

The International Spectator 4/2002

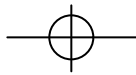
A Supranational Party System and the Legitimacy of the European Union

Simon Hix*

As the European Union enters a crucial period of institutional reform with the launch of the European Convention and the upcoming enlargement to 27 countries, how to increase the democratic legitimacy of the Union's political system has become one of the central issues. In all democratic political systems, one of the main ways a polity is legitimised is via a "party system". A democratic (that is "responsive") party system has two essential elements: 1) organisation – internally hierarchical party organisations, and 2) competition – contestation, rather than collusion, between these organisations over public policies and political office.¹ In most accounts of liberal democracy, these two elements go hand in hand: democracy works because parties with competing agendas and candidates for leadership organise to

* Simon Hix is Reader in European Union Politics and Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The ideas and some of the evidence in this paper are derived from a major collaborate project on voting in the European Parliament, carried out by Abdul Noury, Free University in Brussels, Gérard Roland, University of California, Berkeley, and the author. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on "The International Role of the European Union and the Enlargement Process", Bologna, 11-12 October 2002, organised by the IAI and Almaweb, with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo, the European Commission and Carisbo, and the cooperation of the Universities of Bologna and Parma, il Mulino, Il Regno and the Istituto Cattaneo.

¹ G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Volume I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); A. Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).



50 A Supranational Party System and EU Legitimacy

secure these goals.² Hence, if parties are underdeveloped or if they prefer to collude rather than compete, voters' choices will not be translated effectively into political leadership and/or policy outcomes. For example, the emergence of "cartelised" party systems in several European democracies has led to growing voter apathy, alienation and protest votes in these systems.³

It is not surprising, then, that many scholars of the so-called "democratic deficit" in the EU claim that what the EU needs is a "transnational party system". As early as 1978, David Marquand argued that the emerging pan-European polity would only be democratic if the basic structure of politics shifts from a 'Europe des patries', where politics at the European level are structured around national identities and governments, to a "Europe des partis", where political contestation is structured through a party system.⁴ Moreover, as in all democratic polities, this party system would have to be based in the main directly-elected institution: the European Parliament (EP).

So, a democratic and effective party system in the EP would mean two things.⁵ First, the party groups in the EP would have to behave in a cohesive way, so that voting would be driven by transnational party membership rather than national affiliation. Second, the parties would have to compete for political office (such as the EP President) and in the policy process (on budgetary and legislative issues), rather than universally form "grand coalitions" either to promote the institutional interests of the EP against the other EU institutions or for any other reason. Also, to translate citizens' policy preferences in the domestic arena into policy actions at the European level and to build functional rather than territorial majorities, this competition would need to be along left-right lines rather than between "pro" and "anti" Europe positions.⁶ However, this line of reasoning implicitly

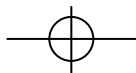
² M. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation", in Gerth, H.H. and C. W. Mills (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946 [1918]); J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943).

³ R. S. Katz, and P. Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, pp. 5-28.

⁴ D. Marquand, "Towards a Europe of the Parties", *Political Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1978, pp. 425-45.

⁵ R. Andeweg, "The Reshaping of National Party Systems", in Hayward, J. (ed.) *The Crisis of Representation in Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); S. Hix, "Elections, Parties and Institutional Design: A Comparative Perspective on European Union Democracy", *West European Politics*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1998, pp. 19-52; C. van der Eijk and M. Franklin (eds) *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1996).

⁶ S. Hix, "Parties at the European Level and the Legitimacy of EU Socio-Economic Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1995, pp. 527-54; S. Hix, "Dimensions and Alignments in European Union Politics: Cognitive Constraints and Partisan Responses", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1999, pp. 69-106.



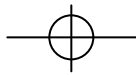
assumes that the EP is a "normal" parliament. While competition over policy is good in normal parliaments, it may not always be so in an evolving legislature. When the power of the EP is at stake, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have a strong incentive to vote together in order to acquire more power relative to other institutions of the EU.

