article 7. The Ordinary Legislative Procedure is a method that enables the EU to function as a supranational autonomous institution, deciding on matters such as international trade and agricultural standards among others for its citizens (Puetter 2014).

The OLP decides exactly how the Council, the Parliament, and the European Commission propose, amend, or execute new laws. The Council is not able to amend any of the Commission's proposals unless the Council decides to do so unanimously. If this is not the case, the procedure moves forward to the first reading. The procedure consists of up to three readings where proposed laws are sent back and forth between the different actors to decide if the new law is going to be implemented or not. The second and third readings are only necessary if the Commission's proposed laws are not agreed upon by the Council and the European Parliament.

To ensure that the stages never get exhausted, the informal decision process also has a strong impact on how new legislation is formed. However, first, we will discuss the formal way of how these laws are implemented, at least on paper. It's important to understand that since the Lisbon Treaty, a new way of voting has been included within

the Ordinary Legislative Procedure. It is called a qualified majority vote. This is the Council's way of making decisions, which means that countries or member states within the EU don't have to vote on a proposed law unanimously. Instead, they need a qualified majority of 65% or more of the European population within the countries, meaning that bigger countries like France or Germany have a certain advantage in gaining the population percentage when voting within the Council.

Smaller countries within the EU would be at a disadvantage. The qualified majority voting also includes the rule of having at least 55% of representatives from the Council agreeing to the proposed law or rejecting it for further amendments. Rules also apply for a blocking majority, under which they need at least 35% of the European Union's population and at least four member states agreeing to block a certain rule or law. This is why a blocking minority faces a double threshold and a majority can also be referred to as a double majority, as they have to include both population and the number of representatives in the Council.

The United Kingdom leaving the EU did not formally affect the qualified majority voting within the Ordinary Legislative Procedure. The treaty laws did not foresee a member leaving the Union, hence all the regulations concerning 55% of representatives of the Council and 65% of the population within the European Union are upheld and unchanged, even though the EU shrank from 28 to 27 member states. In the case of new members joining the European Union, no changes within the QMV would change as the numbers are not nominal but instead percentages that can change over time. For example, the European Parliament acquires seats depending on how large a member state's population is, which can also vary as populations change due to demographic changes (Hodson & Puetter, 2022).

Missing transparency has always been one of the biggest criticisms towards the European Union. Critics argue that the EU is not clear on how decisions are formed and how people in power decide on day-to-day politics. This especially includes the legislative process. As we have now understood how the OLP works on paper, the reality looks a little different. The informal decision process is by far more important than the formal process. Trilogues are the key concept to understand in this context. They are informal meetings involving all the different actors in the decision-making process. These meetings are unofficial, and it is very difficult to obtain information about what is being discussed to make formal decisions later on.

A study by Cabral (2020) went through all the parliamentary hearings to try to estimate how many trilogues were held in which the Parliament was included. This is public information, however, not very transparent to access. The study went through footage of all parliamentary hearings over a certain period to gather their data. Tiago Cabral's study by (2020) concluded that over 90 percent of the legislation proposed is decided after the first reading. This is not because the proposed laws are already perfectly designed by the Commission, but instead through informal meetings where the actors involved already know what they are voting on and have formed majorities

or alliances before the proposal takes the floor for the first vote of the first reading due to trilogues (Carbral 2020).

The process of law-making begins with the Commission, hence it is useful to understand how the Commission is elected and how they come into power. Since the EU Parliament elections in 2019, the 'Spitzenkandidaten' system has been in place, in which each political party within the parliament has a top candidate they all rally behind for the Commissioner's position. However, after the elections in 2019, it was evident that the system was not fully functional yet, as Ursula von der Leyen received her position as Commission President without having had the 'Spitzenkandidat' position at the start of the election.

