



Advances in EU Gender Equality: Missing the mark?

Vilde Renman and Caroline Conroy

Abstract

Gender balance has been a particularly salient issue in the recent process of formulating the list of designated commissioners. Jean-Claude Juncker's success, as President-elect of the European Commission in securing the designation of nine women as commissioners should be seen in perspective. Female representation in top EU positions remains low. This paper analyses the EP committees, finding a clear divergence in legislative influence between committees chaired by men and women. Although female political representation has been increasing, this is happening at a very slow pace and the most influential leadership roles in the EP remain dominated by men. This raises questions of the possible need to resort to stronger measures to improve female representation in the EU institutions.

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Ahead of Jean-Claude Juncker's confirmation as President of the European Commission, the outgoing female Commissioners sent a plea to the President-elect for the public endorsement and support of the appointment of at least nine female Commissioners in the next College of Commissioners. Although Juncker acknowledged their concerns and recommendations, going so far as to release a public statement urging member states to nominate a woman, they were seemingly reluctant to heed to his advice until promises of more important portfolios were made in return to presenting a female candidate. When the final list was made official on September 5 the target of nine female Commissioners had been reached, and although some credit should be given to Juncker, he nevertheless failed to deliver on his campaign promise to create a College of Commissioners consisting of at least 40% women.¹

The Socialists, Liberals and Greens in the European Parliament (EP) threatened to refuse to vote in favour of a new Commission consisting of fewer women than in the previous College,² which most likely also influenced and put pressure on member states. However, there will still be a lack of gender parity in the 8th parliamentary term, and the European Parliament – the institution that supposedly embodies fair and equal political representation of member state citizens – does not show a much better picture compared to the European Commission. Despite hopes in the run-up to the 2014 European elections that a higher degree of female representation would be achieved, gains made in gender equality proved to be minimal when compared to the 2009 elections: women continue to account for less than half of the 751 MEPs despite constituting more than half of the EU population. Since only a few national electorates, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Spain, have begun slowly to appoint more and more female representatives, one must wonder whether the European Union, and its institutions, have done enough to set a proper example for member states when it comes to promoting gender equality.

The importance of gender equality and female representation in both the public and private sector has long been recognised by the European Union. Respect for, and the pursuit of, gender equality is part of the fabric of the European Union as outlined in Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. That being said, the EU has, historically, only made slow moves towards such ideals. Equality between men and women is one of the common values on which the EU is founded, yet its own institutions still fail to live up to this principle. Although a small increase in the overall number of female MEPs as well as female EP Committee Chairs can be observed in the 8th Parliamentary term, this does not translate into a fairer gender balance in terms of real power and representation.

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¹ www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/junckers-call-female-commissioners-falls-deaf-ears-303752

² www.euractiv.com/sections/social-europe-jobs/lack-women-no-longer-problem-new-commission-308200

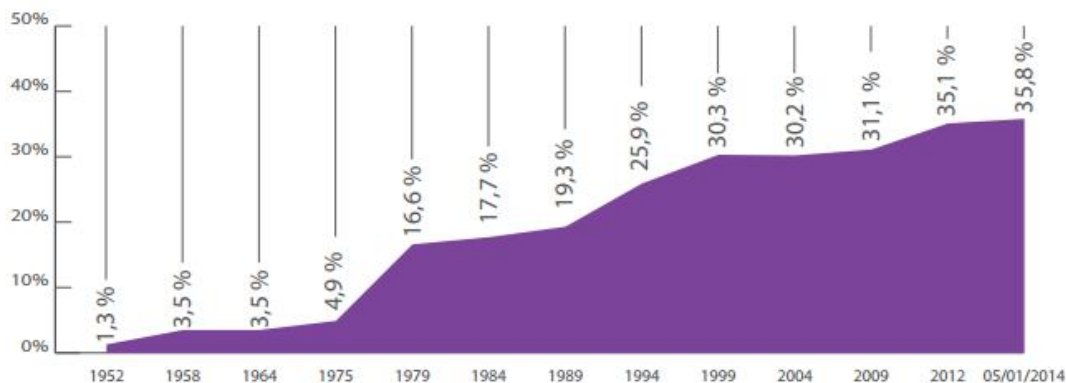
This paper focuses on the European pursuit of greater gender equality in political representation and leadership. The analysis concentrates on committee leadership and the general composition of the European Parliament, which is arguably the European institution that should accurately reflect the nature and spirit of the European public. After providing an overview of developments in female political leadership and representation over time, the next section proceeds to compare the 7th and 8th parliamentary terms in an analysis over whether, and if so where, progress in the gender equality in the EP has been made. Using Eurobarometer data, the next section explores also why strengthening gender equality is an important objective not only for the EU institutions but also for EU citizens. It concludes with remarks on the shortcomings that remain, and makes suggestions for future steps that need to be taken in the field of EU gender equality.

