

The Politicisation of the European Union and the Role of the European Parliament: Opportunities, Risks and Limitations

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Politicisation of the EU has become an important subject in debates about the future of the European governance. This paper addresses the distinguished and unprecedented politicisation-push that the EU has been experiencing through the emergence of sovereignty, identity and solidarity conflicts in the context of the poly-crises - from negative referenda outcomes to the global financial and economic crisis as well as against the backdrop of the migration crisis. Politicisation is heavily influencing and substantially re-shaping the EU institutions and the EU-level Civil Society.

After theoretically outlining the concepts of constructive vs. destructive politicisation, the paper focusses on the political dynamics in the women's rights committee of the European Parliament as a highly politicised arena. The chapter addresses in particular the gender specific cooperation and alliances between and within political groups and party federations by analysing the key factors which influence decision-making in the context of the EP, both at plenary and committee level: distribution of seats among political groups, intra-group cohesion and inter-group coalitions.

Keywords: European Union, European Integration, politicization, gender

DEFINING THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL SPACE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE POLITICISATION

Le Parlement européen doit remplir les mêmes tâches que tous les parlements: il doit exprimer les différents courants de pensée afin d'arriver à les concilier.

Hans Furler, Président des Europäischen Parlaments 1960-1962

Media portray the EU predominantly along national lines. The angle or perspective from which EU related news stories are told are frequently one-dimensional and explain conflicting positions predominantly with a national focus. Hence, media framing, i.e. the media reconstruction of reality, looks for a national angle and describes the EU decision-making processes largely as a battleground for national governments defending genuine national interests: the German national interest against the French; the national interest of the Franco-German engine opposed to other EU member states; the interests of the north against the south, or the west against the east; of the net contributors against the net receivers, etc.

“Whether a national leader won, lost, or tied, whether a representative was able to extract a concession to bring back home or capitulated to counterparts, is often more important than how members’ decisions affect the EU as a whole.”¹

This portrayal is not entirely wrong, and the formation of smaller alliances within the EU, such as the Euromed 7 initiative established in 2013 by seven Mediterranean countries in order to better coordinate issues of common interest within the EU, or the 1991 established Visegrad group including four central European countries show the attempt of governments to influence better the EU agenda setting. However, media framing along national lines is only a small section of reality. For many years now, academic research has shown that the EU decision-making processes are more complex than that and that the political battles are fought among traditional Left-Right lines as well as along pro-and anti-European lines, and each EU institution - from the European Commission to the Council or the European Parliament - is developing its own peculiarities and specific dynamics. In this context, the politicisation of the EU is influencing and reshaping the EU institutions and the EU-level Civil Society and has therefore become an important subject to understand European governance and its future. Amongst the most prominent researchers figure amongst others Simon Hix² and Swen Hutter, Edgar Grande and Hanspeter Kriesi.³

Hix argues that the EU has changed in recent years from a consensual to a contested system of governance.

“Until the early 1990s the EU was essentially a consensual system of governance. The result was the so-called ‘permissive consensus’, whereby citizens were content to delegate responsibility to their leaders to tackle the European integration project. However, this consensus collapsed in the early 1990s, which has resulted in much more contested attitudes towards the EU among Europe’s citizens. European integration no longer commands widespread support and a complex web of economic interests, social values, political preferences and national contexts shape individuals’ attitudes towards the EU.”⁴

If political elites continue with consensus politics, they risk to provoke more public opposition to the EU. Politicising the EU agenda in domestic politics and at European level appears to him as the right sort of medicine for Europe. Hix defends the point of view, that there is a visible Left-Right politicization of the EU and that more of it is both possible and desirable “since such a form of politicization would strengthen the public debate and clarify its terms.”⁵ Hix argues further:

“Rather than assuming that a European demos is a prerequisite for genuine EU democracy, a European democratic identity might well form through the practice of democratic competition and institutionalized co-operation.”⁶

The best politicisation platform is according to Hix the European Parliament where evidence of the trending Left-Right politicization of the EU is already visible:

“Voting in the European Parliament is increasingly along Left-Right party lines and decreasingly along national lines. In fact, the main political groups in the European Parliament are now more ‘cohesive’ in their voting than the Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress and only slightly less cohesive than parliamentary parties in the national parliaments in Europe.”⁷

Contrary to Simon Hix’s views, who assumes that politicisation will mainly have positive effects on the integration process, Swen Hutter, Edgar Grande and Hanspeter Kriesi shed some light on the negative effects of politicisation, which is mainly driven by populist radical right parties highlighting the negative consequences of European integration.

“The main path towards the politicisation of Europe is dominated by Eurosceptic parties of the right. [...] By challenging the pro-European consensus of mainstream parties and the political elite more generally, the populist radical right is seen as the most vigorous driving force of the politicisation of European integration.”

Hutter/Grande/Kriesi argue that in this contest, politicisation is alimented by multi-layered legitimacy conflicts, particularly by sovereignty, identity and solidarity conflicts.

“In cases in which European integration is politicised by the populist radical right, this process is driven by a specific type of issue being emphasised and a particular framing of European integration. More precisely, it focuses on constitutive issues and uses a cultural-identitarian framing. [...] By emphasising constitutive European issues, the populist radical right puts the spotlight on fears of loss of national sovereignty, identity and financial resources. Furthermore, opposing European integration by reference to cultural-identitarian justifications is nurtured by the ‘nativist’ ideological predispositions of radical right parties. In this way, the populist radical rights has been successfully mobilising the potential losers from the further opening-up of national boundaries in western Europe since the 1990s.”

Contrary to Hix, Hutter/Grande/Kriesi emphasise the negative effects of politicisation on the integration process and identify a cleavage between pro-European and anti-European political forces, rather than a Left-Right divide:

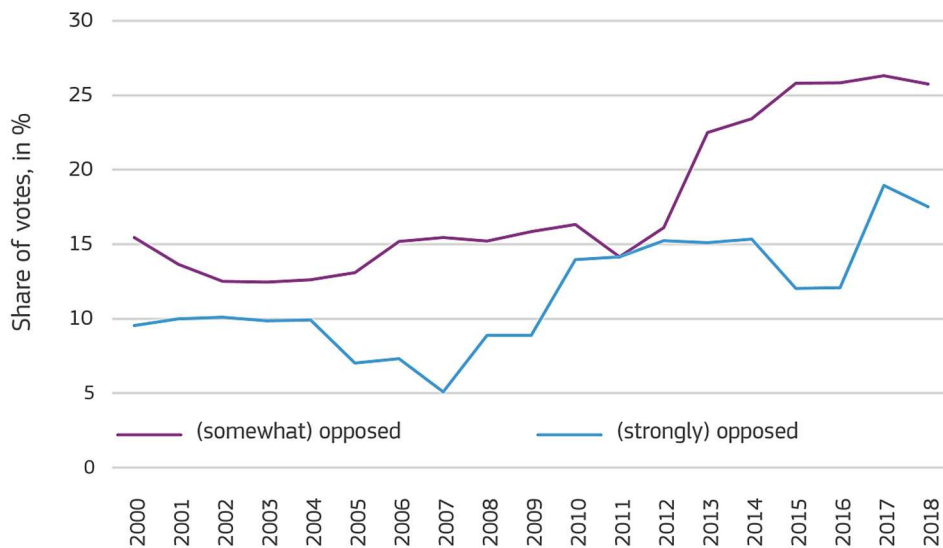
“By putting Europe on the agenda and highlighting its negative consequences, the populist right exacerbates tensions within mainstream parties of the left and right, which can no longer so easily integrate European issues in their programmes.”

Finally, Hutter/Grande/Kriesi conclude, that politicisation has added uncertainty to the system and actually represents rather a wrong than a right sort of medicine for the EU:

Our findings suggest that politicisation has led to a significant increase in political uncertainty for political elites. Because of the ubiquitous threat potential of politicisation, political decisions on European integration have become much less calculable than in the times of permissive consensus.

However, both understandings of politicisation embody two sides of the same medal and describe the Janus-faced character of politicizing European policy making. While in the past, the EU policy-making process was described as technocratic, governed by faceless bureaucrats, in recent years it has become increasingly difficult to build political consensus: When agreements are reached in Brussels, they are more contentious than ever, the European institutions seem fragmented and the European political debate is becoming more and more controversial. European integration polarises and the political process has become remarkably politicised.⁸

FIGURE 1
SHARE OF VOTE FOR PARTIES THAT OPPOSE EU INTEGRATION IN EU-28, 2000-2018



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The share of votes for parties opposed to EU integration has steadily increased over the last decade,⁹ while many Europeans are getting disenchanted of the Union and distrustful of its institutions and policy-makers. At the same time tension between the national and the European level are rising. Euroscepticism - in all its forms, from moderate to extremist - is no longer a fringe phenomenon¹⁰ but a political reality. It has become one of the most striking developments in modern European politics, and for the coming years it is here to stay.

The politicisation of Europe is fundamentally alimeted by multi-layered legitimacy conflicts, particularly by sovereignty, identity and solidarity conflicts.¹¹ During the past decade the constitutional crisis, together with the financial and the migration crisis predominantly emphasised these conflicts, thus damaging the image of the EU's unity and labelling Europe as a cumbersome and verdant political system.¹² These types of conflict are not entirely new and have always accompanied the integration process. They are intrinsic or natural to European integration, because Member States find themselves rooted in a reality of shared sovereignty and common governance in order to best manage interdependence, for which they have originally not been designed for.¹³ For pro-European political actors, there has been little alternative to integration. Most of the Head of States and Governments, which signed the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, were in the opposition, when their respective countries signed the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Nevertheless, European integration followed a certain path dependency nature, with little or no alternative. "Either we share our sovereignty, or we lose it" said the former EU-Commission President Romano Prodi. Obviously, the pro-European narrative did not contemplate the possibility of an anti-European politicisation. Carlo Ruzza describes the present state of the EU facing the "populist turn" as follows:

"One can characterize the state of the EU facing populism as one of many institutions still looking for a solution to the overarching problem of their loss of legitimacy."¹⁴

However, parallel to the described downward spiral of destructive politicization, Europe is witnessing as well a different, pro-European sort of politicisation, mainly through parliamentarization: The history of European integration is also a history of gains in legitimacy, most notably in the gradual upgrading of the

European Parliament - from the Common Assembly to the citizens' chamber and the significant expansion of its competences in EU legislation.