The 'Spitzenkandidat' system is supposed to provide transparency for European citizens casting their votes for the European Parliament's representatives and therefore to also know who they are voting for as their candidate for the top job in case the voted party can ensure a majority within the parliament. The 2024 results of the EU Parliament elections have shown that the process is ever evolving, and that the EU has deficits to acknowledge. A transparent and legitimate election process is necessary for the EU to gain further trust from its electorate and must keep evolving even after the 2024 elections.

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

Who decides what in the EU?

What is the role of the European Commission within the EU?

What does the legislative process look like?

How do European institutions interact?

What are deficits of the legislative process and what could be done about them?

Member States and the EU Rule of Law Framework Article 7 TEU

Central themes:

Multinational cooperation, Rule of Law

Preliminary rulings from the European Court of Justice are essential for ensuring that EU law is upheld within member states. These rulings hold supremacy in areas where the EU holds competence or shared competence. Preliminary rulings occur when national courts from EU member states seek guidance from the Court of Justice on how to interpret treaties, rulings, or directives in cases of discrepancies. A criticism of this mechanism is that it allows lower courts or private individuals to circumvent the interpretations of higher domestic courts by directly requesting an interpretation from the CJEU (Alter 1996). Consequently, the primary purpose of preliminary rulings is to ensure that EU law is interpreted uniformly across all EU member states.

The European Commission or, in rare cases, member states can initiate infringement proceedings. Such proceedings are started against an EU member state accused of not upholding certain rules within EU law. Infringement proceedings are rare because retaliation from the accused member state could cause more harm than good within the institutional framework or the law-making process (Saurugger & Tarpan, 2018).

As the guardian of treaties, the European Commission, along with the Court of Justice, is primarily responsible for initiating infringement hearings. These hearings typically concern the four freedoms, which include the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital (Saurugger & Tarpan 2022). In other cases, the process may involve EU competences. For instance, the CJEU penalized France for excessive NO₂ pollution, resulting in a financial fine.

A more prominent infringement case that garnered significant media attention involved proceedings against Poland and Hungary. The European Commission initiated these cases after identifying legal violations in both countries. Poland, for example, enacted legal guidelines that undermined the constitutional court's power and increased the central government's authority. Hungary faced criticism for various reasons, including steps taken by its government to restrict freedom of expression and control media outlets through state-owned channels, thus limiting press freedom. The most significant concern in both countries was the national governments' attempts to influence their judicial systems, thereby skewing judicial independence and consolidating power.

As a result, in 2017 for Poland and in 2018 for Hungary, the European Commission, after several attempts to voice concerns, triggered Article 7 proceedings.

Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) provides a structured mechanism to address risks and breaches of EU values within member states. Article 7(1) serves as a preventive tool aimed at addressing a clear risk of a serious breach of EU values. It allows for the initiation of the procedure by one-third of the member states, the European Parliament, or the European Commission. Following this, the Council of the EU can determine, by a four-fifths majority, that such a risk exists and can issue recommendations to the member state in question. Article 7(2) escalates this process by providing a mechanism to establish the existence of a serious and persistent breach of EU values, requiring a unanimous determination by the European Council. Finally, Article 7(3) introduces sanctions, including the suspension of voting rights within the Council, which can be decided by a qualified majority. The current status of Article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary illustrates the EU's dedication to upholding its foundational values. In Poland, the European Commission continues to monitor judicial reforms and adherence to the rule of law, while in Hungary, the European Parliament and Commission scrutinize actions concerning judicial independence, media freedom, and fundamental rights. These ongoing proceedings underscore the EU's resolve to address threats to its principles, despite the political complexities involved in achieving consensus for decisive action under Article 7 (Waldhof & Neumeier 2021).

