1 In the Brussels Bubble

In Brussels, there is a word to describe Brussels.

As the morning sky grows lighter above Place Schuman, a sharp honk yanks Jack's eyes away from his phone screen and onto the oncoming headlights of the Airport Express bus. Traffic is thick on the roundabout that morning, as trains are striking across the city, and there is a forecast of rain. '*Pardon*, so sorry, *désolé!*' Jack stammers and takes two quick strides forward. Safely back on the pavement, he lowers his eyes and scrolls down his phone screen with his thumb. His inbox refreshes. There are no new messages.

In his late forties, Jack is a mid-level diplomat in the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the European Union. Brussels is his third diplomatic posting, and in a few months, he will be called back to Dublin. He slides his thumb down the screen again. Waits. Nothing. Then up pops a push notification from *Politico* news. *** *Live updates* ***, the banner reads. *** *The week ahead: EU leaders in town for summit – Bruxelles, ma belle: eating well in your twenty-minute lunch break – A new EU recycling law is raising fears of another 'curved bananas' PR disaster for Brussels.* *** Jack frowns. He swipes to the left and the message disappears. He drops his phone into his coat pocket, looks up and resumes walking towards Avenue d'Auderghem. Moments later, his dark silhouette merges with those of the other pedestrians, and he disappears into the crowd.

The Schuman roundabout is the central thoroughfare in the European Quarter in Brussels. Bright blue flags with twelve stars flap high above the sidewalks. A flower stand displays bouquets and potted office plants. Stairs and escalators lead to the underground train and metro tracks. Traffic lights turn red and green. Cafés sell espressos and sandwiches wrapped in plastic. A zebra-crossing is

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painted on the grey asphalt in the colours of the rainbow. Hundreds of people cross the square on weekdays from early morning to late afternoon. Some walk towards the Berlaymont, the headquarters of the European Commission. Some have a meeting at the EXKi coffee shop around the corner or work at the European External Action Service. Some are on their way to the two large Council of the European Union buildings: the Justus Lipsius and the Europa. Some walk down Rue de la Loi, Rue Froissart or Avenue de Corthenbergh, streets lined with restaurants, pharmacies, newsrooms, law firms, lobby offices and diplomatic representations. Like Jack, most wear the business attire of dark suits and overcoats and carry documents, handbags or backpacks. A distinguishable Place Schuman sound is that of carry-on suitcase wheels rattling over uneven paving stones. Sometimes, the scene is crowded by visitor groups taking photographs and selfies, flocks of new hires carrying EU-branded tote bags or schoolchildren chattering in French, Latvian or Greek. In the evenings and on the weekends, the Square is dead. The sky is often grey. On average, it rains nine days a month.

Many accounts have been written about what happens on or close to Place Schuman, and many library shelves have been filled with analyses of the treaties, policies and political futures that have been imagined and negotiated here.[1] The square is named after Robert Schuman, who was the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of France from 1948 to 1953. With other influential early European politicians – all men – whose names adorn the buildings nearby, Robert Schuman is widely credited with the plan to unite the continent in the wake of two devastating world wars.[2] In 1950, the Schuman

[1] Peterson, J. (1995). Decision-Making in the European Union: Towards a Framework for Analysis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *2*(1), 69–93; Wallace, H., Pollack, M. A., Roederer-Rynning, C., & Young, A. R. (2020). *Policy-Making in the European Union* (8th ed.). Oxford University Press; Hix, S., & Høyland, B. (2022). *The Political System of the European Union* (4th ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

[2] The Schuman Declaration was presented by French foreign minister Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950. It proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community, whose members would pool coal and steel production. The ECSC (founding members: France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg) was the first of a series of supranational European institutions that

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Declaration proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community, based on the argument that pooling heavy industrial production would make war between the historic rivals France and Germany "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible".[3] Today, the square that bears his name lies at the heart of a political organisation that has achieved many of its initial goals. At its largest, the Union has had as many as twenty-eight member states. The most recent addition was Croatia in 2013; the last and so far only member state to part definitively was the United Kingdom in 2021, with Greenland withdrawing in 1985 to become one of the EU's Overseas Countries and Territories. At the time of writing, nine countries officially hold a candidate status: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. In and around Brussels today, the EU institutions employ around 50,000 people, not counting the officials who work in EU liaison offices across European capitals and the staff of the EU's 139 diplomatic missions worldwide. Since 1964, the EU has had its own bespoke day, 9 May, and since 1985, 'Beethoven's Ode to Joy' is its official anthem. Also in 1985, the EU adopted its own flag, depicting twelve yellow stars on a blue background. Since 2000, it has had the motto 'United in Diversity' and since 2002, the EU has had a currency, the Euro. In 2012, the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize as it had 'for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe'.[4]

Over the last seven and a half decades, through seven rounds of enlargement, three major treaty updates and a constant process of negotiating a balance between national autonomy and further European integration, the EU has developed from an industrial trade

would ultimately become today's 'European Union', https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en, accessed 17 December 2024.