1. EP gender equality: Gradual but insufficient improvements

In the first European elections, held in 1979, the nine member states of the European Community elected 410 Members of European Parliament (MEPs), of which just over 16% were women. Female political representation in the EP continued to be similarly low over the next decade. This means that at a time when paramount decisions over the functioning of the EU were being made, culminating in the signing of significant Treaties such as the Single European Act (1986-87) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992-93), women were clearly underrepresented in political negotiations at EU level.

Ahead of this year's election to the EP, there were high hopes for positive change in terms of gender equality and representation, as well as the belief that the upcoming legislature would be central to institutional reform and the strengthening of the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Unfortunately, the outcome fell short of expectations, with only a 2% gain in female representation.

Figure 1. Changes in female EP membership over time, 1952–2014



Source: *Women in the European Parliament*, Political Post, European Parliament, Equality and Diversity Unit, March 2014 ([www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2014/0001/P7_PUB\(2014\)0001_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2014/0001/P7_PUB(2014)0001_EN.pdf)).

Looking at the composition of the European Parliament in the 8th term, one sees a continuation of a gradual, if sluggish, increase in gender distribution. Following the 2014 election, the female share of MEP seats increased to 37%.³ Unfortunately, these gains failed to match the advances made in 2005, which saw a 4% increase. But are reduced gains a trend, and should the leadership of European institutions, and the general public, be concerned?

³ www.results-elections2014.eu/en/gender-balance.html

If the slow increase in overall female representation is accompanied by low levels of women in powerful positions in the EP then it would appear that the issue of gender equality and diversity ought to be revisited. Looking at leadership roles within the political groups, we find that five out of the seven political groups are led by men as well as the majority of vice-chairs also being male. Turning to the parliamentary committee composition in a comparison between the 7th and 8th parliamentary terms we find, just like the overall outcome of the elections, small, though positive, developments when it comes to the total number of women. In the 8th term, 11 committees increased the total number of women while two maintained stable percentages. However, the committees with the most notable improvements were those that already had a strong female membership during the previous term. Moreover, only nine out of the 22 committees accurately reflect the gender composition of elected MEPs. Moving towards demographic parity in the European Union, where women account for more than half of the population, only four committees (Employment and Social Affairs; Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs; Women's Rights and Gender Equality; and Petitions) have an equal division, or predominately female, membership.

Turning next to EP committee chairmanship, one of the most significant leadership positions, it is easier to ascertain whether the power distribution between the genders has improved within the new EP. There were eight female chairs during the last legislature; this has now increased to ten. By simply looking at the overall number of female committee chairs, which for the upcoming legislative term account for nearly half, one gets the impression that a fairly equal representation between the genders has been achieved. The numbers, however, can be misleading. In order to achieve a more complete understanding of the issue, it is necessary to look at *which* committees are chaired by a woman because there is arguably great variance between committees in terms of their importance and power.

This divergence can be analysed in terms of how much real legislative influence they possess and can be measured by looking at the degree to which different committees are involved in shaping legislation. The EP engages in numerous forms of legislative procedures, but when it comes to the passing of pieces of legislation with a direct impact upon Europe's citizens, the most commonly used one (hence, the most influential) is the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP). These pieces of legislation weigh the strongest in terms of the extent of real political influence they have and it is therefore logical that committees involved in producing a higher number of OLPs are the ones with the greatest legislative power and ability to shape EU policy-making. Based on this parameter, the top committees during the 7th Parliamentary term (see Table 1, marked in bold) were Environment, Public Health and Food Security, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Economic and Monetary Affairs, and, International Trade. Out of these top ones, only one was chaired by a woman.