Moreover, one could also argue that, as the powers of the EP have grown in the various treaty reforms, such a party system may not be sustainable. It is easy for the party groups to organise their troops when the MEPs' votes do not matter "back home". But, as the EP gains power, MEPs can expect growing pressure to follow national positions at times, causing a potential break from their transnational party groups. Similarly, with a more powerful EP, the national governments have an incentive to try to ensure that the "national" divisions and coalitions in the Council are replicated in votes in the EP, at least on issues that concern the EU as a whole. Hence, more powers may undermine supranational party cohesion and change the structure of party competition at the European level.

Until now, there has been no systematic analysis of the degree of cohesiveness or competitiveness of political parties at the European level. All previous research on the EP has developed claims using only samples of votes from one or more parliaments. In contrast, in a major collaborative research project, all the roll-call votes in the five EPs since the first direct elections – from the first vote on 19 July 1979 to the last vote on 13 December 2001 (half-way through the fifth parliament) – have been collected, collated and analysed.⁷ This is a total of over 11,500 votes, and involves over 2,000 MEPs. The aim of this research is to convey the empirical regularities of parties at the European level in a convincing way, to shed light on the debate on the basic design of the EU institutions and even to correct some popular misconceptions about the EP.

To assess how far the EU has developed a democratic transnational party system, this article proceeds as follows. The next section looks at the development of party cohesion and competition between 1979 to 2001. An explanation is then offered of why increased powers for the EP have led to more rather than less cohesion and competition. Finally, the last section draws the findings together in a short conclusion.

⁷ Currently being carried out by Hix, Noury and Roland. See, S. Hix, "Legislative Behaviour and Party Competition in the European Parliament: An Application of Nominate to the EU", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2001, pp. 663-88; A. Noury, "Ideology, Nationality and Euro-Parliamentarians", *European Union Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2002, pp. 33-58; A. Noury and G. Roland, "More Power to the European Parliament?", *Economic Policy*, vol. 17, issue 35, 2002, pp. 279-320; S. Hix, A. Noury and G. Roland, "Understanding the European Parliament: Party Cohesion and Competition, 1979-2001", manuscript 2002.



Party cohesion and competition in the European Parliament

Six main party groups and growing MEP participation

Since 1979, the EP has been dominated by two main party groups: the Socialists (PES) on the centre-left and the European People's Party (EPP) on the centre-right. These two parties controlled 54 percent of the seats in the first directly-elected parliament (1979-84) and 66 percent of the seats in the fifth parliament (1999-2004). The share of the Socialists increased between the first and the fourth parliaments from 28 to 35 percent, but fell sharply in the fifth parliament to 29 percent. The share of the EPP fell between the first and the third parliaments, increased in the fourth, when the British Conservatives joined the group, and increased strongly in the fifth to 37 percent, following the inclusion of Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the main French Gaullist party (RPR) and the increased vote shares of several other EPP member parties in the 1999 European elections.

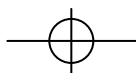
Three other political forces have been present in all five parliaments: the Liberals (ELDR), the Radical Left (ex-Communists), and the French Gaullists and their allies (such as the Irish Fianna Fail, Portuguese Popular Party and Italian National Alliance). Also, one political force has been present in every parliament since 1984: the Greens and their allies (such as the regionalist parties from Spain, Flanders, Scotland and Wales). Together, these six political forces – Socialists, Christian-Democrats/Conservatives (EPP), Liberals, Greens, Radical Left, and Gaullists – have controlled 85 percent of seats in the directly-elected EPs: rising from 80 percent in the first parliament to 93 percent in the fifth.

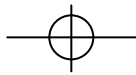
The average level of attendance of MEPs and the average level of participation in roll-call votes (the proportion of all MEPs who register either a "Yes", a "No", or an "Abstain" vote) have risen steadily since 1979. For example, the participation rate in votes rose from 45 percent of MEPs in the first parliament to 73 percent in the fifth, with a 21 percent rise between the third and fourth parliaments, and an 11 percent rise between the fourth and fifth. As a result, the participation rate in the EP is now comparable to the levels of participation in national parliaments and the US Congress.