[3] https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en, accessed 11 December 2024.

[4] www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/summary/, accessed 11 December 2024.

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community into a worldwide unique political, legal and social formation. On paper, its main task today is making laws and regulations that affect the lives of over five hundred million citizens 'at home' – and, many argue, countless other people worldwide.[5] Through this optic, the EU is a bureaucratic organisation in which various representatives come together to devise and decide on new legislation. On any given day, the topics of negotiation can range from the classification of single goods and services like car radios, smartphone applications or haircuts, to the formation or scrapping of trade agreements and the definition of core political values like democracy and freedom of speech. Through its involvement in the latter, the status of the European Union has incrementally grown beyond that of a legal-economic trading floor. The institutions that sit on Place Schuman today understand their role to be not only the furtherment of the interests of its member states and its 450 million EU citizens, but the development and protection of a democratic, peaceful and resilient European way of life. In this framing, the EU is also an idea, and even an ideal: a humanist project to unify and shape the myriad intersecting identities of those who call or aspire to call Europe home.

In formal discourse and in the academic literature, this mix of functionalist pragmatism and normative ideals has earned the EU the characterisation of a 'polity'. A term that entered political vocabulary via Aristoteles and Thomas Hobbes, polity combines politics and community and refers to a system of governance. The most common, and most often idealised, polity today is the nation-state. Since the second half of the twentieth century, twenty-seven such states have voluntarily delegated significant legislative, political and judicial powers to institutions at the European level, thus establishing a European polity.[6]

[5] Bradford, A. (2020). *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*. Oxford University Press; Manners, I. (2002). Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(2), 235–258.

[6] Hix, S. (2006). The European Union as a polity (I). In K. E. Jørgensen, M. A. Pollack, & B. Rosamond (Eds.), *Handbook of European Union Politics* (pp. 141–158). Sage; in a number of the EU's member states, the status of the nation-state is a contested issue, such as the split between the Flemish and the Wallonian communities in Belgium, or

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In Euro-lingo, the 'native language' of EU staff, scholars, journalists and European politics buffs, this status is summarised in the notion of the *acquis communautaire*, French for 'acquired community'. The *acquis communautaire*, or the *acquis* for short, is the collective legal term for the whole body of written and unwritten EU laws, the EU's political aims and the rights, obligations and remedies which the EU member states share and must adhere to.[7] Hundreds, even thousands, of books have been written about the political nature of the European Union.[8] Indeed, an entire academic field of European or EU studies has formed around the establishment and development of the European Union, complete with its own theories, journals, colleges, degrees, university departments, scholarships, conferences, funding bodies, library sections, institutes, think tanks, experts and careers. There are so many

the region of Catalonia in Spain. Given our focus on how the EU is performed and done in Brussels, we do not consider such tensions in this book. Excellent resources on this topic include Scully, R., & Richard, W. J. (Eds.). (2010). *Europe, Regions and European Regionalism*. Palgrave; Keating, M. (2008). A Quarter Century of the Europe of the Regions. *Regional & Federal Studies*, *18*(5), 629–635.

[7] Meinhard, H. (2009). Acquis Communautaire. In *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*. Oxford University Press, https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1717?d=%2F10.1093%2Flaw%3Aepil%2F9780199231690%2Flaw-9780199231690-e1717&p=emailA%2FxPa.JAEHHyI.

[8] This book is in conversation with, and a continuation of the work, by a growing number of authors that have approached the EU as a cultural, historical and sociological phenomenon. These books, of course, have predecessors again and it is on their shoulders and shoulders' shoulders that we stand. Among the books that have inspired us the most are Favell, A. (2008). *Eurostars and Eurocities – Free Movement and Mobility in an Integrating Europe*. Blackwell Publishing; Kuus, M. (2014). *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; McNamara, K. R. (2015). *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union*. Oxford University Press; Kauppi, N. (2019). *Toward a Reflexive Political Sociology of the European Union*. Springer International; Mérand, F. (2021). *The Political Commissioner: A European Ethnography*. Oxford University Press. Each of these books studies the EU as an achievement, a social complex made through the practices, knowledges and objects that are every day defined and handled by people in Brussels and Europe. Their research questions are similar to the fundamental questions we explore in this book, each with slightly different emphases on knowledge, expertise and norm production (Kauppi and Kuus), political agency and change (Mérand), political culture, everyday symbolism and authority (McNamara), everyday experiences of living and working in EU-Europe (Favell).

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approaches to studying or discussing EU issues that it can be difficult to choose a starting point. But it is often said that 'in Brussels, there is a word to describe Brussels', so it is with this notion in mind that we introduce the basic themes and arguments that will unfold in this book. The word, as it were, is 'Bubble', a term used by those who work and associate with the European institutions to capture both a geographic place and a nexus of personal careers, international exchange and political action.

