

The EU and its Working

The European Union (EU) is a unique supranational organization comprising today 27 member states, which work together to promote peace, stability, and prosperity across Europe. Its functioning is characterized by a complex system of institutions, policies, and decision-making processes designed to facilitate cooperation and integration among member states.

At its core, the EU aims to achieve four main objectives:

Peace and Stability

One of the primary motivations behind the formation of the EU was to prevent future conflicts in Europe by fostering economic interdependence and cooperation among member states.

Prosperity and Economic Integration

The EU seeks to create a single market with free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, thereby promoting economic growth, job creation, and competitiveness within the region.

Solidarity and Social Cohesion

Through policies such as the Cohesion Policy, the EU aims to reduce disparities in economic development and promote social inclusion and equal opportunities across member states and regions.

Global Influence and Cooperation

The EU acts as a key player in international affairs, advocating for multilateralism, human rights, and sustainable development while pursuing common foreign and security policies.

The functioning of the EU is underpinned by several key features:

- **Institutions:** The EU has a complex institutional framework that includes the European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, European Council, Court of Justice of the European Union, and European Central Bank. Each institution has specific roles and responsibilities in the decision-making process.
- **Decision-Making Processes:** The EU employs various decision-making procedures, including the ordinary legislative procedure, special legislative procedures, and consultation procedures, through which laws and policies are formulated and adopted. These processes involve negotiations and compromises among the EU institutions and member states.
- **Policies and Areas of Competence:** The EU has developed policies and legislation in a wide range of areas, including trade, agriculture, environment, justice and home affairs, and foreign affairs. These policies are implemented through a combination of regulations, directives, and other legal instruments.
- **Legal Framework:** EU law is supreme over national laws within areas of EU competence, and it is enforced by the Court of Justice of the European Union. The legal framework of the EU provides the basis for the functioning of the single market, the protection of fundamental rights, and the enforcement of common policies.
- **Budget and Financial Framework:** The EU operates a multiannual budget financed by contributions from member states. The budget supports various EU policies and programs, including cohesion funding, agricultural subsidies, research and innovation initiatives, and external assistance.
- **Challenges and Debates:** The EU faces numerous challenges, including the management of economic crises, migration and asylum issues, democratic deficits, and the rise of euroscepticism. These challenges reflect ongoing debates about the future direction of European integration and the balance between national sovereignty and supranational governance.

International Migrations and the Challenge of Inclusion in Europe

Migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another, either within a country (internal migration) or across international borders (international migration). It is driven by various factors such as economic opportunities, political instability, conflict, environmental changes, and social reasons. Understanding migration involves analyzing its causes, patterns, impacts, and policy responses. Here's an overview of the definition and current trends on migration:

- **Economic:** People may migrate in search of better job opportunities, higher wages, or improved living standards.
- **Political and Social:** Individuals may flee persecution, conflict, or human rights abuses in their home countries, seeking safety and security elsewhere.
- **Environmental:** Environmental factors such as natural disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation can force people to migrate in search of more sustainable living conditions.
- **Social and Cultural:** Migration may also be driven by factors such as family reunification, education, or marriage.

Several trends characterize contemporary migration patterns:

Forced Displacement

There has been a significant increase in the number of forcibly displaced persons globally, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), driven primarily by conflicts and persecution. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced people reached a record high of over 82 million by the end of 2020.

Mixed Migration Flows

Migration flows often consist of a mix of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and other categories of migrants. This makes migration governance complex, as different groups may have distinct legal statuses and protection needs.

Urbanization and Internal Migration

Urbanization continues to drive internal migration, with many people moving from rural to urban areas in search of employment, education, and improved living conditions. This trend poses challenges for urban infrastructure, services, and social cohesion.

Climate Change and Environmental Migration

Climate change-related events, such as extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and environmental degradation, are increasingly contributing to migration. While it is difficult to attribute specific migration patterns solely to climate change, environmental factors can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and drive displacement.

Labor Migration and Remittances

Labor migration remains a significant component of international migration, with millions of people moving to other countries for work. Remittances sent by migrants to their home countries play a crucial role in supporting the livelihoods of families and communities left behind, particularly in developing countries.

Migration Policies and Governance: Migration policies vary widely among countries and regions, ranging from restrictive measures to more open and inclusive approaches. There is increasing recognition of the need for comprehensive and rights-based migration governance frameworks that address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of migrants while also considering the interests of host communities.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ): An overview

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), founded in 1945 and seated in The Hague, serves as the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It settles legal disputes between states—such as questions of territory, maritime rights, and treaty interpretation—and issues advisory opinions to UN bodies. Judges, elected by both the General Assembly and Security Council for nine-year terms, act independently and do not represent national interests.

The Court's jurisdiction depends on states' consent, granted via treaties, special agreements, or declarations of compulsory jurisdiction. Proceedings include written and oral phases, leading to binding judgments. However, enforcement remains a significant limitation: the ICJ lacks direct power to enforce its rulings, relying instead on states' voluntary compliance or, occasionally, referral to the UN Security Council.

Geopolitical Context & Challenges

In recent years, the ICJ has experienced an unprecedented surge in cases, particularly involving the Middle East. For example, proceedings include South Africa's genocide claim against Israel over actions in Gaza, Palestine's case against the United States concerning the relocation of its embassy to Jerusalem, and Nicaragua's case against Germany related to arms supply. Additionally, the ICJ issued a landmark advisory opinion in 2024 declaring Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories illegal—yet many States have shown little willingness to act on it. These developments reflect states' increasing recourse to legal institutions amid deep geopolitical tensions, but they also expose the Court's enforcement limitations.