'High and rising' cohesion

Existing research points to relatively high, and growing, levels of cohesion of these parties.⁸ However, these claims had not been tested against the

⁸ F. Attinà, "The Voting Behaviour of the European Parliament Members and the Problem of Europarties", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1990, pp. 557-79; M. Quanjel





total population of roll-call votes in all five directly-elected parliaments. To do this, the average level of cohesion of the supranational parties in roll-call votes in each parliament since 1979 was calculated. This was done using an "Agreement Index" (AI), which measures how much a party is divided in a particular vote. The AI equals 1 when all the members of a party vote as a single block and equals 0 when the members of a party are equally divided between all three voting options in the EP (Yes, No and Abstain). The index is similar to Attinà's measure of cohesion in the EP,⁹ but while Attinà's index can produce negative scores (for example, if a party is split equally between the three voting options, it scores -.33), this index is scaled between 0 and 1.

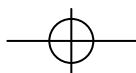
Calculating the average cohesion of the parties in all roll-call votes in each parliament reveals that the six main parties in the EP are remarkably cohesive. This was true even in the first parliament (1979-84): with an average score of .82 for these parties, rising to .84 in the fifth parliament (1999-2001). In addition, the three main "Euro-parties" – the PES, EPP and ELDR – are more cohesive than the other parties: with an average cohesion score of .84 in the first parliament, rising to .89 in the fifth. However, not all parties experienced a consistent increase in cohesion between 1979 and 2001. The trend was upwards for the PES, ELDR and Greens. But the trend has been downwards for the EPP since the second parliament and cohesion rose and then fell for the Radical Left and the Gaullists.

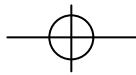
Presumably, it is easier to be cohesive when all the party groups are voting together than when it is a close vote. As a result, when looking at the changes in the levels of cohesion of the parties in the EP, the changes in the overall majority in the EP have to be taken into account. Votes in national parliaments and the US Congress are usually narrowly split between a winning majority and a losing opposition. In the EP, however, many votes represent the opinion of the EP as a whole relative to a proposal from the Commission or a decision of the Council. The average majority size in the EP is over 75 percent, but this has changed considerably over time. There was an upward trend in consensus in the EP until 1988, but a downward trend thereafter.

As a result of these variations in the majority size in the EP, party cohesion needs to be measured controlling for the cohesion of the EP as a

and M. Wolters, "Growing Cohesion in the European Parliament", paper presented at the Annual Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, April 1993, Leiden; J. B. Brzinski, "Political Group Cohesion in the European Parliament, 1989-1994", in Rhodes, C. and S. Mazey (eds) *The State of the European Union*, Vol. 3 (London: Longman, 1995).

⁹ Attinà, "Voting Behaviour of European Parliament Members".





54 A Supranational Party System and EU Legitimacy

whole. This can be done by dividing each party's Agreement Index in a vote by the Agreement Index of the whole EP in the same vote. These "relative cohesion" scores reveal a different pattern to the simple cohesion scores. In particular, whereas in absolute terms the EPP was less cohesive in the fifth parliament than in all the previous parliaments, when the size of the EP majority is taken into account, the EPP emerges as more cohesive in the fifth parliament than in the second, third or fourth parliaments. Hence, even for the EPP, internal cohesion has grown steadily. Also, for the PES, ELDR and Greens, the relative cohesion scores reveal an even stronger upward trend than the simple cohesion scores.

Furthermore, calculating the same Agreement Index for each delegation of MEPs from the same member states reveals that the parties in the EP are much more cohesive than each member state's group of MEPs. Also, whereas "party cohesion" has increased since 1979, "national cohesion" has declined. In other words, since the first direct elections in 1979, voting in the EP has become more "partisan" and less "nationalist" or "intergovernmental".