Judging from how certain committees were more influential in the last legislative term, it is plausible to suggest that the same or at least a similar pattern will be witnessed in the upcoming term. What this means for committee chairmanships is that whoever gets to chair a more prominent committee, such as those dealing with environmental or economic issues, will attain a more influential role within the EP. From the perspective of gender equality, it is therefore important to analyse which committees are now chaired by a woman. In the table above, the committees that will be chaired by a woman in the upcoming term appear in italics, allowing for a comparison between the committees that were most influential in the 7th term and whether these will be chaired by a man or a woman in the 8th term. It becomes apparent that most female committee chairs in the upcoming term will be responsible for committees that in the last session proved the least influential, suggesting a disparity in influence between the genders.

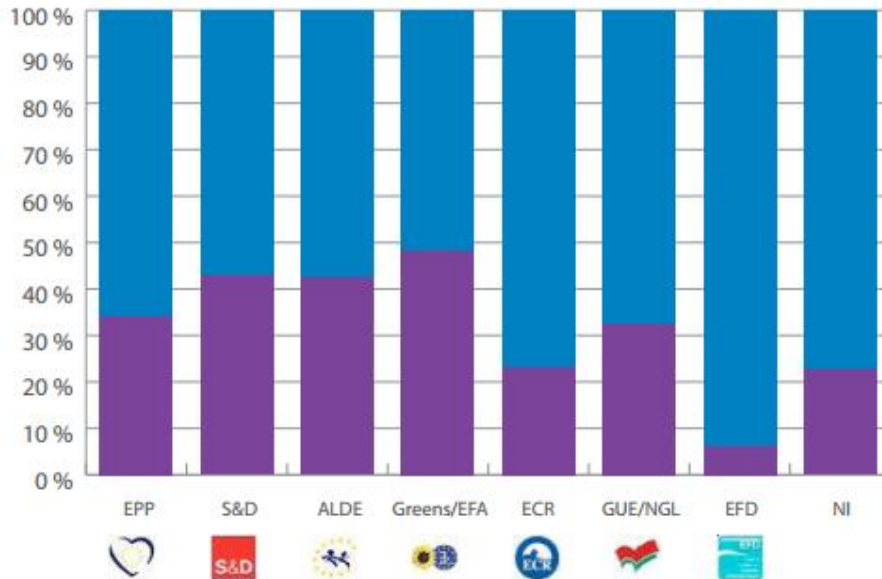
Table 1. Number of ordinary legislative procedures (completed) in the 7th parliamentary term, by committee

Environment, Public Health and Food Safety	59
Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs	51
Economic and Monetary Affairs	48
International Trade	43
Legal Affairs	35
Industry, Research and Energy	35
<i>Internal Market and Consumer Protection</i>	34
Transport and Tourism	28
Agriculture and Rural Development	27
Fisheries	21
Employment and Social Affairs	19
<i>Regional Development</i>	14
Budgets	7
Foreign Affairs	7
<i>Culture and Education</i>	5
<i>Women's Rights and Gender Equality</i>	4
<i>Development</i>	3
<i>Budgetary Control</i>	2
<i>Constitutional Affairs</i>	1

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on data from the Legislative Observatory (www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/home/home.do).

It is important to consider this disparity, since an analysis of how these positions are delegated within the EP political groups can indicate which groups tend to favour women in leadership positions. The political groups bear responsibility for allocating chairmanship positions among their members, a procedure that is negotiated behind closed doors. Therefore, political groups possess a great deal of power to influence the gender balance and can be held accountable, to a certain extent, for encouraging or discouraging, to varying degrees, women in leadership positions within the parliament. Based on the party's ideological stance, it is reasonable to assume that groups such as S&D or the Greens would be more likely to appoint a female representative to significant positions, while the EPP or ECR would be less likely to extend the same privilege to its female membership. But closer inspection reveals that the gender imbalance in leadership roles within the committees is an issue across all parties.