The politicization of the European Union has various manifestations including negative and positive criticism, as well as resistance and support for the political system. The Eurobarometer survey from May 2018 for instance showed record support for the EU:¹⁵ conducted in April 2018 amongst 27,601 people from 28 Member States, the report revealed one year ahead of the 2019 European elections that on average 60% of citizens believe that EU membership of their country is a good thing whilst over two-thirds of respondents were convinced that their country has benefited from being a member of the EU. This was the highest score since 1983. Similarly, according to the results of the Eurobarometer survey from November 2019 on the euro area, showed that 76% of respondents think the single currency is good for the EU. This was the highest support since the introduction of euro coins and banknotes in 2002.

The President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani (EPP, Italy) commented the results as follows, clearly identifying the polarising tendencies in view of the elections:

“The next European elections will undoubtedly be a battle, not just between the traditional parties of the Right, Left and Centre but between those who believe in the benefits of continued cooperation and integration at EU level and those who would undo what has been achieved over the last 70 years.”¹⁶

Moreover, the politicisation of the European Union is not a in itself consistent or coherent phenomenon. It is asymmetric, changing intensity from one policy area to another; it is “differentiated”¹⁷ and “punctuated”,¹⁸ characterised by significant variation over time, across countries and political arenas. Furthermore, the level of politicisation can vary from marginal or slight to intense, while the orientation towards European integration may include a spectrum of positions from strongly in favour to strongly opposed.¹⁹ Whenever politicisation takes place, arguments driven by politics and ideology count more than arguments based on expertise, on practical constraints, or time pressure.

Hence, politicisation is neither good nor bad per se. If it allows democratic preference aggregation and promotes electoral competition - particularly in view of European elections - it stipulates democratic legitimacy. The expression of political dissent vis-à-vis “Brussels”, often depicted as excessively bureaucratized and defending the “there-is-no-alternative” approach, has obviously its opportunities and its risks. Within the three-dimensional policy space of party competition in Europe, path-dependent / mainstream / mass parties (“Volksparteien”) are challenged to position themselves as a moderate centrist alternative to the economic left-right, the social Green/Alternative/Libertarianism (GAL) against Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalism (TAN) and the radical pro-/anti-European integration parties, thus moving the European debate from “constraining” and occasionally “destructive dissensus”²⁰ to a “constructive dissensus”. However, if politicisation is a purely domestic phenomenon and does not manifest in all member states equally, it might have a de-legitimation impact in the member state or member states concerned. If politicisation on the other hand is international - i.e. between countries - it carries the danger of positioning member states against each other.²¹ This is particularly the case, when populist sovereignist political movements are ruling or are part of a government coalition. In such cases, a clear differentiation between the “national interest” and the party’s position becomes blurred. Thus, the strong commitment of European leaders²² to the Europe’s single currency, the Euro, has triggered opposition from new Euroscepticism²³ in several member states; while the obvious divisions in managing the migration crisis has opened a deep divide among European Union members. As Lewis Dijkstra et al. (2018) put it:

“The EU is therefore identified - together with migrants - as the main opponent. In party programme after party programme, electoral manifesto after electoral manifesto, the EU is depicted as a threat to national identity, to democracy and even to economic stability and progress.”²⁴

In practice, politicisation of integration means that relevant questions regarding the future of the European project - from the institutional setup to the recruitment of political leadership, from issues with economic relevance - such as economic policy, fiscal policy, social policy, etc. - to dossiers related to sovereignty, identity and solidarity conflicts - such as immigration policy, cultural diversity, etc. - are subject of public debate in parliaments, in the media as well as in other arenas of politicisation. These relevant questions are debated by an increasing number of politicisation actors in a controversial and divisive manner, distinguishing themselves clearly from each other and exacerbating their disagreement, thus deepening the cleavages and lowering the potential for consensus. Finally, the polarisation between the political actors may occur within the political arena of a given Member State, but as well between political actors of different Member States or even between political actors of a EU Member State or a group of states on the one hand and the EU institutions on the other. The current phenomenon of politicisation is furthermore characterised by the fact that the controversial and divisive positioning of the political actors refers not only to specific policy proposals, but also to the integration process as a whole.

The bad news is: the old days of “permissive consensus” are over; the politicisation of the EU affects supranational decision-making profoundly and it is here to stay.

The good news is: politicisation has manifold manifestations that produce not only negative but also positive criticism, and not only resistance against but also support for the political system.

As the European Union and its policies have become more salient and visible at member states level, the EU cannot bury its head in the sand but must tackle the issue of politicisation head on. The institutions need to be ready to allow key politicisation agents, in particular political parties which remain essential to the process, to voice their concerns, suggestions, their resistance and their support - all in all their political input to the debate. At the end of the day, the key question is, if the European Union is able to absorb the stress test of politicisation. The European Parliament is in many ways an example of best practice in absorbing politicisation. It is the only directly elected EU institution allowing for democratic preference aggregation and promotes electoral competition. And it has this vocation from its beginning, as the Furler-report stated already back in 1963, 16 year before the first direct elections:

“[...] le parlement doit exprimer les différentes courants d’opinion et centres d’intérêt d’un peuple et trouver entre eux un équilibre garantissant le bien-être général. [...] En outre, le Parlement européen doit remplir les mêmes tâches que tous les parlements: il doit exprimer les différents courants de pensée afin d’arriver à les concilier.”²⁵

In the treaty-architecture, the EP is a co-legislator, responsible for Democratic scrutiny of all EU institutions and establishing the EU budget, together with the Council. At the same time it is the most important arena for the politicisation of the EU and European policies. This becomes particularly evident during “critical events”²⁶ such as European Elections, as described by Alexander Clarkson in his article in “politico”:

“A decade or two ago, heads of state would have treated the European Parliament election as a mere sideshow. Now, the increasingly visible concentration of collective power in the hands of EU institutions has made them prizes worth expending serious political capital to win. Everyone is jockeying to decide the EU's future. It's not an easy battleground on which to gain the upper hand. Successive crises — eurozone, migration, Brexit — created the necessity for cross-border political debate. But their fallout has polarized societies and envenomed national party politics. The high stakes electoral game for the future of the EU has sharpened the ideological battle lines between rival party networks within the European Parliament and between political forces on a national level. This has made European consensus hard to find on, well, anything. Everyone — pro-Europeans and Euroskeptics alike — is jockeying to dominate the political debate and decide the EU's future. And the best tool to do that: flamboyant acts of showmanship that harness European issues to their own advantage. That's how the new generation of EU leaders — including

Macron and on the other side, Italy's far-right leader Matteo Salvini — are playing the EU game.²⁷

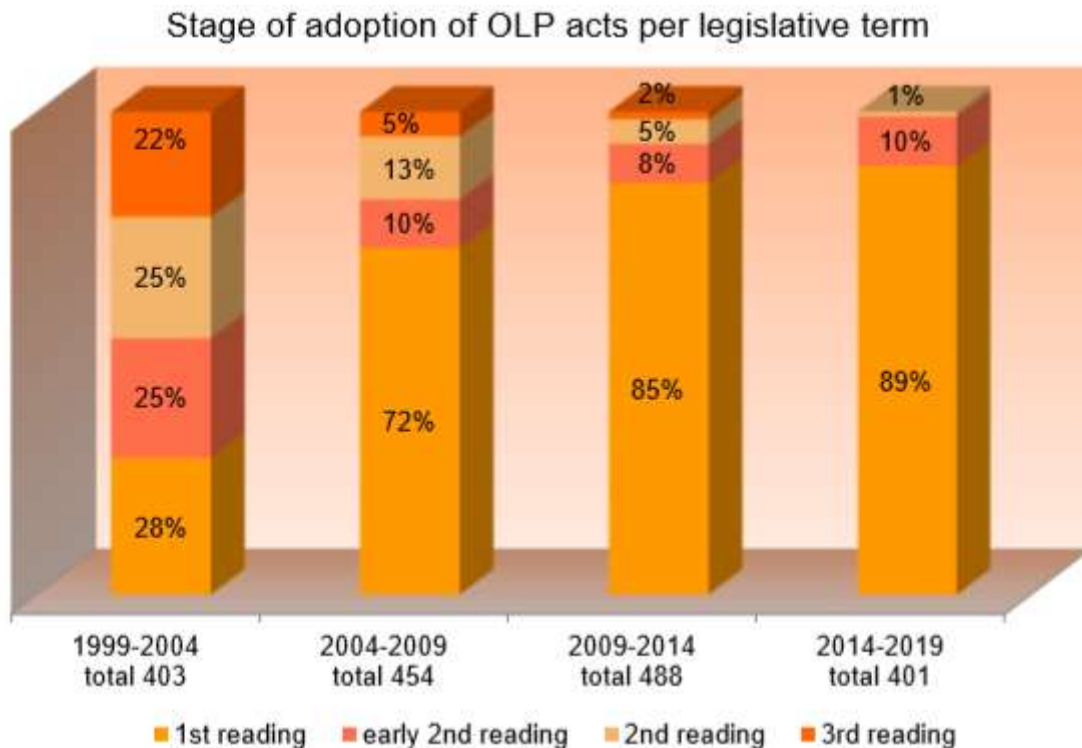
The last European elections in May 2019 visibly took place in the context of increasing politicisation of the EU: the voter turn-out increased to 51 %; traditional parties lost substantial ground, while the share of votes for parties opposed to EU integration has steadily increased over the last decade reaching now close to one quarter of seats; many elected Members are newcomers (61%), the Parliament resulting more fragmented and less predictable than ever.²⁸

The next chapter of this paper focusses on the political dynamics of a parliamentary committee in the European Parliament, namely the Committee on Women's Right and Gender Equality (FEMM) as an example of a highly politicised arena within the EP. These dynamics mainly develop along the lines of the parliamentary groups; they are largely influenced by them and occasionally bear the threat of an obstruction within the EU policymaking process leading to a deadlock.

