

## COOPERATION OF EU INSTITUTIONS

Interview to Maria Noichl, Member of European Parliament ([www.maria-noichl.eu](http://www.maria-noichl.eu))

A project carried out by the students of Gymnasium Sonthofen, under the supervision of prof. Winfried Engeser.



- *Why is the European Parliament the only EU institution directly elected by EU citizens? And which way do MEPs respond – to their own country or to the whole Union? What influence do MEPs have?*

Unlike the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament directly represents the citizens of the EU Member States. This is why its members are elected directly by voters in all Member States. However, this has not always been the case. Although the Parliament was created in 1952, it is only since 1979 that MEPs have been elected in direct elections across the EU.

As members of the European Parliament, our job is to work for the common good of Europe as a whole. This is a principle that I always

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try to remember when I enter the Plenary room. All chairs are blue in the Parliament hall, where there cannot be national symbols – MEPs are elected to serve Europe. Having said that, obviously MEPs are strictly connected to their own country and their own voters. At the same time, however, they have to take into account the concerns and demands of all European citizens, so as to meet the needs of the greatest possible number of people. In this building we often hear the words ‘Put yourself in someone else’s shoes!’ For us, Members of Parliament, it is only too natural to have a lot of relationships, a lot of travel impressions and a lot of experiences with people from all Member States. This is the only way you can reach good decisions.

In terms of influence, the European Parliament can first of all exercise its influence over the appointment of Commissioners. During the so-called parliamentary hearings, the Commissioners-designate are literally ‘grilled’. If MEPs disagree with some nominees’ stances and opinions, they can reject their candidacy. At the moment, however, legislative initiative is the sole preserve of the Commission, which is responsible for drafting regulations and directives. Legislative proposals then have to be approved by the European Parliament, which can also propose amendments to them. It is worth remembering that prior to her election as President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen had declared herself supportive of recognising the Parliament’s right to legislative initiative.

- *On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the collaboration of MEPs in terms of efficiency? Are there any fields of work where collaboration is particularly efficient? In what fields is it not standard practice yet? And how are current issues managed within EU institutions (for instance, the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis)?*

Unlike, for example, the German Parliament, in the European Parliament there are no permanent alliances. Coalitions are formed on an ad hoc basis, meaning that majorities change each time. For this reason, single MEPs are not particularly bound to their parliamentary group, but are free to vote in accordance with their views. At the

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moment, 133 out of 704 MEPs can be considered Eurosceptics. They belong, among others, to the German anti-EU party Alternative for Germany (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*) and to the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*). Given this strong anti-EU tendency, it is all the more important that conscientious Democrats work even more closely for the creation of a common Union. Although this is not always possible, I'd still rate such collaboration an 8 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Contrary to what is maybe believed at national level, when dealing with big issues and problems at EU level, MEPs are extremely united, despite the right-wing bloc I mentioned earlier. If the guidelines of the Parliament had been followed, in 2015 refugees would have been equally distributed among EU MSs. Among heads of State and government, that is within the European Council, national interests are highly emphasised. Too emphasised. In fact, countries like Hungary and Poland can lead the whole Union to an impasse by simply employing their veto. The European Parliament, for example, attempted to link the disbursement of budget funds to the upholding of democratic norms and the rule of law. As a consequence, Hungary and Poland, which at the moment seem to be turning away from democracy and the rule of law, rejected this mechanism, making it impossible to greenlight the EU budget. The result was that the countries that were hardly hit by the coronavirus pandemic were forced to wait for the much needed support of the recovery package.

Unfortunately, in the Treaty of Lisbon there's no provision to expel a Member State outright in case of infringement of democratic principles. The only means of action currently envisaged by the Treaties is the infringement procedure which is opened by sending a letter of formal notice.

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- *Is it common for European institutions to disagree? Can single institutions engage in a direct dialogue with another institution?*

There are three main institutions involved in EU legislation: the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. As I said before, within the EU architecture, the Council is the body that mainly represents the national governments and where the Member States pursue their national interests. Its counterpart is the European Parliament, which plays the role of co-legislator at the same level as the Council. The Commission should mediate between these two levels and facilitate compromise solutions. Rather than dialogues, therefore, it's better to speak of 'trilogues', that is tripartite meetings during which long negotiations take place and issues are debated to ensure a satisfactory future. Trilogue meetings of the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council can last several weeks or even months. Recently, for instance, the so-called 'Green Pass' has been discussed, which should gradually facilitate safe free movement inside the Union during the pandemic. Personally, as a member of the agricultural commission, I'm contributing to discussion in the ongoing trilogue on the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Trilogue meetings are always chaired by the State holding the presidency chair in the Council. Until the end of 2021, therefore, they will be chaired by Slovenia, followed by France.