The more complex a political issue and the more dramatic its consequences, the more inadequate any proposal seems if it does not solve the problem instantly. It is a common fallacy to blame the seriousness of an issue on the failure of political actors who require more than one step to resolve it (Lindblom 1959). The problem of the erosion of rule-of-law and democratic institutions by the Hungarian and Polish governments is severe and cannot be underestimated. Both member states have established regimes that disregard Union law, align their courts, persecute the opposition, and systematically undermine the fragile social conditions necessary for political freedom. This poses a threat not only to the Union's citizens in these countries but to the European Union as a whole. Everyday cooperation between police, judiciary, and administration of the member states relies on the trust that the same rule-of-law and fundamental rights guarantees apply across the Union. Without this trust, it would be unjustifiable to enforce Polish arrest warrants or Hungarian enforcement titles in Germany without thorough legal scrutiny or to transfer refugees to these countries. This trust has been deeply shaken regarding Poland and Hungary, causing significant fissures in everyday administrative and judicial cooperation. Ensuring compliance with these standards is notoriously difficult.

In federal states, there are few means for the central level to resolve fundamental differences in legal or administrative matters if the subsidiary entities do not participate in the institutional process for problem solving. Similarly, the Union has limited ways to enforce the rule-of-law and democratic values committed to in Article 2 TEU against member states. The Union cannot declare national laws invalid or send police to protect demonstrators. Even if it could, one can only imagine the consequences. Experiences with massive political interventions, as the confrontation

with the Austrian FPÖ at the beginning of the millennium showed, are at best mixed. Although the Union is not entirely powerless—it can review and declare inapplicable authoritarian judicial and media laws when they affect Union law—enforcing such decisions, as seen in the significant rulings on Polish judicial reform or Hungarian judge retirement, remains challenging. Hundreds of judicial appointments cannot simply be undone. While Article 7 TEU provides a special procedure for suspending participation rights in Union institutions in cases of severe breaches of fundamental values, this requires a unanimous decision by all member states. Even though the affected member state does not have a vote, the procedure is cumbersome, as an ally can always be found, or the political risks of further escalation seem too high.

To leverage its political power the EU-institutions could halt their payments. Donor countries have often used negotiations over the Multiannual Financial Framework to pursue political objectives, and the Euro rescue relies on implementing structural reforms in exchange for financial aid. The original proposal for a rule-of-law mechanism by the Commission was based on a simple and logical intuition: member states that undermine their rule-of-law institutions and the Union's foundation cannot simultaneously receive billions of euros in Union funds, especially when these funds are used to support the government's clientelism. The Union must not blindly finance the corrupt practices of authoritarian governments. The idea of the rule-of-law mechanism goes further: funds should be withheld not only when corruption and embezzlement endanger their intended political purposes but also when European funds flow into an environment where rule-of-law minimum standards are no longer guaranteed. While the short-term effects of such cuts might be limited, the fundamental idea remains sound. Money is one of the few enforcement tools available to the European Union, and it should be used effectively. However, linking financial payments to political conditions raises complex legal and political issues. Federal systems that seek to accommodate political differences should be cautious about using financial incentives to secure political compliance too easily. For instance, the German Basic Law includes constitutional regulations to limit the use of such financial mechanisms. Similarly, other democratic systems such as the US permit financial incentives from the federal government to states only under specific conditions, ensuring that these incentives do not undermine the autonomy of state governments.

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

What are the foundational values of the EU?

What mechanisms are there to assure that the EU's values are safeguarded?

How does the EU deal with contract violations by member states?

Europe's Global Role

Central themes:

Multilateralism, Globalization

Since its beginning, the European Union has had to deal with various crises. Considering the most recent events such as the financial crisis of 2007, the migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has had multiple opportunities to demonstrate its effectiveness under stress. The conclusion that can be drawn is of a mixed nature. Nevertheless, it highlights how a coalition of 27 states, after Brexit—which could also be seen as a form of crisis for the union—had to overcome challenges together and reach compromises.

