

President von der Leyen convened with hundreds of corporate representatives during an event organised by CEFIC, a powerful lobby group for Europe's chemical industry, just hours before meeting with EU heads of state. This recurring pattern of exclusive engagement raises a fundamental question: is European policy being shaped by its 450 million citizens, or by the continent's largest industrial lobbies? The timing also gives industry a privileged opportunity to feed its demands directly into the EU heads of state summit on Competitiveness taking place the following day. The rollback threatens to intensify after this summit, which will discuss a suite of deregulation proposals, most of which come straight from industry<sup>1</sup>.

Since 2024, the [Antwerp Declaration](#) has acted as a shadow roadmap for the European Union. What is framed as something that will boost the economy has increasingly become a vehicle for dismantling the EU's democratic safeguards. We are witnessing a systematic rollback of vital climate, environmental and social protections—hard-won progress now being traded for corporate concessions behind closed doors. So far, the EU has delivered fast and hard **for polluters, rights-abusing corporations and shareholders, but not for people.**

The Commission has even undermined its own procedural safeguards, failing to provide impact assessments and credible scientific or economic evidence for key proposals, and neglecting meaningful consultation processes. When the European Ombudsman raised concerns, the Commission's response was not to correct its approach, but to weaken its own better-regulation rules.

At the same time, industry lobbying has unlocked billions in public subsidies, justified by claims of economic crisis and capital shortages that have since proven to be vastly overstated. Many of these same companies continue to prioritise short-term shareholder payouts over investing in a just and sustainable transition.

Framing democratic rules as obstacles to growth fuels a dangerous race to the bottom, where the most harmful industries are rewarded with weaker rules and more public funding, while people face austerity and declining protections.

We reject this corporate-led deregulation agenda. Europe's industrial and economic strategy must strengthen — not sacrifice — environmental integrity, social justice, human rights and democratic accountability. Strong standards are not a burden — they are the foundation of Europe's long-term economic resilience. Public money and political power must serve society as a whole, not entrench the influence and profits of the industries most responsible for the crises we face.

**To defend the public's rights to health, to a livable environment and to decent working conditions, we say we need**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://cdn.table.media/assets/europe/ger-ita-non-paper-competitiveness\\_en\\_finale.pdf](https://cdn.table.media/assets/europe/ger-ita-non-paper-competitiveness_en_finale.pdf)

# Rules to protect democracy, people and planet

## 1) Re-vitalise European democracy

The second Von der Leyen Commission's focus on competitiveness is reflected in its more intensive contact with corporate actors: 40% of meetings of Commissioners' cabinet members were with company representatives, 29% with business associations, and only 16% with NGOs. This imbalance risks policy capture.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Commission has created new spaces, such as "Reality Check Workshops" and "Implementation Dialogues", that are set up in an untransparent manner and further reinforce this imbalance, opening up new avenues for corporate influence.

Civil society organisations, NGOs, environmental organisations, trade unions and academia, as key representatives of the public interest, must be heard, protected, and given meaningful access to decision-making.

The EU's current deregulation agenda reflects corporate lobbying more than the priorities of ordinary people: addressing the cost of living, ensuring strong public services, and taking decisive action on the climate, biodiversity, and pollution crises. Lawmaking must not be steered by the very industries responsible for pollution, climate harm, discrimination, unlawful processing of sensitive data, mass surveillance and other harms. These safeguards cannot be dismantled to satisfy the demands of the most polluting and risky sectors.

Instead of shrinking civic space and sidelining public voices, the EU must strengthen democratic participation.

## 2) Rules exist to protect the public

People across the EU are increasingly exposed to forever chemicals (PFAS), pesticide pollution and more frequent extreme weather. This generates huge costs to society, both economically and in terms of wellbeing<sup>3</sup>. Instead of more "omnibuses"<sup>4</sup> that undermine protections, we need better and stronger rules to ensure access to clean water, air, and food, guarantee safer workplaces, safeguard our privacy and personal data online, and protect us from risky applications of AI.

People do not want toxic chemicals in their bodies, unsafe working conditions, polluted food and drinking water, or constant online tracking. Children should be able

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<sup>2</sup>

<https://table.media/en/europe/feature/lobby-contacts-second-vdl-commission-has-more-frequent-meetings-with-companies>

<sup>3</sup> <https://basic.coop/en/actualites/study/pesticides-a-model-thats-costing-us-dearly/> & <https://foreverpollution.eu/lobbying/the-bill/>

<sup>4</sup> An EU Omnibus is a legislative package that bundles multiple, often diverse, amendments into a single, comprehensive document designed for a single vote. Launched by the European Commission, aim to weaken laws, reduce accountability for businesses, in the name of boosting 'competitiveness'.

to play in parks without exposure to harmful substances like PFAS and families should not find forever chemicals (TFA<sup>5</sup>) in their meals due to deregulated pesticides legislation.

### **3) No blank cheque for polluting industries**

Polluting industries are paying nosebleed dividends to shareholders, year-in year-out. From 2010 to 2023, European firms in key energy transition sectors generated €2.1 trillion in net profit and distributed €1.6 trillion to shareholders—a staggering 75.3% of their total net profits (and about 40% of Germany's GDP, for comparison).<sup>6</sup> They do not need extra capital injections paid by taxpayers, who face cuts to healthcare, education, and climate action. The problem is not a lack of capital — it is a misallocation of existing resources. We should invest in a future-oriented, toxic-free and decarbonised economy, not prop up toxic-fossil-intensive sectors resisting the energy and toxic-free transition. Finally, polluting companies should bear the costs of harm caused by their products, not society, respecting the Polluter Pays Principle.

### **4) A new spirit of law-making should be evidence-based law-making**

Omnibus packages are dismantling crucial protections without scientific evidence or proper impact assessments.<sup>7</sup> Proposals are short-sighted, industry-driven, and ignore their effects on people and the planet<sup>8</sup>. Lawmaking must be evidence-based and safeguard health, rights, the environment, and Europe's long-term sustainability goals. Basing laws on the immediate demands of profit-driven industries — often the very ones responsible for pollution, exploitation, techno-driven discrimination and the climate crisis — is fundamentally misguided.

Instead, EU lawmaking should be grounded in solid evidence, expert advice, and the voices of the most impacted communities. Civil society organisations, NGOs, environmental organisations and trade unions, scientists, and independent experts must guide decision-making, ensuring policies serve people and the planet — not just a handful of polluting and energy-intensive companies.

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<sup>5</sup> Trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) is a highly mobile and persistent "forever chemical" belonging to the PFAS group, extensively used in industrial, agricultural, and pharmaceutical applications. As a byproduct of F-gases and pesticides, it has become ubiquitous in the environment, including water, soil, and food, raising concerns about long-term accumulation. -

<https://www.pan-europe.info/resources/reports/2025/12/unseen-and-unregulated-tfa-forever-chemical-europe-s-cereals>

<sup>6</sup> <https://friendsoftheearth.eu/publication/shareholders-over-solutions/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/recommendation/en/215920>

<sup>8</sup> <https://thegoodlobby.eu/academics-warn-of-back-door-move-to-institutionalise-deregulation/>

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