Politicisation of EU Gender Policies: The Political Dynamics in the European Parliament Committee on Women's Right and Gender Equality²⁹

As work of the European Parliament comprises mainly two stages - the committee stage and the plenary stage - parliamentary committees have a very important role: they draw up, amend and adopt legislative proposals and own-initiative reports. They consider Commission and Council proposals and, where necessary, draw up reports to be presented to the plenary assembly. A vast majority of EU legislation is endorsed through early agreements - i.e. at first or early second reading, when parliamentary committees de facto sit in the driving seat. The graph below shows, that the trend towards early agreements is as strong as ever, representing a record high of 89% the 8th term.

**FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE OF CO-DECISION FILES ADOPTED AT FIRST, EARLY SECOND, SECOND AND THIRD READING PER LEGISLATIVE TERM SINCE 1999³⁰**

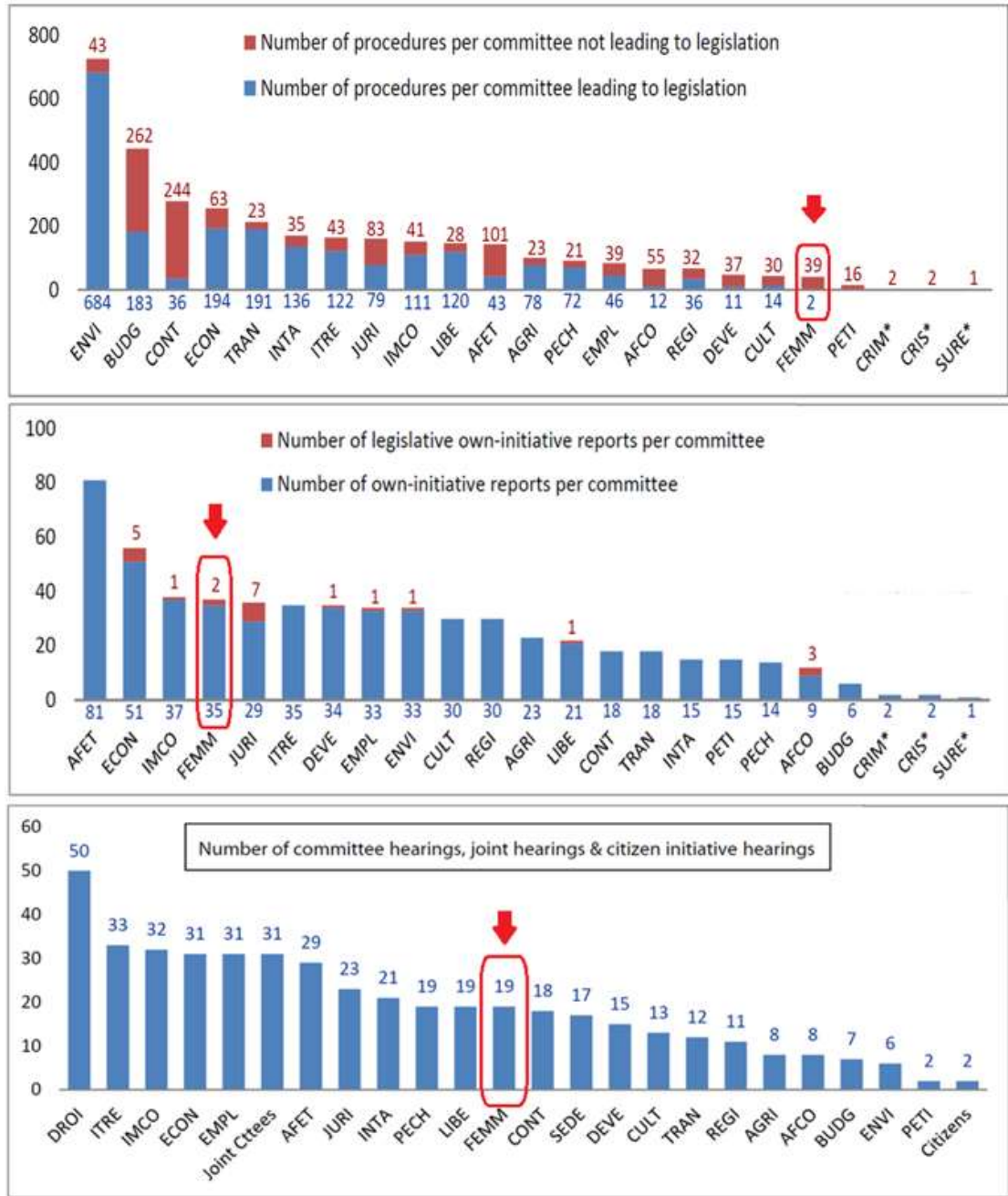


During the current legislative term, the EP has 20 standing committees (22 if one includes the 2 subcommittees) as well as a couple of special ad-hoc committees. They cover virtually every EU policy area and are:

- Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET)³¹;
- Committee on Development (DEVE);
- Committee on International Trade (INTA);
- Committee on Budget (BUDG);
- Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT);
- Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON);
- Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL);
- Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI);
- Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE);
- Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO);
- Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN);
- Committee on Regional Development (REGI);
- Committee on Agriculture (AGRI);
- Committee on Fisheries (PECH);
- Committee on Culture and Education (CULT);
- Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI);
- Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE);
- Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO);
- Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM); and
- Committee on Petitions (PETI).

Each committee is headed by a chairperson and three or four vice-chairs, who are elected according to the agreements settled at the Committees constituent meetings, so that the positions allocated to each political group reflects its size. Moreover, every committee has its own secretariat and a bureau. However, they differ not only very much in size from each other - the number of members per committee may vary between 25 and 71 members - but as well in their workload and work performance. As indicated in the Committee Statistical Report for the 7th Legislature – 2009-2014,³² compared to the other committees, the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality is a low performer when it comes to legislative procedures; but a high performer when it comes to non-legislative resolutions, which have the character of political declarations rather than of legal acts; and finally an average performer when it comes to public hearings with civil society and experts.

FIGURE 3
COMMITTEE STATISTICS, 7TH TERM, 2009 – 2014³²



The FEMM committee was established as an ad-hoc committee following the first direct elections 1979, and in 1984 - after the second European elections - a standing committee was created. The EP was the first parliament ever, establishing a committee on women's rights.³³ Even though today, with the Lisbon Treaty, equality between women and men is one of the fundamental principles of community law, at the beginning the EU was much more worried about unfair competition or distortion of competition law between member states and less about women's rights, as the following two quotes stress:

“In the course of history an interesting evolution has taken place in European gender equality policies. This story started in 1957 when the European Economic Community was founded and the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women was included in the Treaty of Rome to avoid unfair competition and distortions in the free European market. Soon the Treaty article would evolve into a broader demand for equal rights related to work and result in a series of binding directives. In the eighties and nineties gender equality would increasingly enter other policy domains by means of non-binding soft law and gender mainstreaming. More recently, the EU has turned towards an approach of multiple discrimination which involves other grounds of discrimination, such as race and sexuality.”³⁴

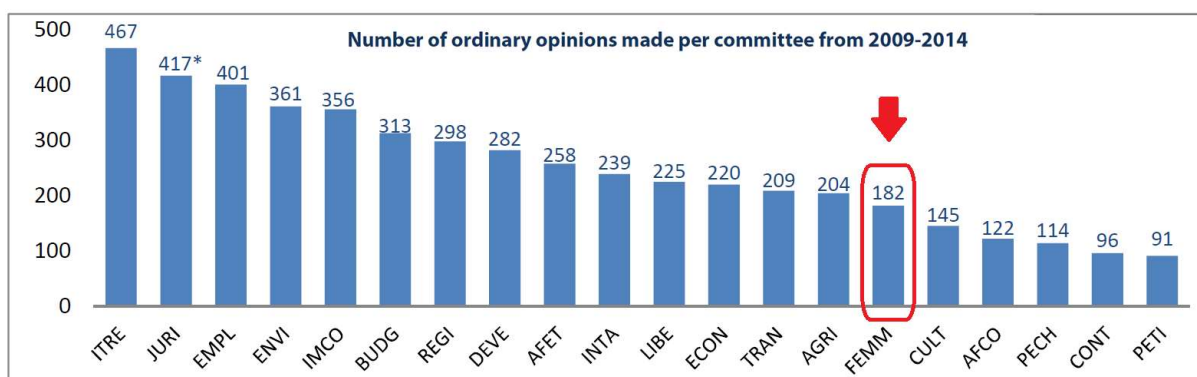
Annex VI of the European Parliament Rules of Procedures describes in detail the powers and responsibilities of the standing committees. Regarding the FEMM committee one reads:

Committee responsible for:

1. the definition, promotion and protection of women's rights in the Union and related Union measures;
2. the promotion of women's rights in third countries;
3. equal opportunities policy, including the promotion of equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work;
4. the removal of all forms of violence and discrimination based on sex;
5. the implementation and further development of gender mainstreaming in all policy sectors;
6. the follow-up and implementation of international agreements and conventions involving the rights of women;
7. encouraging awareness of women's rights.³⁵

Occasionally, the FEMM committee is branded as a "non-legislative committee" or as an "opinion-giving committee", implying that it does neither work on legislation nor on files, which are genuinely its competence, but rather providing opinions to other committees, which are in charge of the files. However, this is not correct. The following figure shows, that parliamentary committees like the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, or the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety for instance, issue much more opinions than the FEMM committee.

FIGURE 4
COMMITTEE STATISTICS, 7TH TERM, 2009 – 2014³²



The central role of the FEMM committee during the pre-Amsterdam phase and afterwards is unquestionable. Since its creation from one legislative term to the next, the committee has been the most prominent and important EP-arena for the promotion of equality between women and men.³⁶ During the

8th parliamentary term from 2014-2019 over 60 MEPs were members or substitute members of the FEMM committee.

However, not only from a global perspective but as well from a European one, progress has been slow when it comes to the equality between women and men. This is as well emphasised by the Gender Equality Index established by the European Gender Institute, which indicates that the average EU score is only 54 out of 100.³⁷ In the EU women still earn on average more than 16% less than men,³⁸ while the gender pay gap in pensions is high at 38%.³⁹

And when it comes to a forecast on gender equality under the current rate of progress, the European Commission concludes:

“Under current rates of progress, it will take almost 30 years to reach the EU’s target of 75% of women in employment, 70 years to make equal pay a reality and 20 years to achieve parity in national parliaments (at least 40% of each gender).”⁴⁰

To quote the report on the Gender Equality Index, the EU is only halfway towards reaching equality between women and men.

