

Shaping EU Influence: Trends for Associations

EURACTIV STUDY

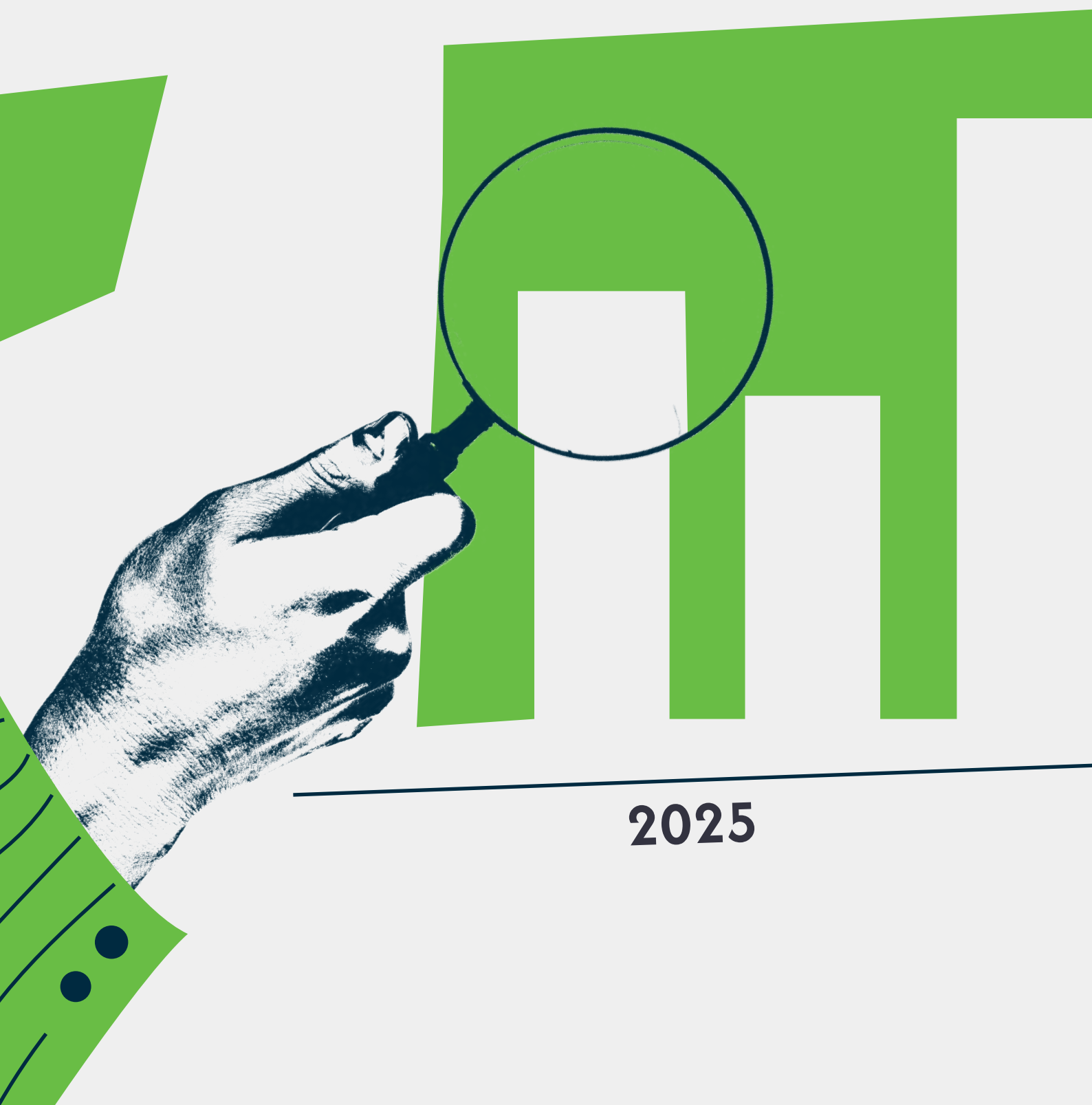


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Introduction by René Moerland, Publisher Euractiv

Media and advocacy have always had a complicated relationship. It's a natural pairing, but not an easy one. Associations, companies, and civic organisations seek visibility and understanding. They hope journalists will recognise their relevance – perhaps even share their perspective. But most reporters are trained to keep a distance. They aim

to serve the public interest, not any specific interest. They ask hard questions. They resist alignment.



Yet, they also know that to understand the forces shaping Europe, they must speak to those who have expertise, influence, and a clear stake in the outcome. That's precisely the role played by the more than 15,000 professionals working in and around the 3,000+ associations in Brussels. These associations form the fabric of Europe's civil society and economy. They are not just stakeholders – they are knowledge holders, consensus builders, and crucial interpreters of complex policymaking.



At Euractiv, we report on EU policy and politics daily. But our work doesn't stop at the news. We also have a responsibility – and an ambition – to support the community we report on. Associations are at the heart of our readership. We know you are busy, overwhelmed with information, and looking for what really matters. That's where we try to make a difference: by offering relevant insights, not noise. By sharing expertise not yet found in policy

documents. By connecting Brussels with the realities in member state capitals.

We believe that a well-informed debate strengthens democracy. That's at the heart of our mission: our journalism, but also our services beyond journalism – events, reports, videos, and communication support – all developed by our separate Advocacy Lab. Independent journalism also delivers the trusted environment for top-notch communication.

To serve you better, we need to understand you better. That's the purpose of this study, completed by over 100 associations. What are your top priorities? What kind of events do you value? How do you perceive journalists?

One early finding: understanding each other isn't always easy – but it matters deeply.

We hope this report helps start that conversation.