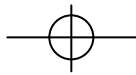
These party cohesion scores in the EP are lower than for parties in most domestic parliaments in Europe (where governing parties can control their parliamentary supporters). Nevertheless, compared to the US Congress, where executive and legislative powers are separated (as in the EU), the parties in the EP are highly cohesive. For example, in the 106th Congress (1999-2000), the average cohesion scores for the Democrats and Republicans were .78 and .82, respectively. In the same period, the three main party groups in the EP had average cohesion scores between .86 and .91.

From a "grand coalition" to a competitive party system

Existing research, using samples of votes, has suggested that political contestation in the EP has always been dominated by a "grand coalition" between the PES and EPP.¹⁰ The results of the current research dispute this claim.

First, looking at the percent of times the majority in one political party voted the same way as the majority in another party reveals that party competition is clearly organised along a left-right dimension. Parties in the

¹⁰ R. Corbett, F. Jacobs and M. Shackleton, *The European Parliament*, 4th edn (London: Catermill, 2000); S. Bowler and D. Farrell, "Parties and Party Discipline within the European Parliament: A Norms-Based Approach", in Bowler, S., D. Farrell and R. S. Katz (eds.) *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); A. Kreppel, *The European Parliament and the Supranational Party System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

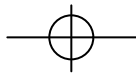


EP are more likely to vote with parties next to them on the left-right dimension than with parties further away. For example, in the first parliament, the EPP was more likely to vote with the Liberals than the Socialists, and was more likely to vote with the Socialists than the Radical Left. Similarly, in the fifth parliament, the Socialists (PES) were more likely to vote with the Greens than with the Radical Left, and more likely to vote with the Liberals (ELDR) than with the EPP.

Second, in terms of the structure of the party system, there is a clear difference between the first three parliaments and the fourth and fifth. In the first three parliaments (1979-84, 1984-89 and 1989-94), the patterns of alliances suggest that the EP party system was split into two blocs: a left bloc (Socialists, Radical Left and Greens) against a right bloc (EPP, Liberals, Gaullists and British Conservatives). However, in the fourth and fifth parliaments (1994-99 and 1999-2001, respectively) a different party system emerged, in which the three main parties voted as much with each other as with their smaller allies on the centre-left and centre-right. In other words, in the two most recent parliaments, the three main party groups have been the main "governing" parties in the EP. Against this governing coalition are two "opposition" blocs: on the left, the Greens, Radical Left and the left-wing members of the anti-European groups; and on the right, the non-EPP Gaullists and allies, the break-away British Conservatives within the EPP group, the right-wing members of the anti-European groups, and the various extreme-right MEPs (who sit as "non-attached" members).

Third, as a result of these changes in the party system, the peak of the PES-EPP alliance was in the third parliament (1989-94). That was the only parliament in which these two parties voted with each other more than 70 percent of the time and the PES voted more with the EPP than with the ELDR. In the first and second parliaments, the PES was more likely to vote with the ELDR and the parties to its left (the Greens and Radical Left) than with the EPP. Also, in the fourth and fifth parliaments, the PES voted more with the ELDR than with the EPP, and the ELDR voted more with the PES than with the EPP.

In other words, whereas a grand coalition may have dominated the third parliament, since the mid-1990s (after the EP gained considerable power in the Maastricht Treaty), the party system in the EP has become increasingly competitive, with the PES and EPP relying less on each other, with each trying to build coalitions with the forces on their extremes, and with the ELDR able to play a pivotal role by determining whether the left or the right emerges as the winning coalition in a vote.



Explaining growing cohesion and competition

Study of comparative political institutions has shown that parties are more cohesive in parliamentary than in presidential systems.¹¹ In parliamentary systems, where the executive is “fused” to a parliamentary majority, the parties in government have several ways of forcing their “backbenchers” to support government proposals. For example, governments can offer backbenchers ministerial seats if they behave. Also, parties in parliamentary systems are usually highly-centralised organisations, where party leaders (in government) control whether backbenchers can stand as candidates in the next election, or where on a party list a candidate will be placed. And, if all else fails, governing parties can use a vote-of-confidence motion, which presents their parliamentary supporters with the risk of not being re-elected if the parliament is dissolved or of not being in the next government if the current government falls.¹²

In contrast, in presidential (or separation-of-powers) systems, the executive does not depend on the support of a legislative majority; the executive is elected in a separate contest and the executive cannot dissolve the parliament. As a result, parties in government in these systems have few mechanisms for forcing their supporters in the parliament to vote as a block. Hence, in these systems, legislature coalitions tend to form on a vote-by-vote basis.