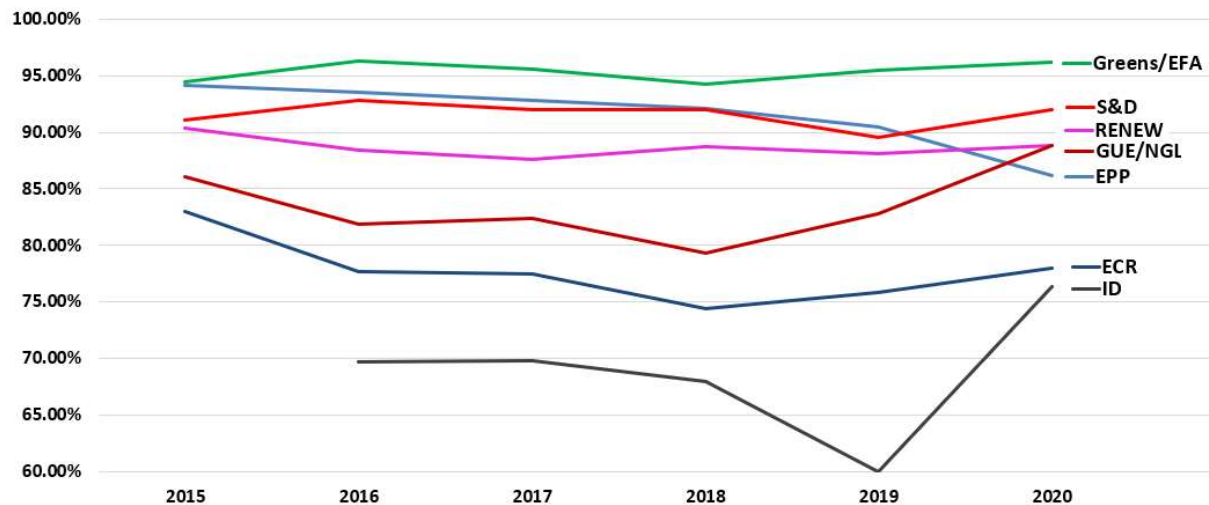
“At this slow rate of progress, it would still take around 40 years to even get close to gender balance in boardrooms (at least 40% of both sexes).”⁴¹

Gender equality is however not only an end in itself, but as well a means to an end. It is of vital strategic importance to the EU to increase labour-force participation and raising the employment rate of women is paramount to meeting the Europe 2020 headline target of 75% of the population aged 20-64 to be employed by 2020.⁴²

In order to meet this target, "Europe" would obviously need to develop coherent policy initiatives during the present legislative term based on a clearly articulated strategy. High rates of unemployment in the EU countries, particularly among young people, have since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis in 2008 resulted inevitably in a decrease of citizens’ trust in European institutions. Furthermore, after every crisis, whether constitutional migration or financial, the image of the European Union has been damaged and the EU has presented itself as a cumbersome and verdant political system. However, at the same time the European political system has developed from what was once an abstract idea into a supranational political actor, which not only reaches compromises and makes decisions, but also polarises. Under the current political context of globalisation and new protectionisms, interdependence and the quest for independence, demographic and climate change, with Europe facing in parallel a financial as well as a migration crisis, any policy area from fiscal policies to migration policies becomes a potential issue of conflict, a crunch moment and a acid stress test for the EU's resilience. Europe's ability to cope, adapt and quickly recover from financial and demographic shocks or challenges posed by international relations has been put in question countless times. The EU has entered a new phase characterised by issues of identity and values, social and political resistance, the potential risk of disintegration, the return of national stereotypes, the popularity deficit and the loss of trust – all in all by the politicisation of integration.⁴³ Against this framework, which is a poor match for an innovative policy on gender equality, the political dynamics within the FEMM committee are quite revealing and provide insightful findings. The level of politicisation in FEMM is intense, and the committee can rightly be valued as the main arena for politicisation of the EU gender equality policy. Traditionally, the political groups are the main agents of this arena and most conflicts are fought along the lines of the parliamentary groups.

The independent organisation VoteWatch Europe⁴⁴ analyses on a regular basis the voting behaviour of Members of the European Parliament. The overall results for the past five years (2015-2020) show rather high cohesion rates between the different political groups.

FIGURE 5
COHESION RATES POLITICAL GROUPS 2015-2020 - ALL POLICY AREAS⁴⁵



However, it is important to stress that cohesion rates of political groups in plenary votes do not equal to the cohesion rates in the specialised committees. If one compares for instance the cohesion rates in all policy areas with the rates and voting behaviour in gender equality policies, the differences are outstanding. Eye-catching is without any doubt the implosion of cohesion rates within the EPP (up to minus 15%) and within ALDE (up to minus 8%).

Moreover, there are some significant changes from one parliamentary term to the next: The analysis of all the votes which took place during the 7th parliamentary term between 2009 and 2014 show as well that three potential coalitions were possible, in order to reach the absolute majority in the house. In 70% of the votes, a "great" coalition composed by the EPP and the S&D group - and sometimes including ALDE. Besides this first type, 15% of the votes were characterised by a "centre-right" coalition of EVP, ALDE and ECR; and another 15% of the votes by a "centre-left" coalition of S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL. These findings confirm the fact that from a holistic point of view with all policy areas included, the 7th term was largely dominated by the "great" coalition; however, two alternative coalition-building options were successful.

If one focusses on the votes in the FEMM committee between 2009 and 2014, one gets a rather different Figure with a clear left-right dimension: 90% of the votes were won by a coalition including S&D, ALDE, Greens-EFA and GUE-NGL. The relative influence of the different political groups - i.e. the group's footprint - within the FEMM committee on the one hand, and within plenary on the other is remarkable!

The different coalitions in the plenary and in FEMM respectively have produced a variety of shortcomings during the 7th term. Occasionally it happened as well that reports, which initially had been adopted at the committee stage, were voted down at plenary stage. This was for instance the case of the Estrela-report from 2013 or the Zuber-report from 2014.

“Die Unterstützung des Europäischen Parlaments für eine fortschrittliche Gleichstellungspolitik ist dabei keineswegs gesichert. So wurde der besagte Estrela-Bericht aus dem Jahr 2013, wenn auch sehr knapp, abgelehnt. Ebenso abgelehnt wurde der Zuber-Bericht über die Gleichstellung von Frauen und Männern in der Europäischen Union aus dem Jahr 2014 [...]“⁴⁶

During the 8th term, between 2014 and 2019, a similar trend can be observed, but with one significant difference: there are no longer coexisting possible majority constellations, but there is only one single coalition between the EPP and the S&D group, with the regular support of ALDE, possible.

Although the EP Rules of Procedure stipulate that the composition of the committees shall, as far as possible, reflect the composition of Parliament, this is not the case in relation to the FEMM committee.⁴⁷ Following the constitutive sitting in July 2014 a coalition of S&D, ALDE, Greens-EFA and GUE-NGL commanded a majority of one vote over the other groups until shortly before the end of the first half of the term. This meant that while at plenary level there was no other majority possible than a coalition between the EPP and the S&D group, the composition of the FEMM committee allowed for an alternative coalition-building. This particular circumstance allowed the agents of politicisation in FEMM to cultivate a considerably higher level of polarisation and conflict, than it was the case for the plenary.

If one compares the cohesion rates of political groups in all policy areas with those specifically in gender equality policies during the 8th term, similar conclusions like for the 7th term can be reached: Again, the implosion of cohesion rates within the EPP group (minus 15%) and within ALDE (minus 6%) is striking; one can record as well an increase in cohesion rates in the remaining centre-left groups.

During the present 9th term (2019-2024) VoteWatch Analysis suggests that not only will the coalition between EPP, S&D and Renew Europe (former ALDE) continue to hold (it is currently the only coalition able to guarantee an absolute majority), but the Greens/EFA group is more and more part of majority building in the EP. This shows a new shift of the overall balance of power in the Parliament towards the centre-left.

Obviously, the data provided by VoteWatch should not be overestimated and sometimes they might present a slightly distorted figure. As Lorenzo Cicchi proved in his work, the data tells little about the quality of the single vote. De facto, in politically important votes, the fragmentation of political groups might be much higher than the overall cohesion rates suggest.

“[...] what is generally overlooked is that the high levels of party cohesion in the EP may be a ‘statistical artefact’, in the sense that a substantial number of divisive votes are drowned out by a large majority of votes where party groups are highly or almost completely cohesive.”⁴⁸

However, the cohesion rates provide enough empirical evidence for the assumption, that the European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality as an arena of politicisation is much more polarised than the plenary-arena.

One of the many examples of the 8th term was the report of Maria Noichl (S&D) in 2015. The report was, as most FEMM report are, a non-legislative report on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and on the Millennium Development Goals running until 2015. The same year, the Commission Strategy on Gender Equality run out. The draftsperson Ms Noichl aimed therefore at encouraging the European Commission to draft a new ambitious strategy. Soon it became evident, that it was impossible to build up a broad coalition on the matter, allowing the European Parliament to speak with one voice with the European Commission and the Member States. Nevertheless, in June 2015 the resolution was adopted in plenary with 341 votes in favour, 281 against and 81 abstentions. In the subsequent press conference the draftsperson invited - contrary to the common practice - representatives of the political groups, which had supported the resolution. Hence, Ms Maria Noichl (EPP, Germany) hold the press conference together with Ms Angelika Mlinar (ALDE, Austria), Ms Malin Björk (GUE/NGL, Sweden) and Ms Terry Reintke (Greens-EFA, Germany).

During the press conference, the voting behaviour of the EPP group was criticised. In fact, 135 Members had voted against the resolution, while 53 had abstained. The vote proceeded against the dominant trend of a "great" coalition between EPP and S&D. The text could nevertheless be adopted, because for a non-legislative resolution just a simple majority (and not an absolute majority of at least 376 votes) was necessary; furthermore, the vote in favour of some, as well as the abstentions of many EPP members helped as well to pass the resolution. The common press conference of the "winners" and the expressed criticisms

against the "losers" conveyed an atmosphere of a highly polarised vote between FEMM-Members as agents of the politicisation.