Figure 2. Gender distribution in the political groups, 7th EP term



Source: *Women in the European Parliament*, Political Post, European Parliament, Equality and Diversity Unit, March 2014 ([www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2014/0001/P7_PUB\(2014\)0001_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/2014/0001/P7_PUB(2014)0001_EN.pdf)).

Following the EP elections this year, the EPP now holds eight Committees. As a political group consisting of national parties from the conservative right, gender equality has never been the main political priority for them. From this perspective it is not surprising that the majority of committee chair positions held by the EPP were given to men. In fact, there was a decrease in female-chaired EPP-held Committees between the last and current legislature, going from four to two. Although the leadership of the Budgetary Control and Constitutional Affairs Committees, both deeply important and influential bodies, was transferred to female representatives in the current legislative term, these committees lag behind other EP bodies in terms of legislative prowess. Moreover, these two committees continued to be dominated in membership by male representatives and while leadership positions are important, a good deal of control and influence will invariably fall to the rapporteur. Therefore, women in the EPP have not only been given a lower amount of chairmanships, they also face a disadvantage when it comes to the effectiveness of the committees that they chair.

The S&D obtained seven Committees and, unlike the EPP, female leadership rose in a majority of them. The Socialists and Democrats are inherently committed to advocating gender equality and promoting female leadership, yet also within the party we find that the committee chairmanships seem to have been disproportionately distributed from a gender balance perspective. This is evidenced by the fact that female-chaired committees are the Committees on Development; Culture and Education; and Women's Rights and Gender Equality (as well as the Subcommittee on Human Rights). All of these can be found towards the bottom of the ladder in terms of passing legislation during the last parliamentary term, suggesting a lack in relative importance. S&D did, however, increase the overall number of female chairs, which was just one in the last legislative term.

The situation is similar for ALDE. Although two (an increase by one from the last legislature) out of its three chairmanship positions were granted to women, their positions in the Regional Development and Petitions Committees are unlikely to be highly influential. Additionally, neither of the committees belonging to the Greens and GUE/NGL is chaired by a woman.

An outlier is the ECR. In the last term, it failed to appoint a female chair but the group has positioned British MEP Vicky Ford as chair of the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection. As one of the more relevant Committees in the previous legislature, it is likely that it will continue to be prominent in the upcoming term. Representative Ford was the leading candidate for the Conservative Party in the East of England, an important electoral district in the UK, during the election campaign and as a politician with sound European experience, her nomination for the role did not come as a surprise. Still, leadership of the ECR was given to Representative Syed Kamall and the majority of other leadership positions within the party also remain dominated by men.

A close analysis of the 10 policy areas outlined in President-elect Juncker's Agenda for *Jobs, Growth, Fairness, and Democratic Change*⁴ provides further insight into the potential role to be played by the Parliament's standing committees. Based on the individual remits of the committees, nine out of the 22 are likely to be designated as 'lead' on the most important aspects of Juncker's agenda. The committees that stand to play the most influential roles are Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON); Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE); Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE); and Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO). These committees will most likely handle legislation that will shape the future of the energy union, internal market and economic union and will tackle the issue of falling employment, growth and investment. For the purposes of this paper, influence is indicated by the likelihood of an individual committee designated as the lead committee for specifically outlined proposals from the European Commission.

Table 2. Potential breakdown of committee duties for the 8th parliamentary term

	Potential lead	Agenda items
More than 37% female - female chair	1	2
More than 37% female - male chair	3	5
Less than 37% female - female chair	1	1
Less than 37% female - male chair	4	8
Greater than 50% female	2	4

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on data from "Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission" and the European Parliament (http://ec.europa.eu/about/juncker-commission/docs/pg_en.pdf and www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/full-list.html).