BUBBLESPEAK

We begin in March 2019, when Café Pulp on Avenue d'Auderghem still stocks the weekly printed issue of *Politico*. Jack has some time between meetings, so he is sitting at one of the café's big communal tables flipping through its pages. Under the heading 'Brussels Brits' Brexit Blues', Jack reads 'Inside and outside the institutions, Brits are worried about Britain's potential loss of influence in the bubble'.[9] His phone lies screen up on the table in front of him. It buzzes, and he reaches for it. Small vibrations notify him of more likes for one of his recent Twitter posts of a modified image from last week's Brexit summit, showing EU diplomats and ambassadors standing and squatting around Michel Barnier, the lead negotiator on the Brexit file. The other day, a plain version of the photo had been featured as *Politico*'s *photo du jour* to illustrate European unity. Jack used a filter app to change the style of the photograph to a painting by Edvard Munch and titled his re-tweet *The Art of Diplomacy!#EUCO*. Now, his eyes flick between the photo and the headline. While the Brits are on their way out, the Bubble still seems intact.

Jack came to Brussels seven years ago after postings in Dublin, Sofia and Athens. Like most of his colleagues, he is no longer sure exactly how he ended up in what he calls 'the trenches' of the EU

[9] www.Politico.eu/article/brussels-brits-brexit-blues/, accessed 17 December 2024.

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machinery. His French is still shaky, but he has become fluent in the language native to the European Quarter, which to any newcomer resembles a cross between secret code and arrogant gatekeeping. All the Euro-lingo baffled Jack at first; within a few weeks, when he was reviewing press statements or preparing the work of his representation's three ambassadors, he would catch himself saying things like '*Co-rée-péer* is running over on an *eco-fiin* file today,' or 'We need to tell the *anti-tschi* to pack extra snacks for dinner' or 'Ah, the gossip monger *Politico*, some newsstands are trying to sell it for 4€ but at *papillon* or *pulp* or *eks-ki* they're just lying around.' The EU's internal vocabulary is constantly growing and two of the more recent terms that Jack and his colleagues have added to their vocabulary are *veelops* and *veeloses*, EU-lingo for very-large-online-platforms and very-large-online-search-engines. No one in Brussels has the patience to spell out the names of preparatory bodies, clarify exactly which coffee shop they are referring to or give the full names of colleagues, companies or products. And anyone doing so immediately outs themselves as having only recently arrived.

Social scientists have long identified the existence of a specialised language, often in the form of metaphors or acronyms, as a significant marker for the existence of a distinct social arrangement or 'culture'.[10] Consider Amy Busby, an early ethnographer of the European institutions, and the description of her first arrival in Brussels in 2011: 'Asking Brussels-based friends for advice, most recommended I stay in the European Quarter; convenient … although probably a bit pricey, a bit soulless and dead at the weekend. I ended up living on Rue Wiertz, with a view of the European Parliament (EP) from my window, and thereafter spent seven months living deep

[10] See Lakoff, G., & Johnsen, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press; and on the EU in particular Ramsay, A. (2000). *Eurojargon: A Dictionary of European Union Acronyms, Abbreviations and Sobriquets* (Vol. 6). CPI Limited; and Balič, T. (2016). Attitudes towards Euro-English in a European Union Institution. *ELOPE: English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries*, *13*(2), 131–152; and Modiano, M. (2008). Euro-Englishes. In B. B. Kachru, Y. Kachru, & C. L. Nelson (Eds.), *The Handbook of World Englishes* (pp. 223–239). John Wiley and Sons.

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inside the "Brussels bubble"'.[11] While Busby's mention of the Bubble was one of the first in an academic journal,[12] the term was far from new. Indeed, in and around the European Quarter, the Brussels Bubble has long been a 'ubiquitous phrase' used by 'the staff of the EP and other Brussels-based organisations as they gathered on Place Lux, the bar-laden square in front of the EP where people meet on Thursday and Friday evenings to discuss the week.'[13]

The Brussels Bubble is both a geographic location and a social site. As a location, it designates the area of the European Quarter of Brussels between Avenue des Artes to the West, Rue de la Loi and Square Ambiorix to the North, the Parc du Cinquantenaire to the East and Rue de Trone and Place Jourdan to the South. In this quadrant lie the headquarters and most annexe buildings of the European Commission, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, the European External Action Service, as well as most of the member states' Permanent Representations (PERMREPS). At the heart of this area is Place Schuman. As a social site, Busby explains, the term Bubble 'refers to the peculiarities of working in Brussels; a multinational and multilingual space, an intense environment with a distinct rhythm to life, where people come and go continuously but which feels like a small village where everyone seems to know each other and news travel fast'.[14] The political geographer Merje Kuus, moreover, notes the fact that 'almost everything in the European Quarter is within a 15–20 minute walk', which increases the

[11] Written in 2011 as a conference paper for the UACES Student Forum at the University of Surrey, published in 2013 as: Busby, A. (2013). 'Bursting the Brussels Bubble': Using ethnography to explore the European Parliament as a transnational political field. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *14*(2), 204.