The European Commission did not present a new Gender equality strategy, which was subsequent criticised by both, the European Parliament as well as the Council of Ministers. Both institutions deplored the "downgrading" of the previous EC-Communication about the EU Gender Equality Strategy to a "strategic engagement" at the level of a staff working document and invited the Commission unsuccessfully to adopt a new strategy, stressing that it should have the same status as the previous one, meaning it should be officially adopted as a Communication.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the new Von der Leyen-Commission made a U-turn following the Parliament's and Council's concerns and drafted a new upgraded European Gender Strategy.

Beyond the field of non-legislative files, some legislative dossiers have encountered deadlocks too. The most prominent example has been the recast of the maternity leave directive in 2008.⁵⁰

Despite the fact that the European Parliament had concluded its first reading in 2010, the file did not find enough support in the Council of Ministers. Because of the obvious lack of progress, the Commission decided in 2015 to withdraw its proposal.⁵¹

The same fate could suffer the Proposal for a Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges and related measures.⁵² On this file too, the EP concluded already its first reading procedure, but an agreement in the Council of Ministers still seems far away. A withdrawal by the EC because of the deadlock cannot be excluded.

The directives were presented in 2008 during the 6th term and in 2012 during the 7th term. On both the EP concluded its first reading during the 7th term: the first reading on the recasted maternity leave directive under Edite Estrela (FEMM, S&D, Portugal) in 2010; and the directive on Women on Boards under co-rapporteurship by Evelyn Regner (JURI, S&D, Austria) and Rodi Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou (FEMM, EPP, Greece) in 2013. After the European elections in 2014, neither Estrela nor Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou had been elected. The EP therefore nominated new draftspersons in order to follow the files. Maria Arena (S&D, Belgium) and Iratxe García Pérez (S&D, Spain) on behalf of the FEMM committee, launched a rescue attempt, and submitted on 20 May 2015 to the plenary a resolution on maternity leave calling on all institutions to conclude the file in a cooperative spirit. Like during the vote on the Estrela-resolution in 2010, more than 60% voted in favour. However, the changing voting behaviour of the EPP group is eye-catching: The Estrela-resolution was adopted in plenary with 390 votes in favour, 192 against and 59 abstentions.⁵³ Out of 641 voting members, 255 were members of the EPP group. More than half of them (146) had voted for the resolution submitted by the S&D members. Only 25 - less than 10% - had abstained.

The motion for resolution submitted in 2015 was adopted with 419 votes in favour, 97 against, and 161 abstentions.⁵⁴ Out of the 193 EPP members, only 30 voted in favour, 35 against and more than half of them (128) abstained. While in 2010 more than half of the EPP members voted in favour of the legislative resolution on maternity leave, in 2015 more than half of them abstained from the vote on a non-legislative resolution.

Not just the deadlock in the Council of Ministers, as well the changing inter-group coalitions in the EP could be used by the European Commission as arguments for withdrawing the proposal, because legislative files require absolute majorities during the second reading procedure. After the European elections in 2014 the possibility to achieve the required absolute majority during a second reading was less than obvious.

Besides the typical manifestations of a more polarised debate, the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality has witnessed as well the "populist turn", characterised by attempts of "destructive dissensus". This has been for instance the case with recommendations from Committee coordinators which have been contested on committee level. As stated in the EP Rule of Procedures (rule 214, version February 2020), the political groups in the Parliament designate one of their members in each committee to be a coordinator. These coordinators meet on a regular basis to prepare decisions to be taken by the committee, in particular decisions on procedure and on the appointment of rapporteurs. The committee may delegate the power to take certain decisions to the coordinators, with the exception of decisions concerning the adoption of reports, motions for resolutions, opinions or amendments. Ideally, coordinators should decide by consensus. However, if consensus cannot be attained, the coordinators may only act by a majority that

clearly represents a large majority of the committee, having regard to the respective strengths of the various political groups. The Chair shall announce in committee all decisions and recommendations of the coordinators, which shall be deemed to have been adopted if they have not been contested. Although several decisions and recommendations have been adopted by the FEMM Coordinators representing a large majority of the committee, they have been later contested when they were announced in committee. One of the several examples is the procedural vote on the adoption of the Coordinators' recommendation on the allocation of the Opinion on the "Determination of a clear risk of a serious breach by the Republic of Poland of the rule of law". The original recommendation was confirmed in the FEMM meeting of 25 May 2020 by 26 votes in favour to 7 votes against with 1 abstention. Another example is the procedural vote on the adoption of the Coordinators' recommendation of 25 June 2020 on the FEMM opinion on the DROI report on "Human rights protection and the EU external migration policy". The original recommendation was confirmed in the FEMM meeting on 13-16 July by the vote in committee, by 27 votes in favour to 7 votes against with 0 abstentions.

Through the contestation of the recommendation of the coordinators and the request of a vote on it, the dissensus becomes much more visible: while coordinators' meetings are held behind closed doors, committee meetings are public and web streamed. Although the outcome of the recommendation could not be changed, the disagreement with the policy approach of a large majority of the political spectrum becomes more evident. Equally, the isolation of the contesting group(s) is more apparent and clear.

Following the European Parliament elections in May 2019 and the presentation of the Von der Leyen team in September 2019, gender mainstreaming reached an unprecedented support from all Commissioners-designates. Indeed, the designates to become EU-Commissioners had to undergo a process of scrutiny and evaluation before parliamentary committees. The first step in this process were the replies of Commissioners-designates to a written questionnaire containing two common questions on their general competence and impartiality as well as cooperation with and accountability to the Parliament. A further set of questions addressed specific policy matters linked to their portfolio. The written part was followed by the oral hearings of all candidates. The entire process was finalised with the vote of the Parliament in plenary in November 2019. For the first time ever, one of the written questions brought to the Commissioners-designates referred to gender mainstreaming and was as follows: "How will you implement gender mainstreaming and integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas of your portfolio?" All designates replied in a supportive way to the question⁵⁵ and some of the outlined ideas were already reflected in the Commission Work Programme adopted in January 2020 titled: "A Union that strives for more." Regarding internal EU policies, the Commission Work Programme states Equality is a core value of the European Union and is a driver for economic growth and social well-being. The Commission will present a Gender Equality Strategy to address the key challenges that women face today, including gender-based violence, economic independence and access to the labour market. Proposals on pay transparency will be put forward.

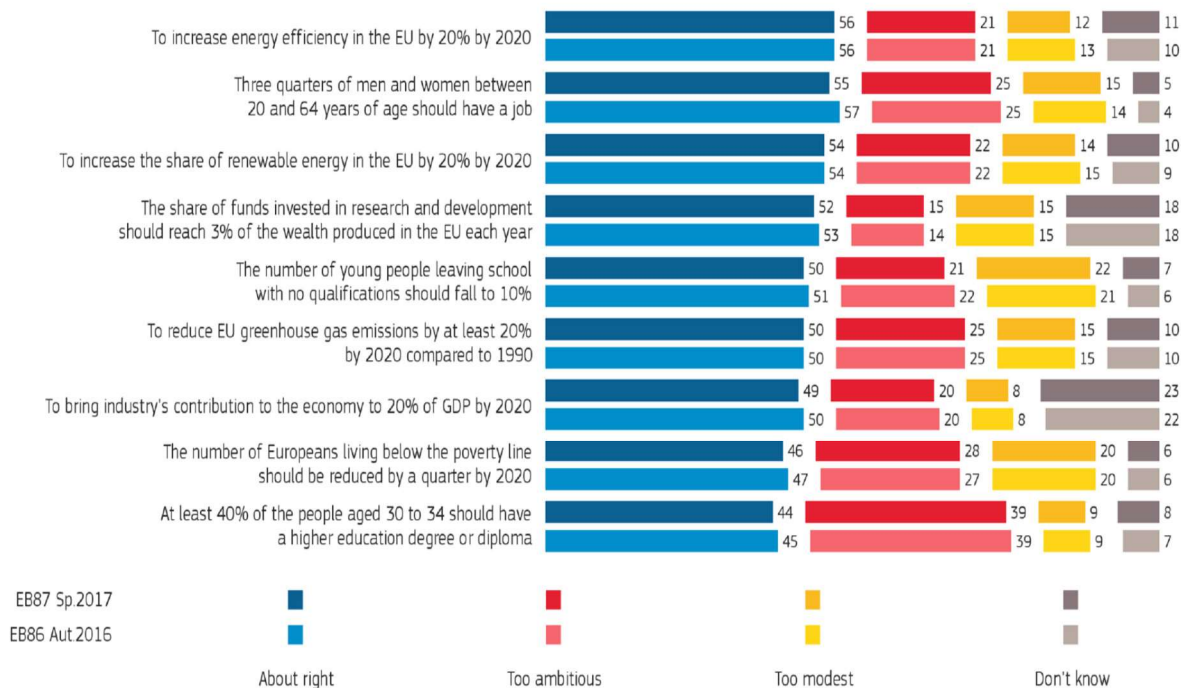
The Commission will also take action to promote equality and better inclusion of Roma people. A dedicated Strategy will help ensure the equality of LGBTI people across the EU. Particular attention must always be given to protecting the most vulnerable. The Commission will put forward an EU Strategy for Victims' Rights."⁵⁶

Regarding the external policies of the EU, the Work Programme announces as well an Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in External Relations, delivered by the end of 2020.

Indeed, EU action is needed. It has been already pointed out above, that the Vilnius-based European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which supports the EU institutions and the Member States in promoting equality between women and men and combating sex discrimination, commented the situation on gender equality in the EU in 2015: "With an overall score of 52.9 out of 100, the EU remains only halfway towards equality. Progress needs to increase its pace if the EU is to fulfil its ambitions and meet the Europe 2020 targets."⁵⁷ Remarkably, the European public seems to be supportive of an enhanced EU gender equality policy: a survey in May 2017 for the Standard Eurobarometer 87 shows - like the one of the previous year - broad support for the Europe 2020 headline target of 75% of the population aged 20-64 to be employed by 2020.

FIGURE 6
STANDARD EUROBAROMETER 87

QB1 Thinking about each of the following objectives to be reached by 2020 in the EU, would you say that it is too ambitious, about right or too modest?
(% - EU)



Fact based analysis as well as surveys suggest the need for action. Both do not, in this case, reflect the political dynamics of the highly politicised arena of a parliamentary committee.

