

POLITICO

POWER COUPLES

Brussels is for lovers

These influential people have formed their own European Unions.

By TARA PALMERI 8/22/16, 5:31 AM CET



As an international city that attracts ambitious people from around the world, Brussels has more than its share of powerful married couples | iStock

Power, money, the thrill of a political or social policy campaign. It's heady stuff. And for many on the EU political scene, it's been a source of romance.

As an international city that attracts ambitious politicians, civil servants, business leaders, journalists, campaigners and lobbyists from around the world, Brussels has more than its share of powerful married couples. Some of the matrimonial pairings connect those professions and spheres in unusual ways.

Here's a look at several of Brussels' most notable political power couples.

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DG LOVE

Dominique Ristori and Irene Souka

They've each reached the highest echelon of Commission officialdom: a director-generalship. But the relationship between Energy DG Dominique Ristori and Human Resources DG Irene Souka started in the 1980s at much less senior level — in the corridors of the Commission's Luxembourg outpost, where they both held junior administrative positions. Ristori, a French national, met Souka, a Greek, when he was assistant to the

director-general of personnel and she was assistant to the head of the translation department. Now they both run entire departments. As head of the Commission's energy directorate-general, Ristori ranks among the most powerful staffers in Brussels. As head of human resources, Souka wields more behind-the-scenes muscle.

After hours: Souka says the two try not to talk shop over the dinner table, because otherwise they would have a 20-hour workday. When they're not working, the pair can be spotted at the opera.

No favors here: Don't suspect preferential treatment for DG Energy from the HR department. "I'm much stricter with his DG than I am with the others, because you don't want to be perceived as giving favoritism," Souka said. "I don't think he's getting a good deal because I'm here, rather it's the contrary."

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The commissioner and the diplomat

Julian King and Lotte Knudsen



POLITICO photo-illustration (Source images by EPA and Flickr)

It may be an awkward time for Brits in Brussels as Brexit approaches, but the country's commissioner-designate, Julian King, arrives with some insider credentials. Those partly come from his CV — before being the U.K. ambassador to France he worked briefly in the European Commission — and partly they are thanks to his marriage to Dane Lotte Knudsen, a top official in the EU's diplomatic arm, the European External Action Service. King and Knudsen offer proof that long distance relationships can work: King's ambassadorial postings in Paris and Dublin meant the couple mainly saw each other on weekends.

Where they met: In Paris in 1992, where the couple still have a house.

Eurocrats' best friends: The couple has two dogs, Molly and Cadbury.

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Bruges connection

Margaritis Schinas and Mercedes Alvargonzález

Margaritis Schinas, the European Commission's chief spokesman, and Mercedes Alvargonzález, a top European Parliament official, have been together for three decades. Both have a long affiliation with the center-right European People's Party: Alvargonzález is head of cabinet for the EPP leader in the Parliament, Manfred Weber; and Schinas was a Greek MEP in the group from 2007 to 2009. The two are fixtures on the Brussels social circuit.

How they met: The pair both studied for master's degrees in European policy at the College of Europe in Bruges 30 years ago. They married five years later and settled in Brussels, where they have remained since and are still in touch with Bruges friends.

Golden rule: They always spend summer holidays at Schinas' family place in Halkidiki, Greece and Christmas with Alvargonzález's family in Asturias, Spain.

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Digital union

Lie Junius and Dirk Delmartino

The heads of the EU offices for tech giants Google and Amazon may battle for the hearts and minds of Brussels lawmakers on digital issues, but outside of work they are totally in sync. Junius, the director of public policy for Google, has previously worked with General Motors, Goodyear and ABM Amro. Delmartino, head of public affairs at Amazon, started his career as a journalist for Belgian daily De Standaard, before working for Microsoft and the Brunswick Group consulting firm.

How they met: Junius and Delmartino, both Belgians, met at the University of Leuven in the 1990s.

Champion: Delmartino completed the Nice Ironman competition in 2014.

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The Baron and the Countess

Carl Bildt and Anna Maria Corazza Bildt



POLITICO photo-illustration (Source images by Getty Images)

The jet-setting former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt and Italian MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt are a formidable political pair on the EU scene. Bildt, a longtime diplomat, politician and commentator, now serves on the board of the Global Commission on Internet Governance, and is a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Europe. Corazza Bildt serves on the European Parliament's Internal Market and Consumer Protection committee. She also owns a parmesan cheese business.