This is exactly the situation in the European Parliament, where the executive (European Commission) does not require the support of a majority in the EP to govern. The Commission can be censured by a two-thirds majority vote (which must also be an absolute majority of all MEPs). This high threshold means that in practice the censure procedure in the EP is more akin to the power of a parliament in a separation-of-powers system to “impeach” the president (for “high crimes and misdemeanors”, as the US Constitution states), than the ability of the majority parties in a parliamentary system to force a government to resign. Also, the Commission cannot introduce a vote-of-confidence motion in the EP or dissolve the EP, leading to new EP elections. As a result, the parties that make up the Commission must build coalitions in the EP on a case-by-case basis.

What is remarkable then is how cohesive the parties in the European

¹¹ G. Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); J. Carey, “Getting Their Way, or Getting in the Way? Presidents and Party Unity in Legislative Voting”, paper presented at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, September 2002, Boston.

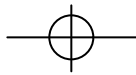
¹² J. Huber, “The Impact of Confidence Votes on Legislative Politics in Parliamentary Systems”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, 1996, pp. 269-82; D. Diermeier, and T. J. Feddersen, “Cohesion in legislatures and the vote of confidence procedure”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 92, no. 3, 1998, pp. 611-21.

Parliament are, and how cohesion has grown, despite the EU's institutional structure. One way of understanding this is to borrow from the explanations of party cohesion in the US Congress – where the cohesion of the Democrats and Republicans has grown since the 1960s.¹³

The basic intuition of these theories is that legislative party organisations enable individual legislators with similar policy preferences to overcome collective action problems. Without a fusion of executive and legislative powers, legislators are not forced to “toe” a particular party line. However, each legislator is unlikely to obtain his/her policy objectives by acting alone. Legislators could cooperate spontaneously, but each coalition would have to be negotiated separately. Hence, by establishing formal relationships binding individuals together, the “transactions costs” of coalition-formation are reduced. Parties also help overcome information gaps. With uncertainty about other legislators' preferences and the impact of legislative decision, legislators with similar policy preferences will benefit from institutional arrangements that divide information-gathering and policy expertise amongst themselves. The result is a “division of labour”: backbench members provide labour and capital (working out the position of the party on the issue on which they become specialised), and party leaders distribute committee and party offices and communicate the party positions to their backbenchers. Also, once these organisational arrangements have been set up, the costs of leaving are high.

This is exactly the situation in the EP. Each MEP or national delegation of MEPs could simply decide how to vote on each issue before the EP on a case-by-case basis. However, each MEP/national delegation has more chance of influencing the agenda and determining policy outcomes if it clubs together with other MEPs/national delegations with similar policy positions. These groups of MEPs can then organise a division of labour, whereby each MEP specialises in a particular policy area and determines how the party group should vote on the set of issues related to that area. In return for the other MEPs following his/her voting recommendations on these issues, the MEP will follow party recommendations on all the issues on which he/she is not an expert. As a result of this specialisation, the life of an MEP is more similar to that of a US Congressman than to a national parliamentarian in Europe – where politicians have to be generalists rather than specialists because party leaders decide who is the spokesperson on

¹³ G. W. Cox and M. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); R. D. Kiewiet and M. McCubbins, *The Logic of Delegation: Congressional Parties and the Appropriations Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); K. A. Shepsle, and B. Weingast, “Positive Theories of Congressional Institutions”, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1994, pp.149-79.



58 A Supranational Party System and EU Legitimacy

each issue and then “reshuffle” their team at will to improve their collective chances of (re-)election.