The FEMM committee is not only the most prominent and important EP-arena for the promotion of equality between women and men, but as well the main arena for politicisation of the EU gender equality policy. As political groups are the main agents of this arena and as most conflicts are fought along the lines of the parliamentary groups. Intra-group cohesion and inter-group coalition remain key tactical considerations in a politically competitive environment. And occasionally, as outlined above, particularly polarised topics may lead to a deadlock. At first sight, this might look somewhat unsatisfying. However, in the new phase the EU has entered, politicisation has become a driving force of European integration dynamics.

“The organisation of the European debate at the level of both the Union and of Member states as well as the clarification and the politicisation of European issues are essential to giving life to European democracy on a daily basis. [...] The future of Europe as a political project depends on being able to mobilise European public opinion on political issues. European political parties should make an essential contribution.”

In this context, the European Parliament has a competitive advantage over the other EU institutions, as it is used to function as an arena of politicisation. More and more policy areas are affected by the increasing politicisation, from fiscal policy to migration, from defence to international relations. Regarding gender equality policy, if and how fast Europe can cover the remaining half of the route towards equality will depend on the elected agents in the EP arena of politicisation.⁵⁸

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX: COMMISSIONERS-DESIGNATES ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Josep BORRELL, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Policy / Vice-President-designate of the European Commission for a Stronger Europe in the World on Gender Mainstreaming

Since day one, the President-elect has been clear on gender equality being a key priority – and she has delivered in proposing a team that is gender balanced for the first time in the history of the College. It is a commitment of the entire team, including myself.

Our key objective is the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. I will ensure that the EU remains a leader in international efforts to achieve gender equality, the full enjoyment of all human rights by all women and girls and their empowerment.

“Gender mainstreaming is enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and is an effective means to achieving our objectives. I will work with the Commissioner for Equality in the international dimension of the new European Gender Strategy announced in the President-elect's Political Guidelines. I am committed to further stepping up our action, building on our now well-established three-pronged

approach, which combines EU political and policy dialogues with partner countries; mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and actions; and implementing ad hoc measures to eliminate, prevent or remedy gender inequalities. These three elements go hand in hand. This approach has been and should be applied to all areas of EU external action including foreign and security policy, defence, development, trade, finance, humanitarian aid, migration, justice and education, as well as in preventing and countering radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism. In my coordinating role, as stipulated in my Mission Letter, I will be well placed to make sure that gender aspects are adequately reflected, also paying due attention to linking the external and internal aspects of our work. Across all our EU policies we have a clear connecting thread, requiring the systematic integration of a gender perspective into the planning, conduct and evaluation of all our partnerships, agreements, policies, strategies and activities. This should be based on a thorough, proper and informed gender analysis.

As for my field of responsibility, one example of effective EU gender mainstreaming can be found in the systematic integration of the gender perspective in the entire process of analysis, planning, conduct and evaluation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, as they are developed in accordance with all relevant international standards and legal instruments. Another example is the integration of a gender perspective in the new generation of EU trade agreements. These show that no policy is gender-neutral.

All EU staff, including those in senior management, bear their own responsibility in the proper integration of gender mainstreaming. A gender-responsive leadership is a prerequisite for effective mainstreaming of gender perspectives, leading ultimately to better achievement of our policy objectives. Gender mainstreaming is a shared responsibility; I plan to lead by example.”

Thierry BRETON, Commissioner-designate for Internal Market on Gender Mainstreaming

It is essential that women can play a full part in all areas of the economy. As chairman of my last company, I placed a high value on ensuring that women had just as many opportunities to succeed as men. The company ran many successful initiatives, and regularly features on lists of top inclusive employers. I also overhauled the hiring procedures to make them as gender-blind as possible.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I undertake to bring this attitude with me to the Commission and its policy-making. I am fully committed to improving gender balance and to implementing gender mainstreaming in all the areas and structures under my responsibilities.

In addition, I will continue the work of my predecessors in this area, including the initiatives launched by Directorates-General Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) and Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT) to raise awareness to promote female entrepreneurship, including through the launch of an e-platform for women entrepreneurs, the creation of a European Network for Women Business Angels and the Network of Women’s Web Entrepreneurs Hubs. I will also work closely with the Commissioner for Equality to pursue the Commission’s Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019. ”

Helena DALLI, Commissioner-designate for Equality

“If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will have the honour of being tasked with the portfolio dealing with Equality. We have an obligation to mainstream and to promote gender equality in the EU and in all Commission actions, stemming from Article 8 TFEU. The Treaty provides a strong mandate and represents a political commitment that I will make the most of as Commissioner for gender equality issues.

President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a gender-balanced College. She tasked me with the formulation and presentation of the next EU Strategy on Gender Equality, which presents an opportunity to further develop the concept and application of gender mainstreaming across EU policies. A strengthened application of gender mainstreaming in policy-making makes better use of resources, makes policy more efficient, supports sustainable development and creates fairer societies. In view of this, if confirmed as Commissioner, I will work closely with my Colleagues to extend the mainstreaming of gender as far and wide as possible to ensure real impact on the ground.

*If confirmed, I commit to issue the comprehensive **EU Strategy on Gender Equality** set out in the Political Guidelines as soon as possible, and will discuss with President-elect von der Leyen on the exact timing of the adoption by the Commission.*

Key elements to be considered for the Gender Equality Strategy include tackling violence against women and gender based violence, pay transparency and the gender pay and pensions gap, gender balance on company boards, work-life balance and the role of both sexes in the attainment of gender equality. The public consultation which took place earlier this year identified other possible areas such as the tackling of gender stereotypes, addressing online gender-based violence and the inclusion of the gender perspective in the field of artificial intelligence. The Strategy should have an intersectional approach to cover women and men in all their diversity. It should also look forward to possible new legislative proposals, as well as incisive policy measures and awareness-raising actions. The new Strategy will present an opportunity to further develop the concept and application of gender mainstreaming across EU policies, both internally and externally. We should not miss this opportunity. I am looking forward to working closely with the Vice-President for Protecting our European Way of Life to make this an important theme and will count on the support of my fellow Commissioners to make gender mainstreaming a reality. I will also count on the Task Force for Equality that will be set up for the integration of the principle of equality in EU policies and processes.

I want the EU to have a Strategy that is ambitious, inclusive, comprehensive and targeted at the real needs of EU citizens. I look forward to early contact with the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality and would like to follow this up with structured co-operation.

I believe that we also need to communicate both within and outside the EU on these issues. For example, we could discuss the EU approach in a dedicated side-event at the meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. I hope that Members of the European Parliament could also be present.

*In line with the President-elect's Political Guidelines, the EU's accession to the **Istanbul Convention** should remain a key priority for the Commission. I have been mandated to finalise the ongoing accession process and I will do my utmost to achieve that goal.*

I welcome the strong support by the European Parliament to the EU accession to the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women and domestic violence. The Istanbul Convention provides a common European framework for the efforts of the EU and its Member States in combatting violence against women and domestic violence. We can achieve more by taking action within a joint European framework than with the Member States acting individually.

In order to finalise the accession process, I will actively engage with the European Parliament, successive Council Presidencies and the Member States to find ways out of the deadlock. We also need to bring all Member States together with relevant civil society organisations to reflect the urgent need to step up the EU's actions on combatting violence against women and gender-based violence. I look forward to the opinion of the European Court of Justice, following the request of the European Parliament.

*Aside from this institutional process, I intend to find ways to **enhance support for victims of violence against women and domestic violence**. If the accession remains blocked in the Council, I will explore proposals on minimum standards regarding the definition of certain types of violence, and strengthening the Victims' Rights Directive. I will also follow up on the Political Guidelines on adding violence against women to the list of EU crimes defined in the Treaty.*

I think it is essential to address one rapidly emerging form of gender-based violence: illegal online violence and harmful online behaviour against women, including revenge pornography. Access to the internet is fast becoming a necessity for socio-economic well-being and a platform for societal and political dialogue. We cannot let online violence and harmful online behaviours silence women and girls and limit their participation in society. As part of the broader EU policy against hate speech and illegal online content, we need to look at what more we can do to ensure that digital public space is a safe, violence-free and empowering place, including for women and girls.

*I will build on the existing Commission dialogue with social media platforms and non-governmental organisations concerning how voluntary-based cooperation can help in flagging and taking down harmful online content, as well as in ensuring decisive action against illegal content. Many forms of **online violence** have been criminalised already or otherwise prohibited in the Member States. More information is needed on the applicable legal provisions in the Member States and on the different forms of online violence they cover. We need to look at how to clarify these issues, while fully respecting fundamental rights and in particular the freedom of speech. This growing injustice is a major concern for me, and I will work with the Vice-Presidents in charge of Europe fit for the Digital Age and Values and Transparency to make a difference.*

*Fighting the **gender pay and pension gap** is 'unfinished business' and I am determined to step up this work. I believe increased pay transparency and improved legal clarity are the first necessary steps to detect gender bias and discrimination in pay structures. I want to enable companies to address pay inequality and to enable victims of discrimination to effectively seek redress. In view of this, during the first 100 days of this Commission, the Political Guidelines set out that we will table actions to introduce binding pay*

transparency measures. This will be a key down payment on our work, feeding into a comprehensive policy to address the gender pay gap. This means confronting persisting stereotypes, strengthening women's empowerment in decision-making, ensuring implementation and take-up of the rights in the Work-Life Balance Directive (especially by fathers), and combating the gender pension gap due to unpaid work.

We also need a change at sectoral level. The lack of women in high-paying, male-dominated professions is one of the causes of the gender pay gap. We need to enable more women to enter certain sectors and occupations, and especially address the root causes of this uneven distribution in our work force. I want to address gender stereotypes, which cause barriers to women but also to men – from seeking opportunities in sectors that may traditionally be dominated by the other sex. These stereotypes also cause unequal sharing of unpaid care work. The implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive will be instrumental in that respect.

Since gender inequalities are socially constructed, I am confident that by addressing gender gaps in the life cycle of education, training, employment, parenthood, care, pay and pension we can accelerate progress in the EU.

Valdis DOMBROVSKIS, Executive Vice-President-designate for an Economy that Works for People on Gender Equality

“I strongly support the President-elect's stance on gender balance. This principle figures prominently in the European Pillar of Social Rights. I would actively support concrete measures for implementing the gender equality principle in practice. I would contribute to the development of a new European Gender Strategy and I would support binding pay-transparency measures to expose pay gaps between men and women. I will also further promote measures to promote equality between men and women in the framework of the European Semester. Advocating measures in support of female labour market participation is just one example of how the Country Specific Recommendations can help keep gender equality high on the policy agenda.