The ICJ's role is further complicated by political power dynamics. Its impartiality is sometimes questioned in cases involving major powers or contested conflicts. Provisional measures—urgent rulings intended to prevent irreparable harm—have been both a powerful tool and a subject of debate. As scholarly critiques note, while international law is increasingly invoked, the Court often lacks effective enforcement and political leverage, leading to perceptions of selective implementation or symbolic rulings.

Limitations & Institutional Constraints

- **Enforcement:** Compliance relies on states themselves or Security Council action; without consent, rulings can go unheeded.
- **Jurisdiction:** The ICJ can only adjudicate disputes between states, excluding individuals, corporations, or non-state actors—limiting its reach in addressing transnational corporate harm.
- **Political Pressure:** Adjudicating sensitive disputes—such as those involving alleged genocide or major conflicts—puts the Court at the center of geopolitical debate. Critics argue that powerful states may manipulate or ignore rulings, weakening its authority.

Despite these challenges, the ICJ remains central to the international order. The sheer volume of cases shows a continued belief in international legal mechanisms as tools for resolving conflicts peacefully. Yet the Court's effectiveness ultimately depends on balancing legal consensus with geopolitical realities—a complex task that requires institutional adaptation and sustained commitment from the international community.

Does the EU hear my voice?

Citizen participation in EU politics

Citizen participation in EU politics is a multifaceted and evolving aspect of European governance, encompassing various mechanisms through which individuals can engage with and influence the decision-making processes of the European Union (EU).

Direct Participation through Elections:

European Parliament Elections

One of the most direct forms of citizen participation in EU politics is through the election of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Every five years, EU citizens in each member state have the opportunity to vote for representatives to the European Parliament, which serves as the directly elected legislative body of the EU. These elections provide citizens with a voice in shaping EU policies and legislation.

Indirect Participation through National Governments:

Council of the European Union

While citizens do not directly elect representatives to the Council of the European Union, national governments, which are accountable to their citizens, participate in the Council's decision-making process. Therefore, citizens' preferences and priorities are indirectly reflected in the positions taken by their respective governments during EU negotiations and policymaking.

European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)

The ECI is a unique tool that allows EU citizens to directly participate in the EU policymaking process by proposing legislative initiatives. If an ECI gathers one million signatures from citizens across multiple member states within one year, the European Commission is obliged to consider the proposal and respond accordingly. This mechanism empowers citizens to raise awareness about specific issues and advocate for legislative action at the EU level.

Consultation and Public Participation

The EU institutions frequently engage in consultation processes to gather input from citizens, stakeholders, and civil society organizations on proposed policies and legislation. These consultations may take various forms, including public consultations, stakeholder meetings, and online surveys. By soliciting feedback from citizens, the EU aims to ensure that its decisions are informed by the perspectives and concerns of those affected by its policies.

Civil Society Engagement:

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including advocacy groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots movements, play a vital role in representing the interests of citizens and holding EU institutions accountable. Through lobbying, advocacy campaigns, and public awareness initiatives, CSOs contribute to shaping EU policies and promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic governance.

Digital Participation

Digital technologies have opened up new avenues for citizen participation in EU politics, allowing individuals to engage with EU institutions through online platforms, social media, and e-petitions. Digital democracy initiatives aim to enhance transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity in EU decision-making processes, enabling citizens to participate remotely and voice their opinions on a wide range of issues.

Overall, citizen participation in EU politics is essential for ensuring the legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness of EU institutions to the needs and preferences of European citizens. By actively engaging with EU decision-making processes, citizens can contribute to shaping the future of Europe and building a more democratic and inclusive European Union.

Caring in Europe

Caring in Europe: Insights from Research at HEC Liège

Caring in Europe refers to the systems and practices that support individuals who need assistance due to age, illness, or dependency. Europe faces a growing challenge as its population ages, particularly among those over 80, which significantly increases demand for long-term care (LTC). These services are labor-intensive and costly, creating financial pressure on welfare systems. Traditionally, care provision in Europe relies on three pillars: the state, which offers public services and funding; families, who provide informal care; and the market, through private providers and insurance schemes. However, despite the high risks and costs associated with dependency, private LTC insurance remains underdeveloped. This is explained by factors such as high premiums, adverse selection, public benefits crowding out private demand, and behavioral biases like myopia and denial. Policy solutions include better means-testing, supporting families without discouraging their involvement, and improving insurance design through behavioral nudges.

Empirical studies using SHARE data—a large European longitudinal survey—reveal important patterns. Socio-economic disparities strongly influence dependency: individuals with lower socio-economic status experience earlier mortality, higher dependency, and longer periods of care, creating a “triple penalty.” Research also shows that informal care often substitutes formal care for mild dependency, but when needs become severe, both forms complement each other. Housing choices, such as nursing-home residence, have mixed effects on mortality and life satisfaction, varying across countries. Motivations for family caregiving are primarily altruistic or norm-driven rather than financial. Interestingly, grandparental childcare often reflects a reciprocal expectation: grandparents provide care partly in anticipation of future support when they themselves become dependent.

These findings highlight the complexity of caring systems in Europe and the need for balanced policies that integrate public provision, family involvement, and private markets. They also underscore the importance of addressing social inequalities and recognizing the economic and social value of informal care. As Europe moves forward, caring will remain a cornerstone of social cohesion, requiring innovative solutions to ensure sustainability and fairness.