[12] Busby references, before her, Rozanska, J. (2011). Polish EU Officials in Brussels: Analysis of an Emerging Community. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, *27*(2), 263–298.

[13] Busby, 'Bursting the Brussels Bubble', p. 204.

[14] Ibid.; at the time Busby was writing, 'sociological' approaches to studying the EU got more visible in EU studies. Key texts in this literature are: Abélès, M. (1992). *La vie quotidienne au Parlement européen*. Hachette; Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities*; Mérand, *The Political Commissioner*; Kauppi, *Toward a Reflexive Political Sociology*.

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likelihood that these people not only know each other professionally but also 'move in overlapping social circles'.[15]

Within these circles, a shared language is one way in which the Brussels Bubble is defined. 'Brussels Bubble Jargon: Do You Speak EU?', was the headline of an article written by the Brussels correspondent of Agence France-Presse, Marc Burleigh, and published in parallel across a number of international news outlets in the summer of 2024. It opens by identifying English as the language that 'oils much of the inner workings of the European Union – but it is not always English as you may know it.'[16] Burleigh goes on to describe a particular vernacular he calls 'Bubblespeak' and introduces several of its key terms.

The first on the list is 'Brussels' as a shorthand to describe EU policymakers collectively. Importantly, this is not to be confused with Brussels as the capital of Belgium, which occupies the same location but overall operates on a 'different political plane'.

Next is COREPER, a French acronym for Comité des Représentants Permanents, the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union. This is the group in which all the national ambassadors meet. The COREPER is split into two, COREPER I and COREPER II, each with its own preparatory body. Each member state sends three ambassadors to the EU: one permanent representative who joins COREPER II, the diplomatic body concerned with economic, financial, foreign, general and justice and home affairs; one deputy representative who joins COREPER I, the diplomatic body concerned with agriculture and fisheries, competitiveness, education, employment, environment and transport; and a third deputy representative who joins the Political and Security Committee (PSC).

[15] Kuus, *Geopolitics and Expertise*.

[16] www.barrons.com/news/brussels-bubble-jargon-do-you-speak-eu-67717eac, accessed 17 December 2024; and https://tribune.net.ph/2024/06/08/brussels-bubble-jargon-do-you-speak-eu, accessed 17 December 2024. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from the Daily Tribune version of the article.

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Respectively, the three committees are prepared by the Antici, Mertens and Nicolaidis groups. All named after former European diplomats, these working groups are staffed by mid-career diplomats seconded to the EU from the member states' foreign affairs ministries. During a normal Brussels week, COREPER meets every Wednesday.

Another important term is 'The Council of the EU', which designates all EU member states' meetings at the ministerial level to make decisions across various portfolios. 'EUCO', the hashtag Jack chose for his re-tweet, is short for European Council. This is the next level up and signifies the summits held by presidents and heads of member states. EUCO meetings are held every couple of months in the main meeting room of the Europa building and are headed by the President of the Council. During the time of our research, this position was held by the Pole Donald Tusk, the Belgian Charles Michel and the Portuguese Antonio Costa.

Meanwhile, 'Eurogroup' or 'Ecofin' is a special term for the Council meeting of the EU's twenty-seven finance (Ecofin) ministers, which usually features a parallel session of the ministers of the EU countries using the Euro (Eurogroup). In 2025, twenty of the Union's twenty-seven member states used the single currency.

Also on the Bubblespeak list are 'President' and 'EU Presidency'. The title of President refers to all those attached with executive power in the EU's co-legislative process, including the President of the European Commission (most recently Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Council – see EUCO President above) and the President of the European Parliament (most recently David Sassoli and Roberta Metsola).

In addition, there is also the notion of the 'EU Presidency', which describes not a person but a position which each member state takes turns at for a six-month period, chairing meetings and helping to establish the political agenda in the Council of the European Union. Although the member state holding the 'presidency' has no executive power over the other institutions or presidents of the EU, it sets out the strategic priorities and decides which legislative files and agendas will be prioritised by the EU's diplomatic and political representative

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bodies and is responsible for planning and chairing most of the negotiations for six exhausting months.

Next on the list is 'QMV', qualified majority voting, the term used to describe how issues are often – but not always – decided at the EU level. The decision threshold of QMV is 55 per cent of the member states voting in favour, representing at least 65 per cent of the Union's population. Some central EU issues, however, like sanctions, trade deals and membership in the bloc, require unanimity, not QMV.