René MOERLAND,
Euractiv Publisher

3,000 Voices, One Brussels Hub

Behind the EU institutions and high-level negotiations, a quieter but significant force is shaping Europe's policy landscape: a network of nearly 3,000 European associations headquartered in Brussels.

These associations represent industries and interests spanning the entire continent—from transport and energy to health, education, and human rights. Collectively, they form a powerful lobbying and communication ecosystem that has grown steadily since the 1950s, when the Treaty of Rome laid the foundation for a deeper European cooperation.

Today, over 15,000 professionals work in Brussels for these cross-border organisations. Their roles range from policy analysis and lobbying to public relations and strategic communication. As the European Union has expanded and deepened its powers, so too has the need for centralised representation and advocacy in the heart of the EU quarter.

Brussels provides access not only to EU officials but also to a pan-European audience. A single meeting or media appearance in the city can resonate across all 27 member states, amplifying messages on a continental scale.

While individual European countries may be modest in size—Germany, the largest, ranks only 19th globally by population—collectively the EU wields global influence, especially in trade, regulation, and standard-setting. In this context, associations mirror the EU's cooperative model: uniting national bodies into one stronger European voice.

These associations are also vital communication channels for large corporations. Although decision-making still lies with CEOs and national offices,

Brussels-based federations help coordinate and amplify messages on complex issues such as regulation, sustainability, and digital transformation.

The rise of Brussels as a centre of European influence extends beyond the political institutions. With its concentration of journalists, NGOs, legal firms, and think tanks, the city offers a fertile environment for advocacy and visibility.

As the EU faces new challenges—from AI regulation to green transition—these associations are expected to play an even larger role in shaping the future of Europe.



The Strategic Role of Associations in Advancing the European Project and Economic Prosperity

At a time when the European Union must reaffirm its relevance to citizens and respond decisively to profound economic, geopolitical, and societal challenges, the role of associations in supporting the European project is both crucial and often undervalued. Far from being peripheral actors, associations serve as essential intermediaries between institutions and society. They bring expertise, ensure representation, and provide a vital link to the economic and social realities experienced across the Union.



BRIDGING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Associations occupy a unique position within the European governance ecosystem. They serve as conduits between EU policymakers and the stakeholders who implement, experience, or are directly affected by legislation and regulation. Whether representing industry sectors, professions, civil society groups, or regional interests, associations bring forward insights grounded in practical experience and technical knowledge.

In doing so, they help policymakers understand the real-world implications of proposed initiatives. They provide the necessary feedback loops to

ensure that EU regulations are both effective and implementable, and they act as early warning mechanisms when policies risk producing unintended consequences. This proximity to both Brussels and the “on-the-ground” realities of member states allows associations to strengthen the responsiveness and legitimacy of the EU’s regulatory framework.

ENHANCING COMPETITIVENESS, INNOVATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Associations are central to enhancing the competitiveness of the European economy. Through their capacity to consolidate sector-specific

expertise, coordinate cross-border cooperation, and disseminate innovation, they support the development of a resilient and forward-looking European industrial base.

In fact, associations play a pivotal role in facilitating the twin transitions—green and digital—by promoting sustainable business practices, identifying opportunities for decarbonisation, and supporting the uptake of advanced technologies across industries. They assist their members, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, in navigating complex regulatory environments and accessing EU funding instruments. In turn, this enables European enterprises to innovate, scale, and remain competitive in global markets.

Moreover, by fostering partnerships between academia, industry, and public authorities, associations support the creation of dynamic ecosystems of innovation. These networks help translate European research and development investment into commercially viable solutions that contribute to both economic growth and environmental goals.

ENSURING INCLUSIVE REPRESENTATION AND REGIONAL COHESION

Associations' contributions ensure that the policymaking process reflects the diversity of the European Union—not only in sectoral terms but also geographically and demographically. Many associations represent actors from rural, remote, or less-connected regions, thus providing

a platform for stakeholders who might otherwise lack access to EU decision-making processes.

By doing so, associations help bridge the gap between Brussels and Europe's regions. They ensure that the economic and regulatory realities of all parts of the Union—not just those of the most developed or centrally located member states—are taken into account. This contributes to territorial cohesion, one of the core objectives of the EU, and helps foster a sense of ownership and inclusion in the European project.

STRENGTHENING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Associations also play a valuable role in supporting democratic participation and civic education.



Many associations invest in awareness-raising initiatives, training programmes, and outreach campaigns designed to inform their members and the broader public about EU affairs. This work is critical at a time when misinformation, populism, and declining trust in institutions pose significant risks to European integration.

By engaging citizens in discussions on policy, regulation, and the broader objectives of the Union, associations help build a more informed and participatory political culture. They provide spaces for collective deliberation, encourage consensus-building, and promote dialogue between diverse societal actors. These contributions help strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU and reinforce its foundational values.

ACTING AS RESPONSIBLE POLICY PARTNERS

While associations are often perceived primarily as advocacy bodies, their contributions go far beyond lobbying for narrow interests. Many associations embrace a broader sense of public responsibility. They advocate for balanced and evidence-based regulation, promote best practices, and contribute to the achievement of EU-wide goals such as climate neutrality, digital sovereignty, and social inclusion.

Their role in providing technical expertise, conducting impact assessments, and identifying emerging trends makes them valuable allies in the formulation of policy that is both future-proof and grounded in the present. In sectors ranging from healthcare and energy to education and retail, associations help ensure that legislation supports long-term economic prosperity without compromising environmental or social sustainability.

FROM STAKEHOLDERS TO ARCHITECTS: EMPOWERING ASSOCIATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Given the current political and economic climate, it is imperative that EU institutions engage more systematically and meaningfully with associations. Doing so would not only improve the quality of EU legislation but also enhance its legitimacy and societal resonance. Associations can offer the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council access to distributed knowledge networks, real-time feedback, and a wider public constituency.