How they met: Serving in the Balkans during the Yugoslav wars. She was working as an interpreter for the United Nations while Bildt worked as EU fixer in Bosnia with the title Special Envoy to the Balkans. They have a son. Corazza is Bildt's third wife.

Blue bloods: Both Bildt and Corazza can claim titles of nobility. Though she was described as an immigrant in the Swedish press when she married Baron Bildt, she is in fact an Italian countess.

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Think tank team

Ann Mettler and Paul Hofheinz

A Swede and a Texan first found love and then founded a think tank. Ann Mettler and her husband Paul Hofheinz launched the Brussels-based Lisbon Council in 2003, pushing ideas

about economic competitiveness for Europe. Mettler now has a prominent official EU role as head of the European Commission's in-house think tank, the European Political Strategy Centre. From that post, she runs Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's ideas factory, and is considered a key player on political strategy and policy in the institution. Hofheinz, who comes from a prominent Houston family — his grandfather and father were mayors — still runs the Lisbon Council.

How they met: In Davos, where she was working as director of the World Economic Forum and he was reporting for the Wall Street Journal.

Offspring: As well as their think tank, the couple have two children.

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Love on the slopes

Robert Madelin and Marie-Christine Jalabert

Robert Madelin, the Commission's former digital policy guru, and Marie-Christine Jalabert, deputy head of the internal energy market unit, have been together since the early 1980s, long before they both joined the EU civil service. Madelin, a Brit, started working for the Commission in 1993 and rose through the ranks in several DGs. Jalabert, also a longtime French Commission official, has worked on the EU's regional development fund. Since last year Madelin has been a special adviser reporting directly to Juncker but announced he will leave the Commission in October. Madelin says he'll be doing academic and pro bono activities, offering strategy and advice and doing non-executive board work.

Where they met: Oxford-educated Madelin and Jalabert fell in love on an early 1980s ski trip organized by the Ecole nationale d'administration, where they had both studied.

Power secret: "We never worked together, directly, hardly ever," Madelin said. "Our dossiers never intersect so we just talk about each other's jobs over the dinner table." But they share a network of powerful friends. "I've made better friends because she's working in the Commission," he joked.

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The journalist and the lobbyist

Robert McLeod and Annalisa Barbagallo

MLex founder Robert McLeod and Brunswick group partner Annalisa Barbagallo have big

business covered — whether Barbagallo is representing them as a lobbyist in Brussels or McLeod is pumping out market insight for his specialist newswire.

How they met: It was a classic Brussels connection. McLeod, an Australian who used to be a Bloomberg correspondent in Brussels, and Annalisa, an Italian who had previously worked in Washington, met at Place Luxembourg in 2007, the Thursday night drinking square outside of the Parliament. “No shame in admitting to that,” Barbagallo says.



Marine Le Pen and her companion, Louis Aliot | Pascal
Guyot/AFP/Getty Images

The romance between National Front leader Marine Le Pen and Louis Aliot hit the headlines in 2011 when she hired him to be her assistant at €5,000 per month. Just two years into their relationship, Le Pen was forced to deny that Aliot was a “spouse” or “stable non-marital partner,” instead calling him her “companion” to justify his hiring. Aliot himself became a full-fledged MEP in 2014. Le Pen has three children from her previous marriage and Aliot has two from his, making them a French Brady Bunch.

Love immortalized: Fictional love stories about Le Pen’s rise in politics seem to be a popular theme in French literature. In the political thriller “The Two Hundred Days of Marine Le Pen,” author Frédéric Deslauriers imagines a scenario in which Aliot becomes secretary general to Le Pen after she wins the presidency. Michel Wieviorka, in “The Quake. Marine Le Pen president,” envisages Aliot as spokesperson for a Le Pen administration in 2017.

Separate but equal: The French magazine *Closer* reported that the couple do not live together and see each other only on weekends.

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G2

Alexandre Stutzmann and Silvio Gonzato

Frenchman Alexandre Stutzmann, a former diplomatic adviser to the last three European Parliament presidents, was named the assembly’s director for external policies-committees in 2015. He shares a love of diplomacy with his partner, Silvio Gonzato, an Italian who is director for strategic communications, parliamentary and legal affairs for the European External Action Service.

Kitchen Cabinet: The two have done extensive work on human rights for the Parliament and the Commission. Gonzato was director of human rights of the EEAS until 2014. In 2015, Stutzmann was appointed to his current role, which includes democracy and human rights promotion. Both are affiliated with the political science program at James Madison University in the United States, and with the University of Florence, Italy.