Then comes 'trilogue', a true Brussels word for a negotiation between representatives of the three institutions that have power in EU lawmaking, or the so-called co-legislators: the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. It is like a dialogue, just with three parties involved.

Finally, Burleigh also includes 'the Bubble' itself on his list, self-referentially defining the term as the 'Brussels ecosystem of EU officials, lawmakers and journalists, who all know the shorthand set out in this guide'. A perfect circle, it seems.

Academics and journalists are not the only ones recognising the complexity of Brussels acronyms and other terminology. The European institutions themselves distribute terminology lists on their staff intranets and public homepages. The most comprehensive of these is the EU-LEX Glossary,[17] which currently lists 345 terms (from A, 'Abstention, constructive (positive abstention)', to Z, 'Zero pollution') that are considered central to the workings of the EU. Collectively, these terms belong to the written rules of the *acquis*. Many have a legalistic ring to them: take 'convergence criteria' (criteria for adopting the Euro), or the 'principle of conferral' (the Union acts only within the limits of the competences conferred upon it by the member states). Others, like 'twinning', describe social processes, 'a means of institutional cooperation … whereby public administrations in EU countries share their expertise with their peers in partner or beneficiary countries'.[18] But other terms are specific to the point of

[17] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary.html, accessed 17 December 2024.
[18] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/twinning.html, accessed 17 December 2024.

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absurdity. One of these is 'Telephone calls within the EU', defined as 'calling a phone number in one EU Member State using a mobile or fixed phone from another Member State ...[at prices that] are capped'.[19] In Brussels, it seems, all vital things must be properly defined and catalogued.

POLITICO

Understanding terminologies and acronyms is one way to learn to navigate Brussels. But the Bubble is far more than speech and texts. It is also an ecosystem, a small village, a gathering of people and a way of life. A rich introduction to its unwritten rules can be experienced on Thursday nights in the bars and restaurants along Place de Luxembourg outside the European Parliament or read about in the constantly updated paper and online pages of *Politico*. This originally American news enterprise opened its doors on Rue de la Loi in April 2015. A decade on, *Politico* has become a leading voice on EU affairs, as well as the politics of and within the Bubble. 'Brussels Bubble' even features as a rubric on the Politico.eu homepage, which regularly features stories from the Bubble about the Bubble. Take 'The Real Brussels Power Map', a piece published in December 2022. Together with the significant buildings of the EU institutions that Jack crosses on his morning walk, the article refers to the EXKi coffee shop on Schuman, the To Meli Greek Deli on the corner of Rue Breydel and Av. D'Auderghem, the Belgian bistro restaurant Le Coin du Diable on Rue Stevin, the Italian restaurant Ramo Verdee on Rue du Toulouse and the Asparia Arts-Loi members-only spa and sports club as the places 'where EU business actually gets done'.[20] 'Sure', it argues, 'you can stake out the Berlaymont or wander the halls of Parliament ... or chat up their assistants at the bars in Place Lux and Place de Londres.

[19] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/telephone-calls-within-the-eu.html, accessed 17 December 2024.

[20] www.Politico.eu/article/eu-parliament-commission-leaders-diplomacy-china-russia-the-real-brussels-power-centers/, accessed 17 December 2024.

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But catching the real power players and dealmakers, the faceless bureaucrats and subtle diplomats, requires a tiny bit more finesse.' Another example is a *Politico*'s July 2024 booklet *The Brussels Survival Guide*, which opens with the welcoming words: 'Congratulations! If you're reading this, you're probably already part of the [...] Bubble'.[21]

In many ways, the reason why *Politico*'s status has become so central, and even iconic, in Brussels' European Quarter is that the magazine is as much involved in shaping EU politics as it is in reporting on it. One example of this goes back to 2016, when it began publishing an annual ranking of those it considers to be 'the most influential people in Europe'.[22] Most names on these lists tend to be those of active EU politicians and civil servants (think Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, key Commission negotiator Sabine Weyand, or former European People Party president Manfred Weber), but they also include people from other backgrounds, such as climate activism (Greta Thunberg in 2020), economy (Daniel Ek, the co-founder of Spotify, in 2017), sport (Thomas Bach, the head of the International Olympic Committee, in 2024), bureaucracy (Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen, the secretary general of Council President Tusk, in 2017), diplomacy (Thomas Valasek, the Slovakian ambassador to NATO, in 2016) and tech (Arthur Mensch, the French founder of Mistral, one of Europe's most prominent AI companies). Every December, a glitzy gala is held for the 'unveiling' of the list: an evening of tuxedos, ballgowns, champagne, Belgian fries and exclusive interviews with those occupying the top spots.[23]

A second example of *Politico*'s power, and the one confirmed both by our research participants and our own experience, is its daily newsletter, the *Brussels Playbook*, circulated every morning to

[21] www.Politico.eu/brussels-survival-guide-european-parliament-election-2024/, accessed 17 December 2024.
[22] www.Politico.eu/Politico-28-class-of-2024/, accessed 17 December 2024.
[23] https://x.com/LivePOLITICO/status/1866880301550670089/photo/1, accessed 17 December 2024.