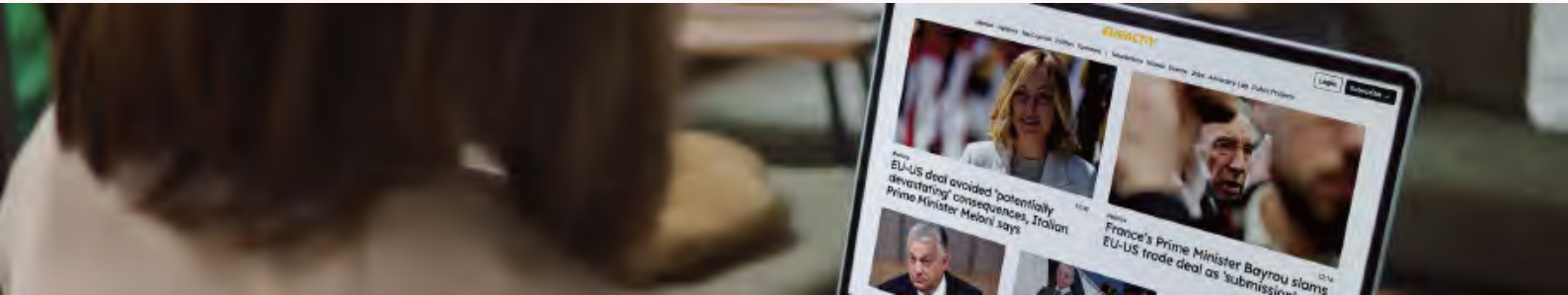
To that end, structured dialogue mechanisms, more inclusive consultation processes, and better recognition of associations as co-creators of European policy should be prioritised. Associations, for their part, must continue to uphold high standards of transparency, accountability, and commitment to the general interest.

Associations have a critical role to play in advancing the European project and fostering economic prosperity for EU citizens. They do so by bridging institutional and societal actors, representing diverse perspectives, supporting innovation and sustainable growth, and reinforcing democratic participation. In short, associations are indispensable partners in building a more connected, competitive, and cohesive Europe.

To fully realise their potential, associations must be seen not merely as stakeholders to be consulted, but as strategic actors in shaping the EU's future. Their engagement is not just complementary to the European project—it is a cornerstone of its success.

Economic Impact Review

A NEW Euractiv product for Associations



In today's fast-changing policy environment, associations need more than facts, they need a powerful story. The Economic Impact Review product is designed to help associations elevate their voice and demonstrate why their sector matters not just to Brussels, but to Europe's future.

This unique product blends rigorous economic research with a strategic narrative, making a compelling case for your sector's role in driving prosperity, competitiveness, and innovation, both within the EU and globally.

EACH REVIEW INCLUDES:

- ➔ A data-backed analysis showing your sector's economic contribution and relevance to key EU priorities ;
- ➔ An opinion piece authored by your association, allowing you to shape the narrative directly ;
- ➔ An op-ed from a Member of the European Parliament, providing political resonance and legitimacy ;
- ➔ A professionally printed version of the full report, ideal for stakeholder engagement.

TO AMPLIFY IMPACT, THE REVIEW IS FEATURED ACROSS EURACTIV'S INFLUENTIAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM, REACHING EU INSTITUTIONS, DECISION-MAKERS, AND KEY OPINION LEADERS THROUGH:

- ➔ A native content spotlight on Euractiv.com ;
- ➔ Targeted placement in thematic policy newsletters ;
- ➔ A dedicated digital content campaign ;
- ➔ Social media promotion.

For tailored solutions or to get started, contact us at advocacylab@euractiv.com

Data and analysis of associations' survey

METHODOLOGY

Target Audience: Associations - including: Industry federations, Trade unions, Chambers of commerce, NGOs with networks, European platforms, Consumer organizations, Patient organizations, Liberal professions associations

Distribution Method: Targeted emails

Response Method: Online questionnaire

Survey Period: 6 May – 12 June 2025

Number of Respondents: 106 organizations

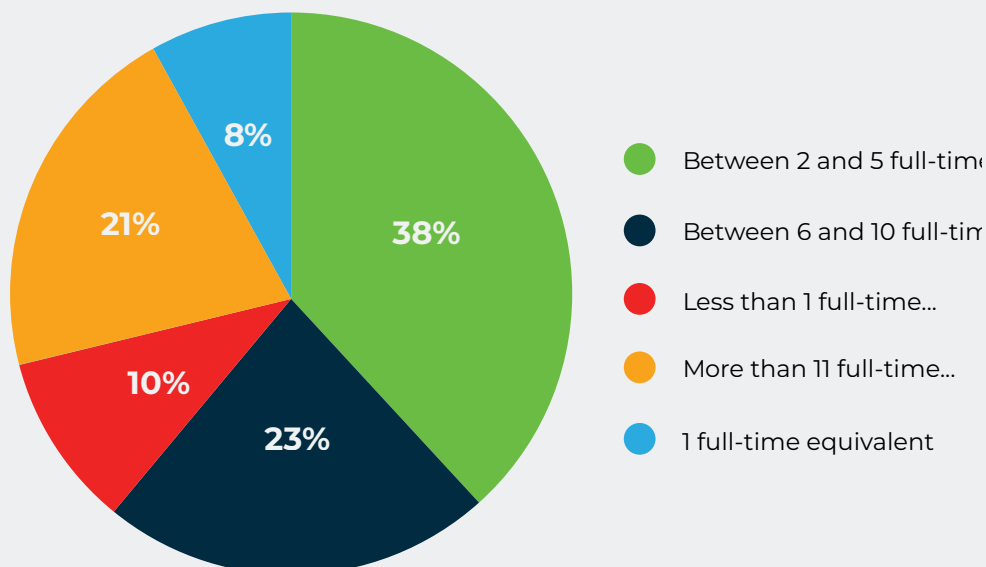
Nature of the Survey: Qualitative and indicative (non-statistical)



Results

How many people work in your organisation's EU/ Brussels secretariat?