Equality of treatment matters in so many respects. It creates a feeling of fairness and inclusiveness, which leads to a sense of belonging. This is what Europeans expect from us.”

Elisa FERREIRA, Commissioner-designate for Cohesion and Reforms on Gender Mainstreaming

“As for the implementation of gender mainstreaming and integration of a gender perspective into all policy areas of my portfolio, I fully commit to the objective of a Union for all which is one of the major priorities of the von der Leyen Commission. Gender mainstreaming is also a key priority for my mandate. I believe that there must be the same opportunities for all who share the same aspirations. Gender equality is a crucial component of sound economic growth. In line with the President-elect's political agenda, gender mainstreaming will be also a priority for my mandate.”

Mariya GABRIEL, Commissioner-designate for Innovation and Youth on Gender Mainstreaming

“Integrating and mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies has been and will remain a priority of my political action. Under the previous term, I have developed and promoted a ‘Women in digital’ strategy, bringing together actions to combat digital gender

stereotypes and promote role models; enhance digital skills and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education for girls and women and stimulate female digital entrepreneurship. This is monitored through the Women in Digital Scoreboard - part of the Digital Economy and Society Index and the European Semester reports. Our #DigitalRespect4Her campaign raised awareness about the difficulties women face online. All Member States and the CEOs of 23 major high-tech and media companies signed a Declaration on creating an inclusive working environment in their companies. In the audio-visual sector, we started tracking gender balance in the Creative Europe MEDIA programme and launched the 'Women on the Move' initiative with a 'good practice' guide."

Paolo GENTILONI, Commissioner-designate for Economy on Gender Mainstreaming

"My commitment to gender equality is part of my commitment to liberalism and democracy. I welcome the gender balance in the College and believe that it is important to lead by example. I commit to achieving the same in my Cabinet, and doing so will make my private office stronger and better able to represent the needs and priorities of the people of Europe wherever and wherever they may be."

Johannes HAHN, Commissioner-designate for Budget and Administration on Gender Mainstreaming

"Gender equality has always been important to me. I am convinced that quantitative targets, combined with measures aimed at encouraging women applicants and creating an environment conducive to management development, will be instrumental in achieving full gender equality."

Phil HOGAN, Commissioner-designate for Trade on Gender Mainstreaming

"I welcome the President-elect's reference to 'draw on all of Europe's talents'. I believe this starts at home and I will, of course, fully subscribe to this undertaking in the composition of my Cabinet. I have been long concerned about the lack of female representation in politics and, as Irish Minister for the Environment & Local Government, I introduced legislation providing for minimum levels of gender participation in elections, which has resulted in a noticeable increase in the level of female representation in parliament. There is a wide range of Civil Society Dialogues under the remit of the Directorate-General for Trade and I am committed to ensuring that all such groups and any other similar panels are gender-balanced in the future."

I am also very pleased that, under the leadership of President Juncker, we have made significant strides in improving the level of female representation in the senior ranks of the European Commission and my own Directorate-General in the current mandate – the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development – has been to the fore in this regard. In terms of policy development, I intend to instruct my services to consider gender impact when preparing policy initiatives. Specifically, I believe that the inclusion of Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in our trade agreements can ensure that the effect of those agreements is a positive one in our trading partners in such areas as ensuring a positive gender agenda."

Ylva JOHANSSON, Commissioner-designate for Home Affairs on Gender Mainstreaming

“Integrating the gender perspective into all policy areas is something which is close to my heart and which I have been working on for many years throughout my career. I have implemented gender mainstreaming in practice and have a solid experience of gender budgeting, which is an important tool for gender mainstreaming of all government action. All policy decisions which concern people, concern per definition both men and women. It is important that all policy and budget choices consider the effects both on men and women and are elaborated accordingly. Separate statistics for men and women for policy choices are a key tool for this purpose.

Furthermore, this is also enshrined in Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, according to which, ‘in all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women’. It is also part of the Commission’s ‘Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019’, which states that promotion of gender equality is to be ensured by applying a gender-equality perspective into every aspect of EU interventions. Of this subject I have extensive personal experience from a Member State Government level, which I believe would be useful in my new role. President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-balanced College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team.

I am also committed to building on the No-Women-No-Panel initiative launched in February and make sure that public events organised by the Commission feature gender-balanced panels. I will also bring this up when discussing my own participation in event and panels.

A new gender strategy presents an opportunity to further develop the concept and application of gender mainstreaming across EU policies. A strengthened application of gender mainstreaming in policy-making makes better use of resources, makes policies more efficient, supports sustainable development and creates fairer societies. The Commission will continue to consider gender impacts when preparing all its proposals. Such impacts will be reflected in the explanatory memorandum of the respective proposals. Gender mainstreaming is applied to the budget process, with the aim of ensuring that budget policy and resource allocation, as well as policy design takes into account the needs and conditions for women and men, girls and boys.

Gender mainstreaming also means paying particular attention, in all activities related to my portfolio, to the impact any initiative may have on women’s role in economy and society at large. There are plenty of ways that this will have a practical impact on my portfolio such as promoting the role of women representatives in the law enforcement area, or the effect that funding in the area of support to migrants has on men and women.”

Věra JOUROVÁ, Vice-President-designate for Values and Transparency on Gender Mainstreaming

“In my current role as Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, I have put women’s rights and gender equality high on the agenda in all its dimensions: economic empowerment, equal pay, women’s role in political decision-making, fighting gender-based violence, and promoting gender equality internationally. I will continue to support these efforts as Vice-President for Values and Transparency, as equality between women

and men is one of the Union's fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Gender mainstreaming means paying particular attention to the impact any initiative may have on women's role in the economy and in society at large and I am committed to upholding this approach within the College and will work closely with the Commissioner for Equality."

Stella KYRIAKIDES, Commissioner-designate for Health on Gender Mainstreaming

"Gender mainstreaming and the integration of a gender perspective into all areas of public policy has been a constant priority in my political career - and would remain so if I am confirmed as European Commissioner for Health. I was able to promote policies and legislate for gender equality through the Committee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women of the Cyprus Parliament and also through the work of the Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies, where I served as a Board Member. I am proud to be given now an opportunity to serve under the first gender-balanced College of Commissioners and under the first female President of the European Commission. This will be a Commission that is more representative of European society, and which draws on all of our potential."

Janez LENARČIČ, Commissioner-designate for Crisis Management on Gender Mainstreaming

In accordance with the provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, I am committed to aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women in all its activities under my responsibility. I will follow the example of President-elect von der Leyen who has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to forming a fully gender-balanced team and I intend to apply the same principle when I form my cabinet.

In my work I shall fully subscribe to the No-Women-No-Panel initiative launched in March 2018. I will build on efforts the European Union has already made to meet the needs of girls and women in both humanitarian and in emergency response and further enhance them.

Didier REYNDERS, Commissioner-designate for Justice on Gender Equality

"I will support the Commissioner for Equality in the preparation and implementation of the new EU strategy on gender equality in my policy areas. There is a gender perspective in many policies under my responsibility. For example, the EU victims' rights policy, including the Victims' Right Directive, addresses specifically victims of gender-based violence. I will ensure that gender mainstreaming is part of correct and effective implementation of the Directive. I commit to further deepening gender mainstreaming in the policy areas and programmes that fall under my specific responsibility, namely justice and consumer protection. We have an obligation to mainstream and to promote gender equality in the EU and in all Commission actions, stemming from Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union."

Nicolas SCHMIT, Commissioner-designate for Jobs on Gender Mainstreaming

"Pursuing gender equality is a precondition for achieving sustainable development and for building fair, modern and inclusive societies in the EU as well as globally. I will implement gender mainstreaming in all policy areas and legislations pertaining to my

portfolio. I will work closely with my colleagues in charge of gender equality within the framework of the new European Gender Strategy outlined in the political guidelines presented by the President-elect, in particular on employment aspects of gender equality issues and in full cooperation with the Task Force for Equality that will be set up.

I will endeavour to implement gender-mainstreaming in all policy areas falling under my competence. I offer my full support to my fellow Commissioner-designate for Equality, Helena Dalli and her mission to deliver an ambitious, comprehensive and future-oriented gender equality strategy. We need a strategy focused on the structural and systemic inequality that women and girls still face, including gender employment gaps, pay and pension gaps. The social partners play an essential role in all these matters, and must be involved thoroughly, during all policy cycles. Beyond gender equality, it is clear that the wider equality and diversity agenda, namely with regard to access to the labour market and in the workplace, need to be tackled. As President-elect von der Leyen has said in her Political Guidelines, we need equality for all and equality in all of its senses. I will ensure that my services assist Commissioner Dalli and her Task Force in all areas that fall under my portfolio.

Specifically, on principle 9 of the European Pillar of Social Rights concerning work-life balance, I will strongly support Commissioner Dalli in ensuring the timely transposition of the newly adopted Work-Life Balance Directive. In-depth work is already being carried out in cooperation with Member States, to ensure accurate data collection on family-related leaves.

The adequacy, affordability and quality of formal care services, including childcare, can significantly affect the choice of women to remain or drop out of the labour market. Over 10% of women are inactive due to caring responsibilities. This choice has a strong impact on employment, pay and pension gaps. My services are addressing this, together with the Member States, both on the policy front and also on the funding side with the help of the European Social Fund. I will strive to push forward this work.

I also intend to pay particular attention to long-term care policies. Many women are engaged in this area, doing unpaid informal work. Boosting the provision of long-term care services will give the possibility to women who currently cannot work due to their care responsibilities to participate in the labour market.

We should not forget that women are also overrepresented in work of precarious nature: they are the vast majority of part-time workers and often opt for variable hours and temporary contracts. This is another factor that significantly reinforces gender gaps. In this regard, I will ensure that all the legal instruments at the disposal of the Member States are properly implemented: the Recommendation on Access to Social Protection, the Directives on Part-Time and Fixed-Term Work, and the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions.

Finally, the European Semester will remain one of the strongest tools to monitor the gender gaps in terms of employment, pay and pension. Moreover, the implementation of measures towards achieving gender equality will feature prominently through our funding instruments, particularly the ESF+.”