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thousands of inboxes in Brussels and beyond. Since its launch in 2015, the *Brussels Playbook* reports on the daily grind of EU events and decisions in a distinctively tongue-in-cheek tone. 'If you want to understand Brussels, sign up to the playbook,' almost everyone we spoke to told us. Regardless of what our participants thought about the *Playbook* – some called it a leak show, others a gossip magazine, others the best source of information in town – the central point is that they were thinking about it, reading it and considering its content to be important for their work.

While many mentioned *Politico*, few mentioned the official versions of the same news circulating in Brussels. The EU institutions publish an annually updated Who's Who booklet listing the names and (sometimes frustratingly limited) contact information of appointees and civil servants,[24] while its official daily journal tracks and lists the EU's legislative proposals, developments and adopted regulations.[25] But these are dry reads next to *Politico*, which, with its convenient 7 a.m. distribution, is by far the more entertaining way to get into the rhythm of a new EU day. Next to serious headlines, the *Brussels Playbook* includes a weather report, tips on where to go for a good, quick lunch and a daily list of birthdays of people you may meet while roaming through the Bubble.

Back at Café Pulp on Avenue d'Auderghem, Jack is scrolling down his PERMREP's Twitter (now X) account. Most of his posts get little engagement: a single like here, a handful there, sometimes a retweet. Jack sees diplomacy, rather than public communication, as his main job, but as one of his Representation's spokespersons, he is responsible for uploading new content and sharing updates about what is happening in Brussels, which has become an increasingly large part of his daily routine. Twitter is serious business in Brussels. Jack compares posting on social media to talking to a journalist on the record – and indeed, posting something has become the

[24] https://op.europa.eu/en/web/who-is-who, accessed 17 December 2024.
[25] See https://law-tracker.europa.eu/homepage?lang=en for the EU Law tracker and https://eur-lex.europa.eu/oj/direct-access.html for its official journal, accessed 17 December 2024.

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equivalent of making a public statement. But Brussels Twitter is a crowded place, and getting attention is hard; so over the years, Jack has developed his own strategy for reaching out through the noise. To be noticed in a crowded place, you either have to be really offensive (here he cites the posts of Donald Trump as an example), really clever, really famous or really funny. Jack aims for funny. Sometimes this means adding a filter to a popular photograph or posting something with comic appeal. Jack's most successful tweet was in November 2018,[26] when he shared a photo of a Brussels puddle in the shape of his native Ireland. Given that it generated over 3,000 likes and more than 360 retweets, Jack had hoped that someone in the ministry back home might have given him some credit for the post, but no one ever did. Getting recognition from others or from home is one of the reasons diplomats use Twitter: another is staying up-to-date with the talk of the town. And so, while Jack drinks his coffee in between meetings, he holds his smartphone in his hands and he scrolls, scrolls, scrolls.

INSIDE THE EU AND ITS SCREEN WORLDS

When reading descriptions of EU politics, or visiting the European Quarter in Brussels, it is soon clear that geographically speaking, the Brussels Bubble lies in the Permanent Representations, offices and meeting rooms of the Commission and Parliament and Council and in the cafés and restaurants in the area between Place Schuman and Place de Luxembourg. It is within this radius, and with the intention of demonstrating, investigating and illustrating the notion of EU politics as a Bubble, that our analysis begins. Being a Bubble means that it is more than a bureaucratic machine or an idea. It is a blend of politics and community, a polity, a social field, a collection of people and a location with its own rhythm and its own distinct patterns of work and life. This positions Brussels as an ideal place to study the world of politics and diplomacy as simultaneously having a local life

[26] https://x.com/IrelandInEU/status/1067134535240945672, accessed 17 December 2024.

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and reverberating reach. It also pushes Brussels into the realm of anthropological and sociological study that explores the broader questions of international relations, representation, power and democracy through analyses of grounded, lived experience. All of which invites us, in Brussels, to ask questions like: 'What does international politics look like today?', 'How do states cooperate?' and 'What (good, or bad) do political institutions do for the people they represent?'

As Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century, reminds us, ethnography is not 'of villages' but rather done 'in villages'.[27] What matters is not the village itself, but the ability to grasp meaning in context and observe how cultural life takes on form and significance in specific settings. Accepting this methodological wager, we approach the Brussels Bubble as our 'village': a locus where politics, international cooperation, diplomacy and governance are lived and made. In service to that, we attend to the situated and everyday – whether in the corridor conversations after a COREPER meeting, the choreography of handshakes before a press conference or the coffee-break chat in the Commission's cafeteria. By tracing such ordinary yet patterned practices, we show how political work in the Bubble acquires a distinctive character; how 'representation' comes to mean something specific to Brussels; how diplomatic encounters are shaped by recognisable routines; and how negotiations and decision-making procedures follow their own situated logics.