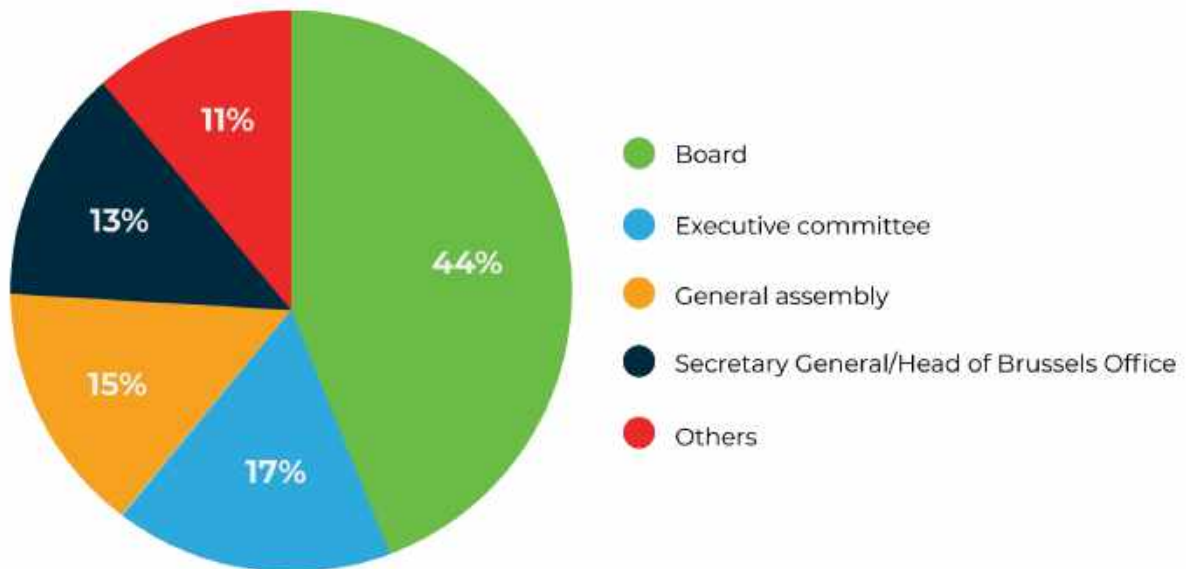
Over half of Brussels associations have 5 or fewer employees, while 20% have more than 11.



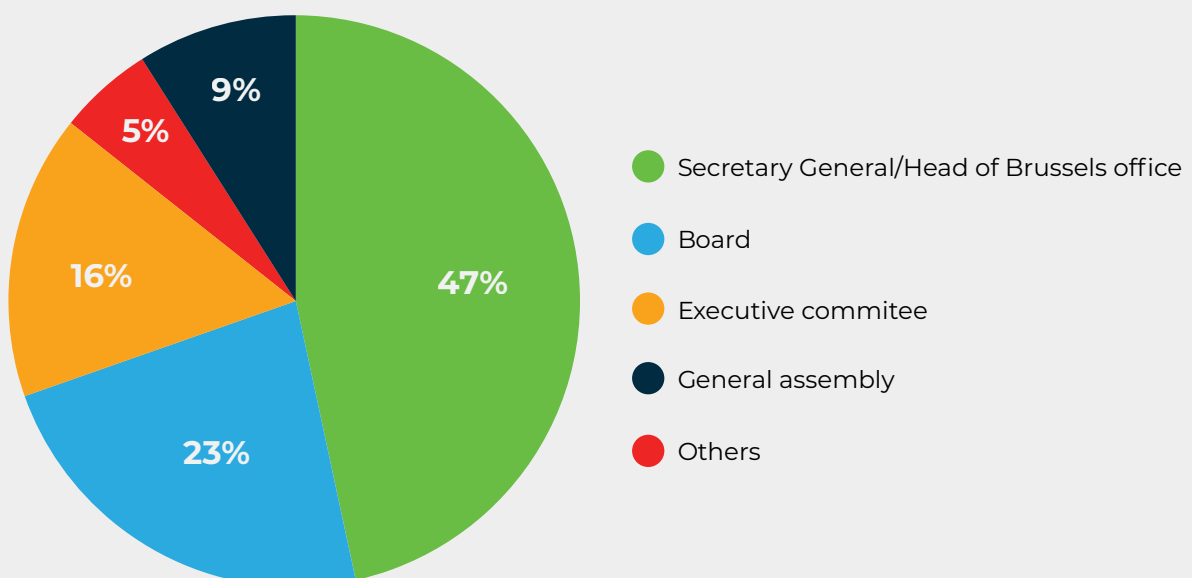


What is your organisation's main decision-making body?*a) For issuing policy positions?*

In most cases, the association's Board decides on policy positions.

*b) For external communications strategy?*

Most organizations say that the Head of the Brussels structure decides on strategic communication.