Easy riders: The couple ride their motorbikes to work every day — “the best way to overcome the crazy traffic,” Stutzmann says.

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NGO duo

Eloise Todd and Tom Brookes

Eloise Todd, global policy director of the ONE Campaign, and Tom Brookes, executive director of the European Climate Foundation, are do-gooders with influence in Brussels. Todd's passion has been ending hunger. Before joining the global ONE campaign founded by Bono, she worked in the European Parliament as a political adviser on Africa. A former journalist, Brookes has worked as a lobbyist for Microsoft and Apple when they were battling the Commission on antitrust cases.

How they met: Todd and Brookes, who are both British, had known each other for sometime but bumped into each other on the Eurostar as she brought the ONE campaign to Brussels in 2009.

Charity begins at home: While both work their networks to advance worthy causes, there's always a little friendly competition between the two. "I should lobby him to make sure that the money for climate change goes to the poorest people," Todd said.

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The Euroskeptic and the European

Nigel Farage and Kirsten Mehr



POLITICO photo-illustration (Source images by Getty Images and EPA)

Brexiteer and former UKIP party leader Nigel Farage claims to hate the European

institutions, but they are also where his heart is. His German-born wife Kirsten works for UKIP in the European Parliament, currently as an assistant for MEP Raymond Finch. Kirsten writes all of Farage's emails because he hates computers, according to the Daily Mail. During the U.K. referendum campaign, Farage said he wasn't denying a British worker a job writing his emails because no one else could do that task "unless they were married to me."

How they met: In Frankfurt in 1996, where she worked as a bond trader. Farage has two grown children from his previous marriage to Irish nurse Gráinne Hayes.

Better together in the EU? Farage was spotted recently in line with Mehr at the German embassy in London, but he refused to comment on whether he was trying to find a way to keep EU citizenship along with Mehr and the couple's two children.

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Transparency issues

Carl Dolan and Vanessa Mock

While Carl Dolan cracks down on corruption and pushes for more openness in the European institutions as director of Transparency International, his wife Vanessa Mock, a German, manages communication for the Commission's finance department.

How they met: Mock, a German, met Dolan, an Irish native, while covering corruption during her previous career as a journalist for the Wall Street Journal.

Awkward: Transparency International took aim at Mock's boss, then-Commissioner Jonathan Hill, in June 2015, saying he had "particularly low numbers for meetings with civil society." Mock said the couple have their own system of Chinese walls separating his campaigns and her Commission work.

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Talking head twosome

Geoff Meade and Jacki Davis



Jacki Davis and Geoff Meade, after the latter received his MBE in February | Yui Moki/AFP via Getty Images

Former journalists Geoff Meade and Jacki Davis, who now run an events-moderating communications firm, are regular fixtures on the BBC, where they offer commentary on EU politics. Davis was the first editor of *European Voice* and later ran communications for the European Policy Center think tank. Meade was the Brussels correspondent for the U.K. Press Association for so long that a brass plaque marks a corner of the Commission press bar where he held court. The two stage the annual Brussels Press Revue satirical show, which is about as close as the EU press corps gets to glamour.

How they met: Meade and Davis met in the 1990s when both were Brussels hacks. Jacki became Brussels correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in 1992. Meade was a widower at the time with children, and the two started dating in 1994.

Getting away from it all: Meade and Davis spend their summers on the island of Lipari, off the coast of Sicily.

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Old school

Horst Reichenbach and Dagmar Roth-Behrendt

Commission lifer Horst Reichenbach and former European Parliament vice president Dagmar Roth-Behrendt have a combined 65 years of experience in Brussels. Reichenbach, who has run several Commission DGs, headed the Commission's Greek task force from 2011 to 2015. Now he's on the board of directors of the European Bank for Reconstruction and

Development. Roth-Behrendt was once one of 14 vice presidents in Parliament for the S&D; she's now a special adviser to the Commission on health.

Politics gets personal: The couple's Potsdam home was attacked by vandals in response to the austerity measures imposed on Greece in 2012. Stones and paint were thrown at the home and Roth-Behrendt's BMW was burned.

Synergy: In the late 1990s both worked on health policy: Reichenbach as the Commission's DG of Consumer Policy and Health Production from 1997 to 1999 while she was working in the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer protection.

Ryan Heath contributed to this article.

This article has been updated to correct a picture identifying Florian Philipott, vice president of the National Front, as Louis Aliot.