THE BOOK'S AMBITION

Previously, leading scholars have argued that the EU is a polity 'sui generis', a one-of-a-kind political community that follows its own 'self-contained regime'.[28] But while thousands of books have covered

[27] Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. Basic Books Inc., p. 22.

[28] Phelan, W. (2012). What Is Sui Generis about the European Union? Costly International Cooperation in a Self-Contained Regime. *International Studies Review*, *14*(3), 367–385.

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aspects of the EU and Brussels, few have visited its engine room, and even fewer have given a deep sense of what it is actually like to work, live and exist in the Bubble. What follows will not focus on the functions of the EU institutions, the effects of treaty reform or the impacts of single policies or personnel changes, but on the everyday practices and lived experiences that make the Brussels Bubble a world unto itself. Viewed as social practice, European politics, diplomacy and governance are made in particular places and by particular people on an everyday basis. What do the people who work here do and say? What do they hope for and what do they fear? How does their work become meaningful or get disrupted? Chronicling this is our first ambition.

Our second ambition is to consider how the status of the Bubble and the work that is done there is impacted and changed by the increasing presence and reliance on digital technologies. This second focus comes both from our theoretical interests, from the observable rise of digital technology and its importance as a method and problem of world politics, and from within the political and social field of Brussels itself. As soon as we started looking at what happens in the offices, meeting rooms and social spaces of the Bubble, at how things are done, how files are negotiated and decisions made and how daily life is lived and navigated, we quickly found ourselves drawn into the digital environments of newsletters, emails, text messages, social media sites and other screen-based sources of information and connection. Because today the Bubble is not only a material, social, economic, political and legal phenomenon but also a digital phenomenon. And increasingly so. Take Jack. He is almost hit by the airport bus because he is busy checking his phone while crossing the street; he follows and interacts with other members of the Bubble on Twitter; his phone buzzes with digital news blasts from *Politico*; he prepares for and arranges meetings on his phone and collects and shares information via the screen. Yet spending time on all this sucks time away from his other tasks, and when he hopes for recognition, it does not come. Nevertheless, he goes on doing what he does, because like everyone around him, he sees no alternative. This is the book's

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second starting point, and we will use the chapters that follow to explore and conceptualise this predicament.

The first part of this century may well be remembered for the great advance and rollout of digital technologies whereby more and ever-bigger parts of life have moved into online formats and virtual screen worlds. We take the societal process of digitalisation as a lens through which to study how politics and global governance are done in Brussels – and how it may be changing. We also use the focus on digital technologies and their use to explore the larger questions about the nature of the EU as a polity, practices of global governance and how we can study, observe and make sense of politics, diplomacy and the struggle over power in the Brussels Bubble. We engage these questions through years of ethnographic work and abductive theorising, moving back and forth between immersive knowledge generated in the field and conceptual knowledge gathered from academic sources and debates. We start our analysis *in media res*, amid the experiences of real individuals who work for the EU today, like Jack, and finish with a methodological appendix, explaining how we conducted our study and how similar studies may be done by others elsewhere. In the intervening chapters, we use our experiences and observations as embodied examples of academic theoretical debates and as possibilities to challenge and develop them further. This puts the book in conversation with a wealth of other studies on European integration, international relations and organisations, diplomacy and global governance that we will consider throughout. What sets this book apart from most existing literature is its ethnographic depth and theoretical openness. If our first theoretical starting point is the anthropological claim that 'Brussels' can be thought of and theorised as a 'bubble', our second is an idea developed in the overlapping fields of international relations, sociology, anthropology and science and technology studies, which posits the existence and emergence of (new) technologies not as an independent intervening variable but as a process in which the social, the material and the technical impact one another to the point of becoming entangled and mutually

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dependent.[29] In this framing, the recognition that Jack desires for his tweet is an example of how social media becomes infused with concerns of hierarchy and status that may not be exclusive to European politics but which carry an exclusive meaning in this particular professional situation. Similarly, the fact that Jack checks his email while walking down the street may give an insight into his personal idiosyncrasies as a dialled-in, modern-day professional, but it also tells us that Brusselites expect to be permanently reachable and a constant part of the information-sharing loop.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, we consider the daily rounds of Jack and many of his colleagues as examples of the interplay between digitalisation, technological change and everyday governance practices in the EU. You will meet diplomats who go back home to fetch a forgotten phone, PERMREP spokespersons who cc themselves on every email they send in order to keep track of their workflow, ambassadors who delete all their emails during the *rentreé* after the summer break or over the course of the year due to information overload, Commission staff who lament their social media (un)popularity, Council employees who draw up new meeting rules and protocols and diplomats whose bodies almost seem to fuse with their smartphones. Throughout, the individuals we introduce are not academic inventions: they are real, flesh-and-blood people and the stories we tell about them are not examples of what the meeting between diplomacy and digital technologies might look like in theory, but what it actually looks like in practice.