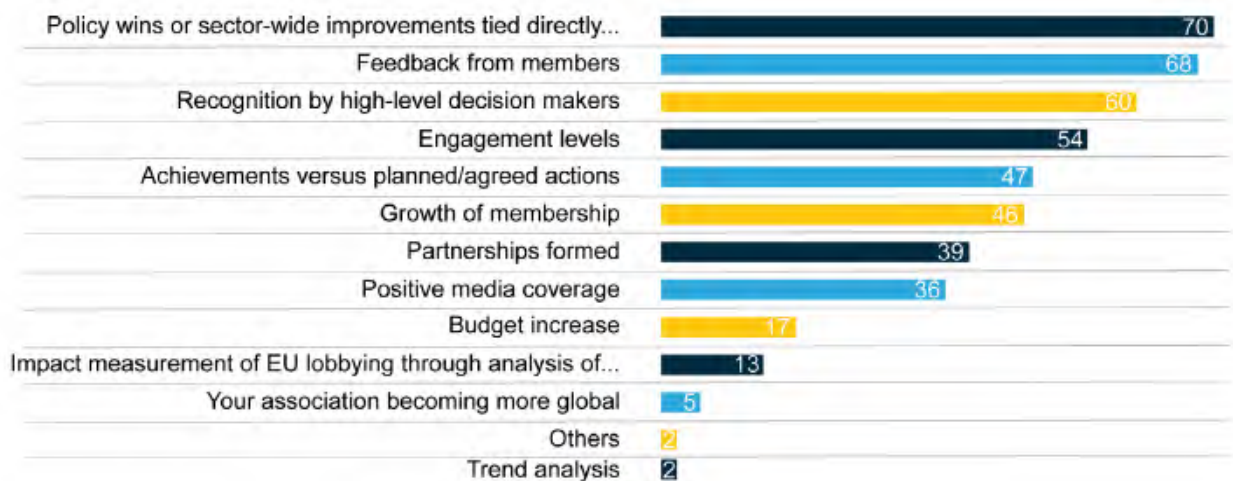
What are the biggest challenges that your organisation faces?

Industry changes often demand more staff, which many organisations struggle to secure, and nearly a third of organisations struggle to be understood by the media.



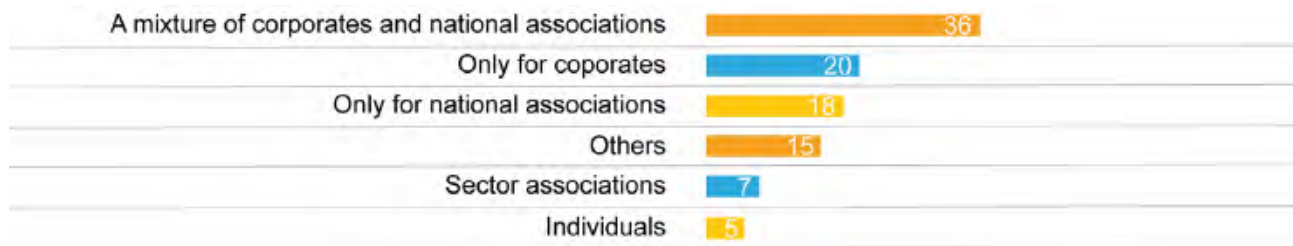
How do you measure your organisation's success?

Influencing policy and member feedback remain top priorities, and over a third of organisations see media coverage as key to achieving their goals.



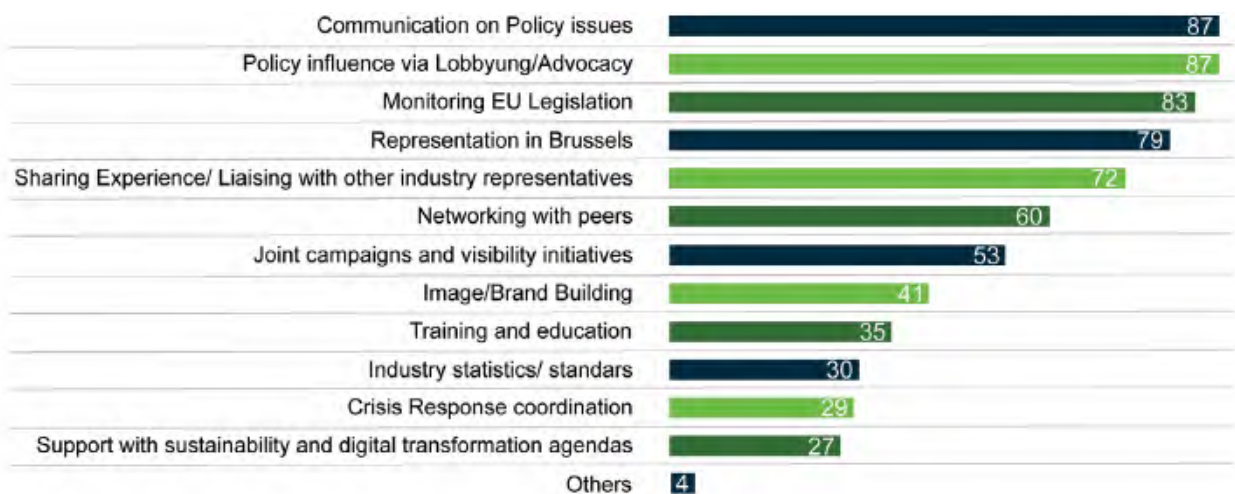
How would you describe your membership structure?

Most associations include both corporates and national associations.



