Simplifying the E.U.
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May 29, 2014

If Sunday's elections motivated you to more closely follow E.U. politics, you will have to make sense of the notoriously complicated labyrinth of institutions and officials. Before anyone pops a blood vessel in frustration, we should try to understand the structure of the system using the analogy of a school—with a student's council, a committee of clubs and a principal's office that somehow manage to coordinate a population of 500 million.

The Council of the European Union, made up of ministers from each member state and not to be confused with the European Council brought up later, equates to a student's council consistent of appointed reps from each grade. The European Parliament, though it has quotas from each country, is formed by elected political parties that can be compared to a school's theatre, sports and environmental clubs. The Council and Parliament debate legislation on a chasm of topics, as though the grade reps and clubs were negotiating everything from how clean the water in the fountains must be to how much the fries in the canteen should cost; from how to fix the leak in the roof to which new students are accepted each year. The only topic too sensitive for the E.U. to touch is national defense—think the mention of puberty on the playground.

After weeks, months or years of brokering, the legislation may be implemented by the European Commission, made up of topic-specializing commissioners equivalent to the Math, Art, and Science department heads working

in a principal's office. This legislation determines more than 75 per cent of national legislation in member countries; that means that, in the school analogy, only one-quarter of class rules for each grade are determined by particular teachers. This school also has a board (the European Council made up of the heads of member states), a treasurer (the European Central Bank), a discipliner (the Court of Justice) and influencers from among the students and from neighboring blocks (lobby groups).

Although we might be able to at least roughly understand the structure of the E.U., and we should want to because it's now Canada's second largest trading partner, there is no comparison to be made to the miraculousness of coordinating a €140 billion annual budget from 28 countries who were not long ago dropping bombs on each other. For that, the E.U. won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. But if we are to stick to the analogy of a school, then what makes this system even more of a miracle is that, as Sunday showed, a notable portion of the people running it are those who want to – and may – drop out.