Since the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union has evolved its decision-making processes. The Three Pillar system has been replaced by the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, which works alongside the EU's system of competencies across various policy areas within Europe. One of the main criticisms against the EU is that its bureaucratic system is too big and too slow, making the decision-making process full of hurdles and inefficiencies.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the continent, resulting in over one million deaths, voices of criticism became louder. Several countries attempted to prioritize their interests by stockpiling medical supplies instead of sharing them. Politicians engaged in dubious deals, and the pharmaceutical industry was in conflict with governments over whether to share their patents (Stevis-Grineff & Erlanger 2021). On the other hand, the union managed to secure an emergency fund for all its member states, amounting to 750 billion euros to help them recover economically from this worldwide pandemic. This financial aid package was decided upon in four days. In comparison, a similar measure took six months to pass through Congress in the United States (Schmidt 2020).

The EU's ability to handle crises reflects its complex structure and the necessity for compromise among its member states. Despite criticisms of inefficiency, the union's response to emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates its potential to act swiftly and effectively when required. The 750 billion euro emergency fund is a testament to the EU's capacity to mobilize resources and support its members in times of need.

This evidence highlights the dual nature of the EU's effectiveness. It does not always operate efficiently, yet in some instances, it performs remarkably well. This dichotomy can be analyzed through the lens of crises, showcasing both the strengths and weaknesses of the Union. The European Union's performance in times of crisis is a multifaceted issue. While the union has faced criticisms for its bureaucratic inefficiencies, it has also proven capable of decisive action under pressure. The EU's

response to recent crises, including the financial crisis, migration crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic, highlights both its strengths and areas for improvement. By analyzing these responses, we can gain a deeper understanding of the EU's complex dynamics and its ongoing efforts to enhance its effectiveness in the face of future challenges.

As the war in Ukraine has unraveled into a conflict engaging parties around the world, attention has turned towards the EU and how it handles this geopolitical crisis right in its geographic vicinity. This chapter aims to provide insight into how the EU might evolve further in the future and what the EU's institutional framework could develop towards.

In the literature, this can be seen as a fusion of power. Without the fusion of being a co-legislator, the European Parliament would have difficulties exercising its oversight function and playing its part in upholding the balance of power within the union. The Council now serves similarly to an upper house in bicameral parliamentary systems. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach consensus within these chambers. This difficulty is exacerbated as political party formations within the EP drift further apart from each other due to ideological differences (Ripoll & Servent 2018; Costa 2001).

Power is also fused by the European Council, the Council, and the Commission of the EU, reflected through their executive powers. Other institutions acting autonomously from the traditional institutions have also gained executive power, such as the European Central Bank, which can be categorized as a *novo* body (Hodson 2022). Other executive powers are clearly separated, which can be observed with EU agencies that have fewer powers than their counterparts in the US. These agencies were often created in times of crisis to ensure and establish certain procedures as well as to collect data to assist decision-makers. An institutional question that will remain in the future is whether power will continue to be fused or separated.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, Van Middelaar, Csehi and Puetter argue that the European Council, since its creation in 1975, has become one of the most powerful institutions within the EU. It tasks the Council of Ministers with assignments and provides the union with a general direction in which it should develop (Van Middelaar 2019; Csehi & Puetter 2021).

Looking ahead, the EU faces numerous challenges that will shape its future institutional framework. The war in Ukraine is just one of many geopolitical crises that test the union's capacity to act cohesively and effectively. The EU's response to this crisis, like its response to previous ones, will likely influence its structural evolution.

As the EU continues to navigate its path forward, the balance between fused and separated powers will remain a critical consideration. The ability to adapt and evolve its institutional framework in response to internal and external pressures will

determine the union's future effectiveness and stability. The European Council's role in setting the union's direction will be pivotal in this ongoing process.

The EU's handling of crises, from the war in Ukraine to broader geopolitical challenges, underscores the importance of its institutional evolution. The interplay between the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, and other autonomous institutions will shape the union's future. By analyzing these dynamics, we gain a deeper understanding of the EU's governance and its potential trajectory in the coming years.

The European Parliament has proposed the Conference on the Future of Europe which today is in charge of drafting new treaties that aim to enhance the EU's institutional framework. A future idea could be to grant the EP the ability to initiate legislation, like national parliaments, thereby increasing its legislative power and oversight capabilities. However, the Commission will maintain a firm grip on its sole right to propose new laws. This institutional development opportunity would mark a shift towards greater democratic participation within the EU's legislative process (Hodson et al. 2022).