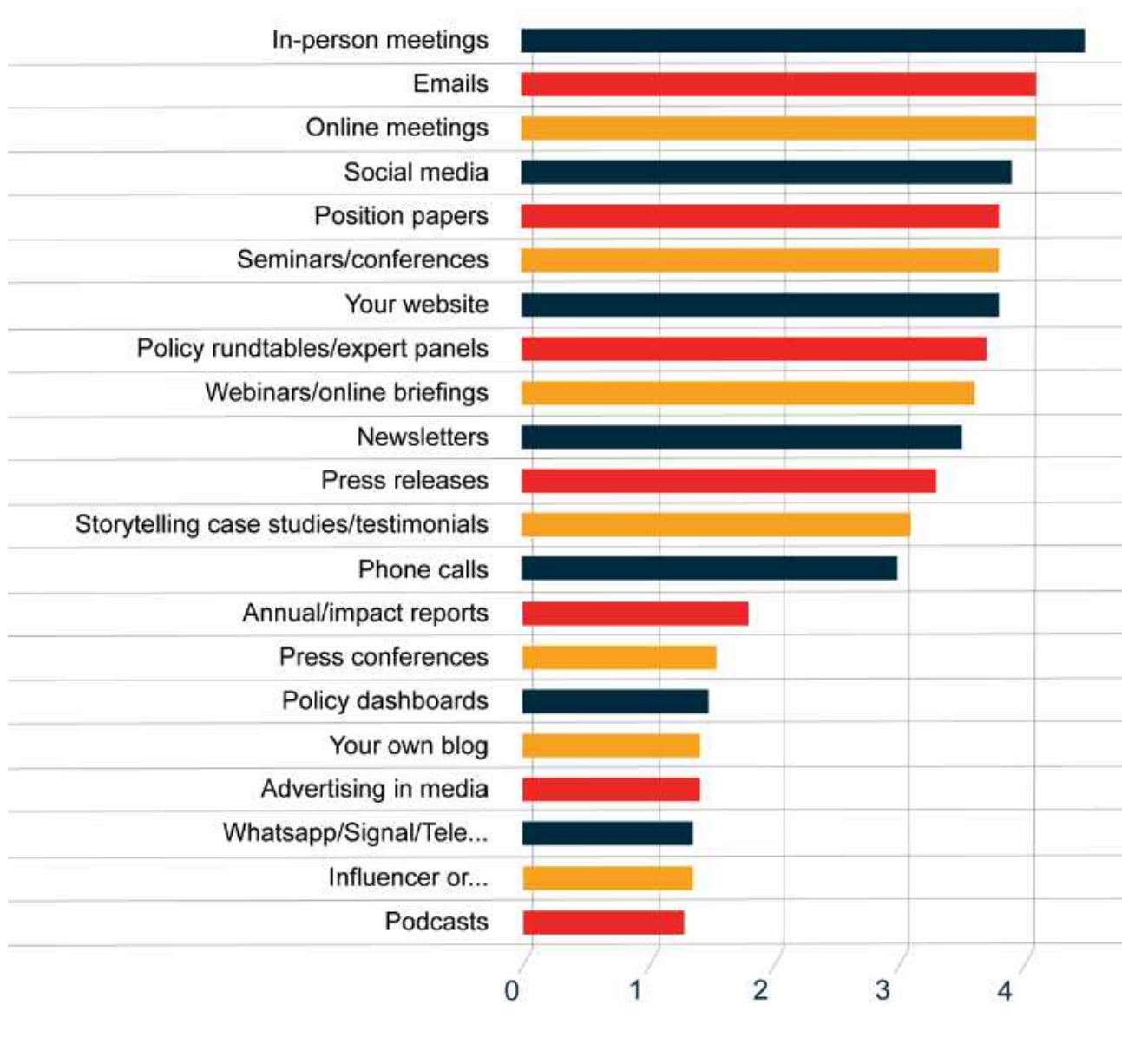
What added value do you offer to your members?

The organisation's work involves representation in Brussels, monitoring legislation, and influencing decisions. Over a third of associations also value member training and education.



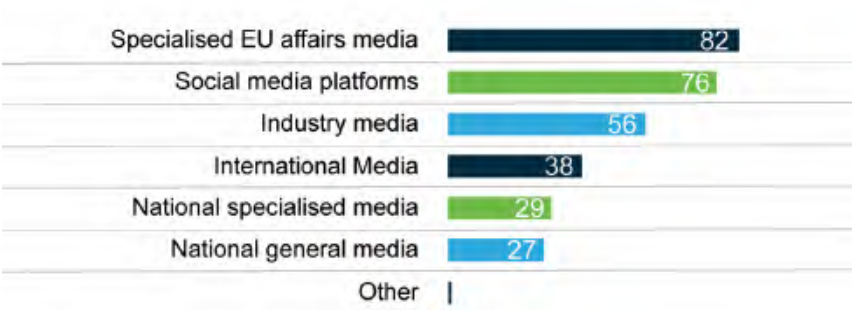
Rate the importance of the following tools for direct communication with different stakeholders:

Online meetings are valued, but physical meetings remain a priority. At the same time, Podcasts are becoming less relevant.



In your external communication, which media are more relevant?

Specialised EU affairs media are considered the most effective channels for external communication by associates, ranking just above social media platforms in importance.



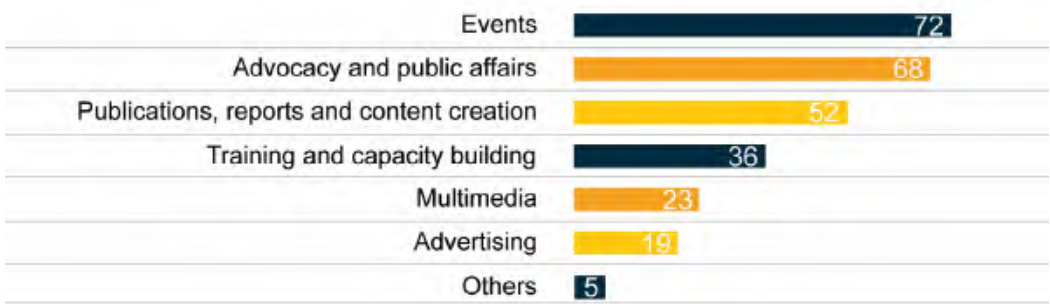
What would you invest in to get more attention from the media?