This theory also helps explain why growing powers for the EP have led to more rather than less party cohesion. With more powers, national parties have more incentives to influence how “their” MEPs vote. When national parties have policy positions that conflict with the majority position of their EP group, national delegations will be more likely to vote against their EP group when the EP has significant powers than when the outcome of a vote is irrelevant.¹⁴ However, when national party and EP group positions do not conflict, more powers for the EP mean even greater incentives for national parties to promote the division of labour inside the EP parties, as failing to do so would undermine any attempt to secure important policy outcomes through those new powers.

Therefore, because the national member parties of each EP party group have similar policy positions on many issues on the EU agenda (particularly on left-right issues), growing powers for the EP have led to more rather than less internal party cohesion. This consequently suggests that additional powers for the EP – such as extension of the codecision procedure to all areas of EU legislation or granting the EP the right to amend both compulsory and non-compulsory areas of expenditure in the EU budget – would strengthen rather than weaken the parties in the EP.

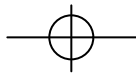
Conclusion: a democratic party system ready for power

It is often assumed that the EU party system is incoherent and disorganised, based on national rather than ideological conflicts, and that it functions through an uncompetitive “grand coalition”. Unlike domestic parliaments, political parties in the European Parliament do not have a government to support. Also, voting in the main EU institution, the Council, is based on member states’ interests rather than party interests. Hence, as the powers of the EP increase, national interests could be expected to undermine the ability of the EU party system to organise and compete around transnational “European” interests and ideas.

This perception could not be further from reality! Evidence from roll-call voting in the EP between 1979 and 2001 indicates that the EP party system functions surprisingly well, and increasingly so. In these roll-call votes, the European level political parties behaved in an increasingly organised and competitive fashion.

Since the first European elections in 1979, the main European parties

¹⁴ S. Hix, “Parliamentary Behavior with Two Principals: Preferences, Parties, and Voting in the European Parliament”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2002, pp. 688-98.



have shown high levels of voting cohesion – comparable to the current levels of cohesion of the parties in the US Congress (which have also become more cohesive since the 1960s). Moreover, the cohesion of the EU parties has increased over time as the powers of the EP have increased. Remarkably, this increased internal cohesion has occurred despite an increase in the internal national and ideological fractionalisation of European political parties, as the EU has enlarged to more member states. This consequently suggests that European political parties do have a disciplining effect on their national member parties.

In terms of party competition at the European level, the main ideological dimension of domestic politics (the left-right conflict) has been the dominant force behind coalition formation since 1979, whereby EU parties are more likely to vote with parties closer to them on the left-right dimension than with parties further away. The grand coalition between the two main political parties – the Socialists and Christian Democrats/Conservatives – was not dominant throughout the 1979-2001 period, and there has been a significant increase in competition between these two parties since the 1999 European elections (with the Liberals playing a pivotal role between the two).

What is also remarkable is the level of stability in these patterns of cohesion and competition since the first European elections, despite the enlargement of the EU and the EP and fundamental changes in the political significance of the EU, the powers of the EP, and the structure of the EU party system. Party cohesion has risen since 1979. But, this rise is small: only .056 for the three main European parties (the PES, EPP and ELDR), and relative cohesion (controlling for the size of the majorities in the EP) was already high in the first parliament. Also, competition patterns have changed since 1979, but the relative positions of the political parties on the left-right dimension have not changed.

As a result, in contrast to much journalistic sentiment, the facts reveal that the European level party system is very much like the “normal”, democratic and competitive, party systems found at the domestic level. Parties at the European level are able to translate transnational party-political positions and allegiances into structured political organisation, contestation and coalition formation in the EU policy process.

This is an optimistic message for the European Union, as more powers for the EP in a future “EU Constitution” will almost certainly increase the party-political nature of competition and alliance-building in the EU policy process. Put another way, given the chance, the nascent European level party system is capable of playing a central role in the democratisation and legitimisation of the EU.