In Chapter 2, we will meet Daan, who thinks that online contact is the only useful way to communicate in Brussels; Sabine, who uses two phones; Jakub, who despises negotiating with devices in the

[29] See, for example, Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1987). *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton University Press; Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. Bloomsbury Publishing; Marres, N. (2017). *Digital Sociology: The Reinvention of Social Research*. Polity Press.

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room; and Lukas, who is drowning in his perpetually updating email inbox. Through their experiences and emotions, we present the love–hate relationships that fuse Brussels professionals to the digital tools that surround them, probe the classic idea of the diplomat as information-gatherer and consider what happens to diplomatic identity, intimacy, trust and connection in an era of near constant digital connection.

In Chapter 3, we follow Louise and her colleagues into a closed-door negotiation and observe her as she performs her duties as a staff interpreter. The chapter considers the classical role of the diplomat as negotiator, mediator and generalist, and investigates how the task of fulfilling this role is affected when technology enters the mix. What the experience of the negotiation shows is how digital technologies promise efficiency and speed while simultaneously soaking up attention and creating distraction.

In Chapter 4, we return to Jack and his Irish puddle tweet, re-engage with Sabine and her two phones, and meet Peter, who runs the Twitter account of the President of the Council of the EU. Through their experiences, we explore one of the central claims of much of digital diplomacy scholarship to date: that digital communication increases legitimacy, transparency and democratic access. We relate these ideas to classical themes of diplomatic recognition, status and gift-giving in diplomacy and to the notion of the diplomat as the public face of the nation.

Chapter 5 focuses on smartphones, tracing how they are used in trilogue meetings, by the protocol team and during lunch breaks, and find out what happens when a phone is forgotten, lost or low on battery. Through these accounts, we consider what kinds of materials diplomatic work is built around and dependent on today, and how these materials shape diplomatic communication, connection and information-sharing. The diplomat and the device form an assemblage whose fusion is becoming stronger and more inevitable by the day.

Chapter 6 focuses on 2020, when COVID-19 reaches the Bubble. Meetings are cancelled, quarantines are imposed and much of

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diplomatic life moves online. We get an impression of life through the eyes of Martin and Sebastian, whose work rhythms are turned upside down; get to know David, who has to prepare new sets of rules; hear from Alfred, who sits through hours and hours of videoconferencing; and check back in with Louise, who is struggling on the sidelines of the big meetings. The chapter chronicles how the pandemic provided a serendipitous, almost natural experiment for our study on the union of digitalisation, diplomacy and EU politics.

In our final chapter, we conclude by gathering all the threads to ask what then constitutes politics in the EU in the digital age, and how technologies shape international relations and global governance more generally. Building on the takeaways from Jack and the others, we argue that understanding the EU today requires reimagining it as a *digitalizing social field*: a polity whose politics, authority and legitimacy are inseparable from the digital infrastructures through which it is practised and experienced. Within this environment, social media functions as a symbolic economy of recognition – a 'Bubble effect' – in which likes, mentions and retweets circulate as tokens of insider visibility, reproducing boundaries rather than dissolving them. Meanwhile we observe how diplomats and officials emerge as *cyborgs*, whose authority and affect are inseparable from the devices and interfaces that extend their bodies and shape their political presence. Digitalisation, we will show, is not an external or deterministic force acting upon European politics, but a socially negotiated, institutionally embedded process, continually produced and contested within the EU itself. In this sense, the politics of digital sovereignty in Brussels prefigure broader transformations across other multilateral hubs, where the infrastructures of global governance are increasingly mediated through the same corporate platforms and tools. Finally, we discuss what contributions long-term ethnography can make to the study of international organisations, diplomacy, power and international institutions like the European Union.

The book as a whole presents an alternative way to portray and read about international organisations, global governance, diplomacy

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and power. Our approach looks at the Brussels Bubble through the eyes of those who live and work in it every day, and in doing so, it shows that their attention is no longer primarily focused on the physical environment and the faces of others in the same world, but increasingly on the screens of meeting room projectors, TVs, laptops and smartphones. This affects not just working routines and daily rhythms, but ultimately alters the ways in which international negotiation, representation and dialogue are conducted. Portraying and reading the EU in this way is both a close-up chronicle of the period of our research (2018–2023), and a theoretical and normative commitment to think about technological change, diplomacy and EU politics not as abstract things that 'happen' in some non-descript place, but as deeply social and situated processes performed by real people in real places every single day.

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