To boost visibility and media coverage, most organisations plan to proactively engage with journalists, while many also intend to publish their policy positions online ahead of key EU events.



For which of the following areas do you have a fixed budget?

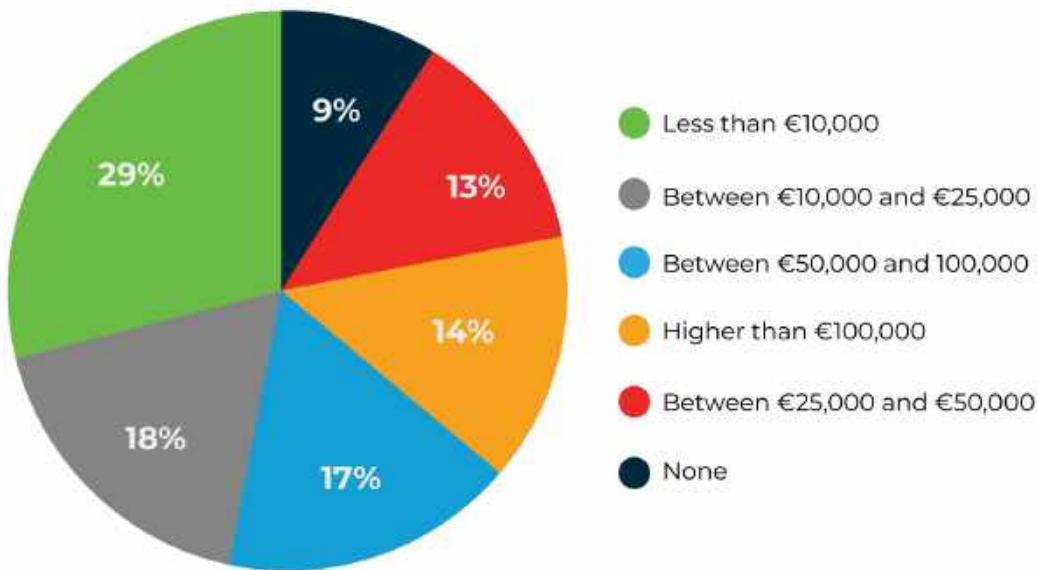
The primary segments for budget allocation are event organisation, advocacy campaign and content creation. More than a third of associations also allocate fixed budgets for member training and capacity building.



What is your total annual budget for communications?

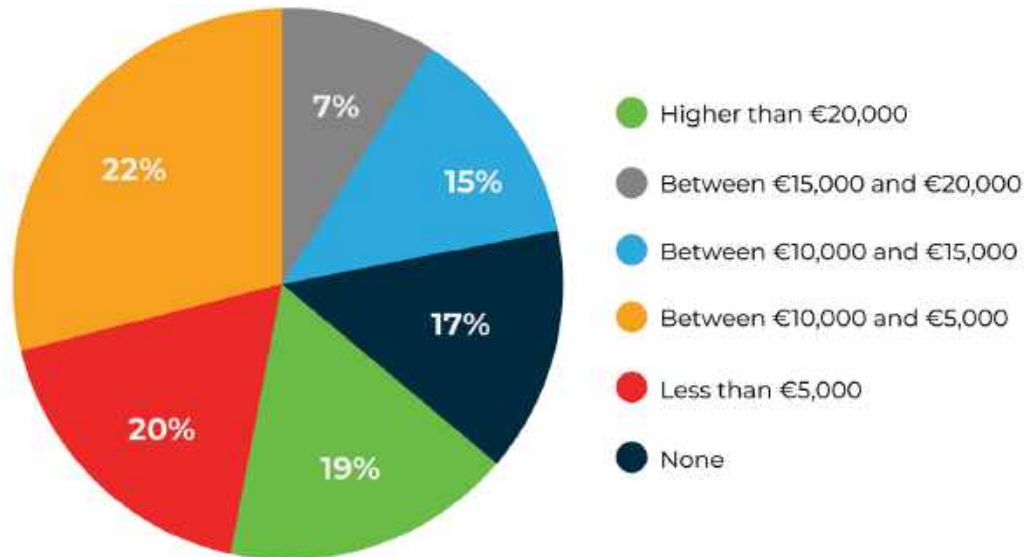
(calculated without budget allocated to human resources)

Nearly 50% of organizations report annual communication budgets that surpass €25,000.



What is your total annual budget for EU media and policy monitoring tools subscriptions?

Approximately 40% of organizations report annual subscription budgets exceeding €10,000.



Findings from an organisational point of view:

1. The organization's board decides on involvement in EU policies ;
2. The Brussels office head sets the engagement strategy ;
3. Many associations prefer lean structures in Brussels ;
4. These structures focus on lobbying and member communication ;
5. Organizations have budgets to monitor legislation and influence policy.

Findings from an operational point of view:

1. Industry changes and HR shortages are reshaping organizations ;
2. Online meetings now rival in-person ones in value ;
3. Publishing policy papers and promoting them on social media is an effective positioning strategy ;
4. Proactive outreach to EU-focused journalists is a growing priority ;
5. Five years post-pandemic, Brussels is once again the hub of events.

Euractiv PRO product for associations

A NEW tool for subscribing to Euractiv content and monitoring EU policy



Euractiv PRO is a powerful, subscription-based platform designed for associations navigating the fast-paced world of European policy and legislation.

JOIN A PAN-EUROPEAN COMMUNITY OF POLICY STAKEHOLDERS AND GAIN ACCESS TO:

- ➔ Daily curated news on EU policy, politics, and industry developments ;
- ➔ A 7:00 AM policy newsletter, delivering essential content with editorial context ;
- ➔ Legislative reporting not only in Brussels but across major EU capitals, via a network of EU correspondents.