A further breakdown of the data reveals that the most potentially influential committees (ECON, LIBE and ITRE) are chaired by male MEPs. More troubling, the composition of both ECON and ITRE strongly favour male MEPs, with female MEPs accounting for only 22.95% and 23.88% respectively. However, it should be noted that a majority of LIBE Committee membership is female, at 56.66% (a slight increase in female membership from the 7th term.) IMCO, which holds a less critical leadership position, is chaired by a female MEP and also boasts a gender ratio that exceeds the EP composition, at 42.5%. That being said, it appears that the influential committees that are dominated and chaired by female MEPs tend to focus on more domestic, or 'soft', issues, while the male-dominated committees focus on economic and monetary affairs, as well as science and research.

Overall, committees that more heavily favour male MEPs in both membership and leadership stand to continue to play a more significant role in the European Parliament. This casts doubt

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/about/juncker-commission/docs/pg_en.pdf

over the extent to which women will play an active role in shaping the future of Europe according to Juncker's expressed wishes for institutional reform and democratic change and calls into question whether this is really what Europeans want for the future of the Union.

2. Increasing gender equality: A matter of political legitimacy

During the second term of Commission President José Manuel Barroso, an increase in female representation in both the EP and the European Commission could be witnessed. This can be attributed, in part, to his administration's focus on equality and diversity in leadership. During this period, the EU entered into several international agreements and promulgated the Women's Charter.⁵ Despite these steps forward, the role that women will play in determining the future of the EU can still be questioned. It is noteworthy that an increase of just over 20% in female political representation has been achieved in the past 35 years in the EP, and even that meagre progress has begun to lose steam. The gender ratio has been slowly improving within European institutions, yet a majority of women (46%) feel that their interests are not well represented by the European Union.⁶

One possible explanation could be the lack of female leaders to champion the causes and issues that mostly concern women. Gender inequality is still perceived to be a social issue, and the recent economic crisis exacerbated the problem by diverting attention and funding away from the issues of equality and diversity.⁷ Much is left to be desired in terms of the effectiveness and reputation of the Parliamentary committee tasked to deal with women's issues, Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Despite being relatively active in issuing political opinions and drafting initiatives, its direct law-making power is found to be minor. The committee is, moreover, one of the smallest and has been described as 'irrelevant' by MEPs.⁸ The effective dismissal of this committee and the downplaying of gender and equality issues indicate a more troubling situation.

There exists a general feeling among an overwhelming percentage of Europeans polled that, given equal qualifications and skills, women continue to face real obstacles to reach positions of responsibility in both senior levels of public administration and within the leadership of political parties. The most popular explanation is that politics is dominated by men who do not value the skills of women.⁹ Additionally, women are restricted from roles of responsibility in both the public and private sphere due to their more traditional roles as family care givers.¹⁰

Yet this bias is not reflected in the mindset of many Europeans. There is a general consensus that not only are women qualified to hold positions¹¹ of greater responsibility but that most European citizens are comfortable with female decision-makers.¹² When polled, there is strong support for increasing the number of women in the European Parliament, with 70% of women and 60% of men stating that 40% or more of the EP should be women.¹³ And although the

⁵ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-10-71_en.htm?locale=en

⁶ Special Eurobarometer 266.

⁷ Special Eurobarometer 326.

⁸ [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493051/IPOL-FEMM_ET\(2014\)493051_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493051/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2014)493051_EN.pdf)

⁹ Annexes released by the Directorate General for Communication (25/5/11) (www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2011/2011_03_08/TabEN.pdf).

¹⁰ Special Eurobarometer 326.

¹¹ Special Eurobarometer 326.

¹² Special Eurobarometer 393.

¹³ Special Eurobarometer 266.

public believes that gender inequality has decreased over the last decade,¹⁴ inequality is still an issue that 61% of Europeans believe should be dealt with by the European Union.

Examining women's issues in a broader context, it becomes clear that female representation in the higher echelons lags significantly behind other concerns in public opinion. In the lead-up to the 2014 elections, the EP contracted TNS Opinion to conduct a flash survey to examine women's response to the financial crisis. Among the findings was that female representation in positions of power was viewed as the sixth most important gender equality issue, with 20% of respondents in the EU ranking it as the most important. Female political leadership fell behind issues such as the pay gap, domestic violence, issues in reconciling private and professional lives, female corporate leadership, sexual trafficking, and the unequal sharing of domestic duties.¹⁵ Respondents indicated these same issues as inequalities that the upcoming parliament ought to make a priority. And so, while gender equality and presence in leadership are crucial goals, it appears that EU citizens see greater threats to European women than political underrepresentation.