As is always the case in politics, the key is finding a compromise. Very often these compromise solutions are just small steps, but when 27 countries take a small step towards a better future, this is still progress.

- *What is the difference between the European Parliament and the national Parliaments of Member States?*

Let's consider, for example, the *Bundestag*, the German Parliament. The European Parliament is made of representatives elected in the 27 EU Member States, while the German *Bundestag* is composed of members elected in the 16 *Länder*, or federal States. A glaring difference between the two is, therefore, multilingualism, which is a feature of the European

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Parliament, where all of the EU's 24 official languages are used and interpretation services in some minority languages are granted when needed, because diversity is the rule in Europe.

A further difference is clear at system levels. While the German Bundestag is made up of a government party (or coalition of parties) and of opposition parties, the European Parliament is currently divided into anti-EU parties and pro-EU parties. Moreover, unlike the members of the German Bundestag, MEPs are not forced to vote along European party lines. Statistical evidence indicates that in no other deliberative assembly are parliamentary members as free to vote according to their personal policy preferences as they are in the European Parliament.

However, the main difference between the two institutions undoubtedly lies in their degree of autonomy. The German *Bundestag* has the right to initiate legislation, that is, it can define the issues to be included in the parliamentary agenda. The European Parliament, on the other hand, does not have a right of initiative yet. It can react vigorously, but it cannot act autonomously. Not yet.

- *What role do political groups play within the European Parliament?*

The size of a political group in the European Parliament is extremely important, as it affects the allocation of speaking time and other rights. Contrary to the German *Bundestag*, in Brussels parties are united in political families. This expression emphasises the fact that representatives of different national Parliaments belong to the same group, although their political opinions are only partly similar. While in the German *Bundestag* parties agree on a common political line, in the European Parliament I'd use the word corridor rather than line.

Therefore, MEPs belong to the same political family when they share general action programmes and work together toward common goals. Of the 146 MEPs belonging to the Party of European Socialists (PES), 133 belong to the S&D group, that is, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), of which I myself am a member, while 1 is a

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member of the European Democratic Party (EDP), 1 a member of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) and 11 are independent members. We're like a family, with brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts.

When it comes to voting, parliamentary majorities are required, just like in any other democratic Parliament. In the European Parliament, a majority can be reached only through cooperation. Depending on the topic under discussion, political groups seek a majority by forming coalitions, which change continually. This procedure is democratic, fascinating but at the same time quite demanding.

- *How would you describe your work as member of the European Parliament?*

Firstly, I'd like to point out that my work routine is extremely varied. While working within the Committee or during hearings or meetings in the Plenary hall, or when voting during plenary sessions, I share my time with MEPs from all of the 27 MSs belonging to all political families. And this is wonderful, to the point that when I'm on holiday I miss the various languages and the variety of people and traditions. During the so-called 'group meetings' or within 'working groups', I work in my political family, where we exchange ideas and pool resources in view of plenary sessions. In the group meetings of SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, there are altogether 16 German MEPs, including myself. We're the smallest group. On these occasions we discuss our voting intentions or specific topics in smaller rounds.

My schedule is also full of journeys all over Europe and, in my specific case, to Africa. Unfortunately, the pandemic has affected many activities also here in Brussels. As a member of the delegation responsible for relations with Africa, I share some duties with other MEPs. Never would I have expected to grow so fond of this continent and its people. The European Parliament is and remains a Parliament with a focus on human rights, which is capable of looking at the wider picture and struggles for a better future for Europe and the whole world.

And what about Bavaria? And Germany? During the so-called 'green weeks', that is the weeks which parliamentarians spend in their local constituencies, I attend events and meetings in schools, companies,

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farms and so on. As a matter of fact, besides dealing with Africa and gender policies, I also work to improve the future of people, products, plants and animals, as well as the environment in general.

[Translated from German by Daniela Ferrari]

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