Maroš ŠEFČOVIČ, Vice-President-designate for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight on Gender Mainstreaming

“If I am confirmed as a Vice-President, I will further strengthen the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is already enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, according to which, ‘in all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women’. It is also part of the Commission’s ‘Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019’, which states that promotion of gender equality is to be ensured by applying a gender-equality perspective into every aspect of EU interventions.

President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-balanced College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team.

I am also committed to build on the No-Women-No-Panel initiative launched in February and aim that public events organised by the Commission feature gender-balanced panels. A new gender strategy presents an opportunity to further develop the concept and application of gender mainstreaming across EU policies. A strengthened application of gender mainstreaming in policy-making makes better use of resources, makes policy more efficient, supports sustainable development and creates fairer societies. I believe it is important to continue considering gender impacts when preparing all Commission proposals. Such impacts are reflected in the explanatory memorandum accompanying a proposal when they are significant.”

Margaritis SCHINAS, Vice-President-designate for Protecting our European Way of Life on Gender Equality

“I will promote gender equality in all areas of my responsibility: coordinating a Gender Equality Strategy and taking it forward; working to promote equal pay for work of equal value between genders; promoting equal access to health and education and combatting discriminatory migration practices at home and abroad. I have myself applied gender equality as a manager and as a politician in the teams and policies I had the opportunity to form a team and I intend to do the same with my future team and policy proposals as Vice-President of the new Commission.”

Virginijus SINKEVIČIUS, Commissioner-designate for Environment and Oceans on Gender Equality

“I am a strong believer in gender mainstreaming. As a Minister, I was a supporter and promoter of the Women Go Tech initiative, which aims to increase women’s participation in IT and engineering in Lithuania. The number of programme participants has been doubling each year, with an increasing number of women choosing to work in technology companies as a result. I would like to continue in a similar vein and integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas of my portfolio in the European Commission. This planet is the only one for all of us, therefore, environmental challenges and solutions require engagement of every European, despite gender, age, religion or any other differences. Gender perspective will be important to deliver my agenda. President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-balanced College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team. I will

strive for gender balance in all activities organised by my services (panels, experts groups). Internally, I will ensure my services pursue a strong gender policy.”

Kadri SIMSON, Commissioner-designate for Energy on Gender Mainstreaming

“As a member of the first female-led European Commission, I will pay particular attention to promoting gender mainstreaming. This principle is enshrined in Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), according to which “in all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women”. President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-equal College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team and will make sure that men and women are equally represented in my cabinet. I am also committed to build on the No Women No Panel initiative launched in February 2019. Gender mainstreaming also means an attention to factor in the preparation of any new initiative the impact this may have on women’s role in economy and society at large. In the area of energy policy, there is still much work to do on this front. For instance, the European Parliament recently published a study demonstrating that energy poverty affects more women than men. Furthermore, according to recent studies, the share of women in the energy sector is on average 22% in the global oil and gas industry and 32% in renewable energy. I am ready to engage with Parliament, stakeholders and civic society organisations to see how this can change in the future.”

Frans TIMMERMANS, Executive Vice-President-designate for the European Green Deal on Gender Mainstreaming

“President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-balanced College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team, including at the senior levels.

In addition, I am fully committed to take the push for gender equality further in my portfolio area, as I believe the Commission has to be a leading force in ensuring gender awareness and ensuring that women and men are valued and treated equally. It is an important notion that even in the 21st century is too often still not a matter of fact, but a matter of discussion.

The ‘Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019’ was presented under my coordinating responsibility as a First Vice-President. It requires mainstreaming gender equality in all aspects of EU interventions, in line with the principle of gender mainstreaming enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. But still much more must be done, and I look forward to a new gender strategy which presents a welcome and necessary opportunity to strengthen this agenda further.

Specifically in my portfolio, I will pursue a twin-track approach on gender and climate change. I envisage taking measures designed to redress gender inequalities that are exacerbated by climate change, but also incorporating gender and climate issues into all aspects of our European development policy. In this respect, an example is the support to women’s engagement and gender equality in international negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Gender Action Plan.”

Jutta URPIILAINEN, Commissioner-designate for International Partnerships on Gender Mainstreaming

“Promoting the cause of young girls and women has always been a special priority for me. As the first woman in Finland to hold the position of Minister of Finance, I had the honour to act as a pioneer in promoting gender equality and women’s leadership in economy and in politics. Gender and equality have been core issues in my various development-related functions as well as in the task of Special Representative on Mediation. I will ensure that gender equality and women empowerment continues to be a top priority in our international cooperation and development policies.”

Gender in Development

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will continue to be a top priority and will be mainstreamed in all our actions. Educating girls will unlock global development by strengthening equality, boosting skills and fostering inclusive growth.

Promoting women’s empowerment requires leadership. And it starts from within the European institutions. President-elect von der Leyen is setting the example by ensuring gender parity within her team and I am proud to be part of this journey. You do not need to be a woman to promote gender equality, but you need a gender responsive leadership to place women and girls at the centre.

Education is a pre-condition to ensure the empowerment of women and girls. Despite progress in recent years, disparities still exist. I want in particular to step up our efforts in those Sub-Saharan African countries, which have the worse gender gaps, and build together education systems promoting gender equality in and through education. We also need to make sure women and girls have access to technical and vocational training and that the labour market is inclusive and encourages female participation.

Unfortunately, violence against women and girls is still one of the most widespread and devastating human rights’ violations across the world. We need all international partners to work together to end this shame. Endeavours such as the Spotlight Initiative, putting together the weight of the UN and of the EU, civil society and governments, are quintessential to ensure we have impact on the ground. I will increase our effort to bring others on board including the private sector to help us fight the surge of violence against women and girls.

Much has been achieved in recent years. The current EU Gender Action Plan has contributed to advance the gender equality agenda worldwide. It has triggered an institutional culture shift within the EU and Member States’ staff, including in EU Delegations. It has also set the ambitious objective that at least 85% of all new development actions adopted by 2020 shall target gender equality. We are not there yet, and I want to continue coordinating efforts with Member States to meeting this target.

The Commission has launched an independent evaluation of the EU Gender Action Plan, which will allow taking stock of achievements to date and draw lessons for the future. It is likely that after 2020, we will still need to have a plan of concrete actions translating our political commitments. I would like to use this opportunity to thank the European Parliament for the support in this respect and ask for it in the future in view of a possible Gender Action Plan III.

One thing is clear: gender equality is not only a goal in itself (SDG 5) but also an essential crosscutting objective, if we are to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

Let me underline my staunch political and personal commitment to ensure that the EU leads international efforts to champion gender equality across the globe. I see our collective work ahead as a pre-condition for a sustainable future for all and I intend to work closely with the Commissioner for Equality and other fellow Commissioners, to ensure coherence in our external and internal policies.”

Adina Vălean, Commissioner-designate for Transport on Gender Mainstreaming

“I am personally highly committed to gender equality and I fully support the President-elect’s vision: I can assure you that my cabinet will have an appropriate balance in terms of gender, experience and geography.

The transport sector is one of the most-male dominated sectors. Bearing in mind that new challenges are best tackled with people of different skillsets and mind-sets, promoting diversity is essential in a sector which will undergo tremendous changes in the next few years and which already faces labour shortages. I will be pleased to drive forward the “Women in Transport-EU Platform for Change” and the network of diversity ambassadors. I will also actively contribute to the next European gender strategy. I will do this in partnership with the Commissioner-designate for Equality Helena Dalli, as well as the Vice-President-designate for Protecting the European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas.

Innovation must be accompanied by training and reconversion in relevant skills. Fair working conditions will be key in ensuring the sector is able to attract young women and men into transport professions. Promoting diversity, also in relation to gender, is essential in a sector which will undergo tremendous changes in the next few years and which already faces labour shortages. It is important that the co-legislators come to a good result soon on the social and market access proposals of the mobility package.

Olivér Várhelyi, Neighbourhood and Enlargement on Gender Mainstreaming

“The letter of the Treaties has always been and will remain my guide: rights and obligations go hand in hand; small and big, wealthy and modest, men and women have to be treated equally.

Equality between women and men is indeed a fundamental European value enshrined in the EU Treaties. I am strongly committed to strengthening gender equality and women's and girl's empowerment in the Neighborhood and Enlargement regions, in line with the EU Gender Action Plan II Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020. Many neighboring countries face serious problems in this area, such as gender-based violence, exclusion of women from the labour market and from property rights to name just a few. I am committed to raising these issues in our policy dialogue and to strongly supporting gender equality through our financial assistance. I also want to strengthen gender equality within the European Commission, including in the services under my responsibility, and fully support the goal of the President-elect to ensure full equality at all levels of Commission management by the end of the mandate. I will work in close cooperation with the Commissioner for Equality.

Applying strict conditionality is key. And I will pay particular attention to those mechanisms that emphasize positive developments in partner countries. In this regard, I stand behind the Commission's proposal to preserve the incentive-based approach ("more for more") in the new Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument to reward those EU neighbors who make progress in democracy, human rights, rule of law, cooperation on migration, economic development and reforms. Supporting a rights-based approach and promoting gender mainstreaming will be at the heart of my action. I will use the Human Rights and Democracy thematic program and our support for the European Endowment for Democracy to ensure that the new instrument will contribute more to anchoring of human rights, supporting human rights defenders, vulnerable groups and the persons most at risk and other minorities, and ensuring media freedom and the freedom of expression."

Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President-designate for a Europe fit for the Digital Age on Gender Mainstreaming

"As Commissioner in charge of competition, diversity in my teams and in decision-making has always been at the top of my priorities. This will continue to be the case.

I will remain committed to improving gender balance and to implementing gender mainstreaming using all the tools at my disposal in all the areas where I am responsible."

Janusz WOJCIECHOWSKI, Commissioner-designate for Agriculture on Gender Mainstreaming

"President-elect von der Leyen has put gender equality high on her agenda and committed to lead by example by forming a fully gender-balanced College. I intend to apply the same principle to my team. I also believe that strengthened application of gender mainstreaming in policy-making makes better use of resources, makes policy more efficient, supports sustainable development and creates fairer societies. This is very pertinent to my portfolio as less than one third of farms in the EU are managed by women and I will strive to improve this."