WHY EURACTIV PRO?

- ➔ Timely and balanced reporting that helps you transform information into strategic action.
- ➔ Unique editorial value and cross-border intelligence.
- ➔ Competitive pricing for associations needing real-time EU updates.

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Key Trends Shaping the EU Affairs Landscape

The European Union stands at a critical juncture, influenced by a confluence of geopolitical, economic, technological, and societal shifts. These developments are reshaping the EU affairs landscape, requiring both policymakers and stakeholders to adopt a strategic and flexible approach. This analysis segments the evaluation into two parts: political developments and policies, and engagement tools. Its aim is to present a societal, high-level vision that supports association leaders in navigating these complex developments.



POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND POLICIES

GEOPOLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

The EU is increasingly recognising the need to assert its role on the global stage with greater strategic clarity and cohesion. The geopolitical environment is marked by growing fragmentation, which underscores the urgency for the EU to enhance its preparedness.

Security issues, including defence and strategic autonomy, are expected to dominate the agenda in the coming years. This shift is driven by global crises, such as the war in Ukraine, and the need for the EU to reduce its dependency on external entities, particularly in critical areas like energy, digital technology, and raw materials.

The focus on security and defence is linked to the need to ensure the stability and prosperity of the EU's member states. This requires a comprehensive approach that integrates military, economic, and diplomatic strategies. The EU's ability to project power and

influence on the global stage will be crucial in shaping its future role in international affairs.

ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL POLICY

A notable transformation is taking place in EU economic policy, shifting towards more realistic and pragmatic approaches. There is a growing recognition of the need to reduce ideological constraints and focus on policies that focus on competitiveness for the European industries, particularly in sectors like chemicals, technology, and manufacturing.

The EU's economic independence is a key priority, with a focus on reducing dependency on external markets and supply chains. This requires a strategic approach, including investments in research and development, innovation, and infrastructure. The goal is to create a more resilient and self-sufficient economy that can withstand global shocks and disruptions.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND AI

The rapid rise of artificial intelligence is transforming various sectors, including labour markets, governance, and communications. The EU is at the forefront of digital

regulation, focusing on ensuring that AI technologies are developed and deployed in a manner that is ethical, transparent, and accountable. This includes efforts to address issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the impact of AI on employment and social inequality.

The digitalisation of communications and advocacy activities is also a significant trend, with a move towards more remote participation and engagement. This requires a well thought approach to digital transformation, with priority to be given to skills development and enhanced cybersecurity. The ultimate goal will be to create an inclusive and participatory digital environment, adapting and improving the EU's democratic processes and stakeholder engagement to the current reality.

GREEN TRANSITION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The green transition continues to be a core EU priority, though the tension between sustainability objectives and economic competitiveness has become increasingly evident. The EU's Green Deal is a comprehensive strategy aimed at making the EU climate-neutral by 2050, but its implementation

requires careful calibration to avoid undermining Europe's economic competitiveness.

There are concerns about the potential sidelining of environmental issues in favor of security and competitiveness. However, it is essential to recognise that sustainability and economic growth are not mutually exclusive. The transition to a green economy can create new opportunities for innovation, job creation, and economic development. The challenge is to ensure that the green transition is inclusive and equitable, benefiting all segments of society while preserving European strengths in key economic sectors.

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Stakeholder engagement is becoming more complex and requires more technical input, long-term follow-up, and alignment with national realities. There is a growing sense of fragmentation and proliferation of interest groups, leading to a crowded and competitive public affairs environment. This calls for a strategic approach that

emphasises coalition-building, open dialogue, and inclusive, participatory processes.

The need for more reactive and robust decision-making processes within associations and stakeholder alliances is also a significant trend. This includes efforts to improve governance structures, focus on transparency and accountability, and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation.

POLITICAL SHIFTS AND IDEOLOGICAL CHANGES

A shift towards the right and the rise of anti-EU sentiments are seen as significant trends. There are concerns about the increasing influence of far-right ideology on

EU policies and the potential marginalisation of civil society and smaller interest groups. A smart and creative approach to political engagement is needed, including efforts to build broad-based coalitions, promote dialogue across interest groups on different sides of the political spectrum, and promote inclusive and participatory processes.

The need for more facts and figures-oriented policy actions and delivering tangible results is also a significant trend. This includes efforts to ensure policymaking, improve data collection and analysis, and foster a culture of accountability and transparency. The goal is to create a more evidence-based and results-oriented political

environment that can address the complex challenges facing the EU.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD AND COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

With growing information overload, getting detailed messages across in a saturated market has become more critical than ever. Communication plans should be built with particular attention to the clarity and effectiveness of messaging as well as the use of data and AI tools to reinforce its effectiveness. Coalition building and cross-messaging on different platforms should be considered as the main response to the fragmentation of the European Affairs market.



Where Media Empowers Associations

Since its creation, Euractiv has prioritised engagement with European associations, recognising their essential role in connecting policy with real-world market dynamics.

For over two decades, we have conducted surveys and consultations to better understand how associations evolve and how they can gain greater recognition as credible sources of information.

In early 2025, we launched a new initiative — Shaping EU Influence: Trends for Associations — aimed at exploring how associations contribute to EU policy making and how their influence is evolving within today's shifting political and institutional landscape.

The study was coordinated by Sònia Vilella Cebrian and included Chiara De Santis in the team.

We thank all contributors—especially the associations—for their valuable input, which was central to the success of this research.

Euractiv remains committed to fostering informed dialogue and supporting associations in shaping the future of Europe.

Dan LUCA

Project Coordinator

European Associations 2025