Ensuring a fair balance between men and women in leadership positions is not only what institutions and businesses *need*, it is also what citizens *want*. So far, the EU is not delivering on its gender equality promises since gains are very slow and insubstantial. At a time of political and financial uncertainties within the EU, gender equality promotion runs the risk of being overshadowed by other concerns. The European public has consistently indicated that gender equality is a key issue in society, most recently noted in a Special Eurobarometer conducted earlier this year. More than just indicating the importance of promoting gender equality, the survey found that citizens believe that the EU needs to play a central role in addressing these and other social problems.¹⁶

Conclusion

Although leadership positions and political appointments still tend to be dominated by men, on the whole, gender equality within European institutions and the European Parliament has been on the rise with slow, but substantial, gains over the last two decades. Female membership in the EP has more than doubled and looking to the European Commission, there is a similar pattern of slow, but consistent, increases in female representation.

Concerns should be raised, however, over the slow speed at which this is happening as well as the uneven gender balance in the composition of the EP in the upcoming legislative term. The initial threats not to vote in favour of the new Commission unless it entailed a higher number of female Commissioners are vanishing, partly due to member states taking action and putting forward more female candidates but possibly also because the EP may be conscious of its own shortcomings in this area. Leadership roles in the political groups are favourable to men, and the chairmanship and composition of the most influential EP Committees in the upcoming legislature are also dominated by men. Although the number of female committee chairs has increased this term, the majority of these committees lack power, compared to those chaired by men.

Despite the EP's united front in support of gender equality, the fact is that it seems unlikely that any major positive developments will take place unless stricter measures are enacted. Although the EP is doing better than many national parliaments regarding gender balance, making a relative comparison of this sort will not lead to improvements. It is a matter of practising what you preach, establishing a political balance that is truly representative of the EU population, and

¹⁴ Special Eurobarometer 393.

¹⁵ www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2013/femme/synth_en.pdf

¹⁶ [Special Eurobarometer 413](#).

setting a good example for member states to follow. If the European Union truly wishes to restore faith in democratic legitimacy, and serve as an accurate mirror of European society, it is clear that its institutions should strive to be more inclusive and more equal. If political will is not sufficient to achieve this, perhaps the only way forward is the legal adoption of similar measures as those suggested for private companies by the EU.¹⁷

¹⁷ 2012/0299(COD) *Gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges* ([www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2012/0299\(COD\)&l=en](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2012/0299(COD)&l=en)).

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

Since 2005, an EPIN Steering Committee takes the most important decisions. Currently there are seven member institutes: CEPS, Clingendael (the Netherlands), EIR (Romania), ELCANO (Spain), HIIA (Hungary), Notre Europe (France) and SIEPS (Sweden).

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Structure

Currently there are 34 EPIN members from 25 countries, also from countries outside of the EU. The 'hard core' work of the network is based on the cooperation of about 10 most active institutes. The member institutes are quite diverse in size and structure, but are all characterised by political independence and the absence of any predetermined point of view or political affiliation.

EPIN organises at least three events across Europe per year. The network publishes Working Paper Series and other papers, which primarily focus on institutional reform of the Union. The network follows preparations for the European elections, the EU's communication policy, and the political dynamics after enlargement, as well as EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs.

Achievements

EPIN is a network that offers its member institutes the opportunity to contribute to the 'European added-value' for researchers, decision-makers and citizens. The network provides a unique platform for researchers and policy analysts to establish personal links, exchange knowledge and collaborate on EU-related issues. Members bring their national perspectives to bear on the issues tackled and through collaboration they contribute to establish a 'European added-value' (e.g. on EU communication, flexible integration). By doing so, they strengthen a common European dimension in the national debates on Europe.



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