Check your knowledge: Questions to reflect upon:

Which inequalities within the EU persist?

What are different future scenarios for the EU?

What are scholars saying about EU's trajectory?

Sample Lessons

Since its beginning, the “EU goes School” (EGS-LAB) project has employed a hands-on approach to training (future) teachers in EU education. The project aims to bridge the traditionally separate phases of teacher education - namely students, teacher trainees in their practical training, and practicing teachers. As part of two seminars conducted at Munich University (LMU), we partnered with a local school, sending teacher trainees and their supervisors to participate in seminar lessons and a field trip to Strasbourg.

In addition to regular seminar interactions, students and teacher trainees collaborated to develop sample lessons. This allowed students to showcase their learning progress and gain practical experience in lesson planning, integral to their future profession. Benefiting from the supervision and expertise of the teacher trainees, students tested their lessons in real classrooms and refined their ideas based on practical outcomes. To further motivate and encourage students, they were informed that their lessons would be published in this handbook.

Through this approach, the project team compiled a total of six sample lessons, each targeting specific topics, learning objectives and target audiences (corresponding to relevant ISCED levels¹):

Topic	Learning objectives	ISCED level
The fundamental values of the European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand knowledge in policy and polity Improve skills in forming political judgments 	1-2
The Euro as a shared currency of the European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand knowledge in policy and polity Improve skills in applying political knowledge and presenting results 	1
The institutions of the European Union since the Lisbon Treaty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand knowledge in polity Improve skills in conducting systematic research 	2-3
The legislative procedure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand knowledge in 	2-3

¹ 1 = primary education, 2 = lower secondary education, 3 = upper secondary education

of the European Union	<p>politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve skills in forming political judgments 	
Food safety and consumer protection as policy fields of the European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand knowledge in policy • Improve skills in applying political knowledge to personal decision-making 	1-2

Teachers and educators are encouraged to use and adapt these sample lessons for their goals and activities.²

² Since the seminars and development of the sample lessons took place in German, we decided against direct translations to avoid misunderstandings. Those interested in using the sample lessons who do not know German may therefore contact egs-lab@gsi.uni-muenchen.de for further assistance and instruction.

Evaluation of EU Learning Materials

The European Union provides its own teaching materials, which are available digitally in as part of its “Learning Corner” (https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/index_en)

The majority of the teaching materials are available in several languages, for the most part even in all 24 official languages. These materials include various formats such as brochures, videos or digital games and are aimed at primary and secondary school students. They are further categorized into four age groups: “Up to 9 years”, “9 to 12 years”, “12 to 15 years” and “From 15 years on”.

The platform is continuously being further developed and, in addition to providing teaching materials, also offers opportunities to network with other teachers, information on exchange opportunities and other offers as well as the latest news and competitions.

Currently (as of August 2024), a total of 151 teaching materials are available in the database. At first glance, this abundance of materials may seem overwhelming, but it is possible to narrow them down according to keywords, age groups, subject areas or formats using filters.

In order to enable a more detailed educational classification and evaluation, several teaching materials were evaluated by researchers of LMU Munich as part of the “EU goes School” project. An evaluation form was used to ensure standardization, which is largely based on the criteria of the “Material Compass” of the “Federation of German Consumer Organizations” (<https://www.vzbv.de/qualitaetskriterien-fuer-unterrichtsmaterial>), which was developed by a German-speaking team of experts in different fields of education.

The following is a summary of the most important evaluation findings. A tabular overview and the individual evaluation forms³ can be found in the German version of the manual.

³ The individual evaluations were conducted in German. To avoid misunderstandings or -interpretations, we decided not to provide direct translations of each evaluation form. However, inquiries can be made to egs-lab@gsi.uni-muenchen.de regarding any questions on the evaluation processes and results.

