Preface

'Brussels' holds an ambivalent role in European politics. On the one hand, it is blamed from Lisbon to Stockholm, Dublin to Athens for slow decision-making, dense bureaucracy and strange regulations about cucumber curves, rubber gloves or daylight-saving time. *Brussels divided. Brussels concerned. Brussels too slow to react to a changing world* – such news headlines report or fill social media feeds with ritual regularity. On the other hand, magical promising news keep reminding Europeans of the advantages of cheaper data roaming, cleaner food, safer chemicals, faster trains, stronger privacy and a continuous effort to create a European community and prevent war at home. Yet the Brussels most people know is not the capital of Belgium, or even a real place, but shorthand for the stage on which European and international politics play out. Here, politicians pose before blue flags ringed with yellow stars, livestreams capture allnight negotiations and nameless officials hurry past in corridors and video calls alike.

This book enters the world of those who keep the political machinery of Brussels running – the diplomats, officials and interpreters who affectionately, and sometimes ironically, call their world the 'Brussels Bubble'. To Euro-enthusiasts, the phrase evokes unity, cosmopolitanism and a distinctly European rhythm of life. Within the Bubble, Spaniards are married to Poles, multilingual children attend international schools, corner kiosks sell newspapers in six or more languages and daily work is performed against a swirling backdrop of civil servants, diplomats, politicians, lobbyists, industrialists, interns, journalists, think-tankers, researchers, seconded experts and visitors, who have found their way to Brussels from all corners of the continent. In the offices, meeting rooms, cafes, restaurants, health clubs and parks of the Quartier Européen (the

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European Quarter), the flourishing European microcosm follows its own rhythm, customs and even parlance. After some time in the Bubble, many come to express its spirit of progressive internationalism – and their growing distance from home – by referring to their native country not by name, but simply as '*the country I know best*'.

Despite the affection its insiders feel, one thing Brussels has never lacked is critics. To some, the Bubble embodies exclusivity, privilege and the aloof elitism afforded by low taxes, high salaries and the luxury of being far removed from the 'real problems' of the 'real people' in the 'real Europe'. Infuriated citizens install banners outside its headquarters, access roads are blocked with buses and tractors – and the United Kingdom quits the Union altogether. Angry voices from Budapest to Rome accuse Brussels of weakening borders, attacking national identities and infringing on Union members' sovereignty. At the time of writing, a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament are occupied by Eurosceptics.[1]

Our first ambition in this book is to bring the Brussels Bubble to life through accounts from those who inhabit it – those who build, sustain and navigate its rhythms every day. Few have tried to look at Brussels this way. As the German writer and sober EU critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger observed, "most anthropologists prefer Papua-New Guinea to Brussels, for a particularly curious field could be opened up to research".[2] Exposing and exploring this field is the first ambition of this book. In pursuing it, we track those for whom the Bubble is a place of routine: of morning commutes, coffee orders, office meetings, after-work drinks, small city supermarkets, take-away meals and temporary homes. To Enzensberger, the work these

[1] Statista, Euroscepticism – Statistics & Facts, www.statista.com/topics/10425/euroscepticism/#topicOverview, accessed 7 October 2025.

[2] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Brussels, the Gentle Monster or the Disenfranchisement of Europe.* Translated by Martin Chalmers. London: Seagull Books, 2011, p. 12.

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people do is '[a]n arduous labour that cannot be taken for granted'. And yet, he adds, 'our Brussels representatives are unloved'.[3]

Our second ambition is to show how "the arduous labour" of European politics has changed in unexpected and often contradictory ways through the increasing presence and use of digital technologies. Any EU official on their way to work today will have their smartphone at hand. As the European Quarter rush-hour gets underway, commuters riding the trains and escalators will already be replying to emails. Every meeting held in the EU buildings today either depends on digital technology or abides by rules that regulate its use. Politicians and EU institutions communicate with citizens via social media posts; and members of the Bubble have replicated their social and professional networks online. Brussels is a perfect site for understanding how technology shapes global governance and international politics. In this book, we explore the digitalisation of its complex, multilateral world through the experiences and events that have shaped the agendas and the attention of those working and living in the European Quarter over the last decade.

An ethnographic study is always particular and partial, shaped and bounded by questions of method, access, resources, time and, not least, luck. While readers of this book may recognise all the real places and environments in which we worked, we anonymised all the individuals with whom we interacted. The version of the Brussels Bubble you will encounter in these pages is the version given to us by our research participants, but it is also our version, shaped by our academic perspective and theoretical debates spanning international political sociology, EU studies, international relations, diplomatic studies, sociology and science and technology studies. At the end of this book, we explain how we conducted the research.

Above all, writing this book would not have been possible without the willingness of the many people in Brussels who have invited us into their daily lives and lifted the curtain on their

[3] Enzensberger, 2011, p. 12.

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professional worlds. We would like to thank the countless diplomats, EU staff members, interpreters and other members of the Brussels Bubble who have met us with so much curiosity and generosity over the years. To protect their privacy and as agreed upon during fieldwork, their names are anonymised in this book. While we cannot promise that we will make them more 'loved', what we can promise is to present an account of their world to the best of our abilities. The latter was considerably shaped and improved by our many conversations about our research over almost a decade. Versions of the chapters that make up this book have been presented at academic seminars and conferences worldwide. We have received support and intellectual homes in the Department of Political Science and the Centre for Social Data Science at the University of Copenhagen, the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Denmark's National Center for AI in Society (CAISA), the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). We could not have done the research without generous funding from two research projects: 'DIPLOFACE: Diplomatic Face-Work: Between Confidential Negotiations and Public Display' funded by the European Research Council (grant agreement 680102), and 'SOVEREIGN: Digital Sovereignty: European Visions for Self-Determination in a Digital Age' funded by the Danish VELUX foundation (grant agreement 38914).

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Much more could be said about all this – or we can just dive in and invite you to turn the page and join us in the company of Jack, who is just heading onto Place Schuman and into the heart of the Brussels Bubble.

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