Summary of the Evaluation Results

A total of 22 teaching materials were analyzed as part of the evaluation. Notably, the initial selection showed a surplus of materials suitable for the age groups "From 15 years on" (99) and "12 to 15 years" (78), while there were fewer materials available for the younger age groups "9 to 12 years" (42) and "Up to 9 years" (37). It is important to mention that some materials are assigned to several age groups.

The sample included various formats: four brochures or books, six digital games, four quizzes, two analogue role-playing games, five videos and one interactive website. The assignment of the evaluators to each material was random.

The evaluation form is divided into different sections, which allow for step-by-step processing:

1. General Information (basic information such as title, target group and brief description of the material)
2. Exclusion Criteria (check for possible violations of ethical or educational standards)
3. Content (evaluation of content aspects such as accuracy and choice of topic)
4. Teaching Principles (evaluation of educational aspects such as orientation towards fostering competences and chosen methods)
5. Design (evaluation of design aspects such as structure and accessibility)
6. Innovation (evaluation of the degree of innovation in the areas of content, teaching principles, and design)
7. Overall Assessment (summary of the evaluation results as well as further comments and recommendations)

The criteria in sections 3 to 6 were assessed on the basis of a point-based grading system from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) and associated explanations. An average score is calculated at the end of each section. For the overall assessment, these average scores are added together and divided by the number of dimensions. Decimal places are rounded up or down accordingly for a better overview within the table (example: 3.6 → 4).

The results show a mixed picture overall. Most offers achieve average overall ratings between 3 and 4 (brochures/books: \bar{x} 3.18; SD = 0.89, digital games: \bar{x} 3.46; SD = 0.73; analog role-playing games: \bar{x} 3.28; SD = 0.39; interactive website: 3.7). A difference can be observed with "quizzes" and "videos" with an average rating of 2.66 (SD = 0.68) and 2.2 (SD = 0.67) respectively. Within these categories, evaluations frequently noted that the videos often only convey superficial factual knowledge and simple messages without deeper classification due to their mostly short length. The

same observation can be made for the quizzes, which mostly contain questions on abstract knowledge.

From a positive point of view, the design ($\bar{X} = 3.84$; $SD = 0.68$) and to a large extent the content ($\bar{X} = 3.14$; $SD = 0.89$) of the materials are particularly positive across different formats. Lower average values were obtained for the teaching principles dimension ($\bar{X} = 2.42$; $SD = 1.15$) and innovation dimension ($\bar{X} = 2.59$; $SD = 1.09$), although there are clear differences between the formats. Formats which naturally allow for more liberty in experimenting with different educational methods and approaches such as “digital games” ($\bar{X} = 2.98$; $SD = 1.1$) or “role-playing games” ($\bar{X} = 3.65$; $SD = 0.21$) perform significantly better than “videos” ($\bar{X} = 1.62$; $SD = 1.25$) or brochures ($\bar{X} = 1.9$; $SD = 1.15$). Similar results can be observed for the degree of innovation, where “digital games” ($\bar{X} = 3.11$; $SD = 0.93$) are clearly ahead of “videos” ($\bar{X} = 1.5$; $SD = 0.7$).

Fortunately, none of the materials examined violated the exclusion criteria. However, it was critically noted that the learning materials rarely included critical perspectives or alternative views on the presented policy, polity or politics of the European Union. This might be partly explained by the scope and possibilities of the respective offerings, but this should be taken into account by educators when using them in the classroom.

In conclusion, the Learning Corner offers a wide range of learning materials on the EU, from classic formats such as brochures and videos to interactive digital games. Many of the materials are impressive due to their design and the selection and factual accuracy of the content. Differences can be seen in the educational sophistication and degree of innovation depending on the respective categories. Unsurprisingly, hardly any of the offerings meet the demanding criteria of modern, skills-oriented teaching and learning processes on their own. Therefore, it is important for educators to consider and critically reflect their respective learning goals and target groups when using any materials to ensure effective outcomes.

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