

POLICYBRIEF

No. 12, 2026

The Interinstitutional Ethics Body for Ethical Standards in the European Union: Constraints and Promises of Ethical Oversight in a Multi-Level Governance System

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Introduction

The signed agreement on the Interinstitutional Body for Ethical Standards for Members of Institutions and Advisory Bodies¹ of the EU (2024) marks a significant step in the evolution of European Union governance. As a follow up to recurrent corruption scandals, it reflects a growing political awareness that fragmented ethical frameworks risk undermining public trust in EU institutions. The creation of a common Ethics Body sends a strong political signal: ethics, integrity, and transparency are no longer peripheral concerns, but central components of EU governance and policies.

The EU's normative ambition (Manners, 2008; Nastase, 2017) in the field of ethics nonetheless faces significant obstacles and questions. Some observers have pointed to the risk that the body remains largely symbolic, amounts to a form of “window dressing” (Ionescu and Nastase, 2024, p. 190) or duplicating existing institutions, such as the EU Ombudsman, the European Anti-Fraud Office, the European Public Prosecutor's Office, or the national police and prosecutorial authorities. These concerns take the form of ongoing institutional tensions.

This brief examines the origins, mandate, and institutional structure of the Ethics Body. It also evaluates key inter-

Highlights

This policy brief examines the newly established EU Interinstitutional Ethics Body as a significant but compromise-based step toward strengthening ethical governance across EU institutions. It argues that while the Body improves coordination and promotes common ethical standards, its advisory nature, limited enforcement powers, and institutional tensions—particularly regarding the Council and the role of independent experts—may constrain its effectiveness. The brief concludes with practical recommendations to enhance the Body's credibility, coherence, research capacity, and public legitimacy, positioning it as a key test of the EU's commitment to transparency, integrity, and democratic accountability.

¹ Agreement, OJ L 2024/1365, 17 May 2024.

institutional tensions, opportunities and challenges it raises, and offers a set of recommendations to strengthen ethical oversight and the procedural framework.

It argues that the EU Interinstitutional Ethics Body should be understood as a compromise-based governance instrument, reflecting the diversity of institutional roles and interests within the EU and that its future impact will depend on three factors: (1) institutional buy-in, especially from the Council; (2) the role granted to independent experts; and (3) the balance between ethical coordination and normative input.

1. Background of Ethical Governance² in the EU: From Fragmentation to Coordination?

The debates over the EU Interinstitutional Ethics Body must be understood against the backdrop of growing global attention to ethical standards across public institutions, at all levels of governance (local, national and international organizations).

Research on ethics oversight is still relatively underdeveloped (Lawton and Doig, 2006). A substantial body of research has examined ethics oversight at the national level, drawing on both large-scale comparative surveys and more targeted cross-country studies (Bossart and Demmke, 2005; OECD, 2026).

Key debates focus on compliance versus integrity-based approaches, linking ethics to public values and corruption studies (Maccaulay and Lawton, 2006; Maccaulay, 2017). At EU level, integrity systems are widely described as fragmented, as each institution – and even European Commission Directorate-Generals – maintain distinct rules and administrative cultures, making the Commission a loosely coordinated “multi-organization” (Cram, 1994; Schön-Quinlivan, 2008).

A major shift followed the 1999 Santer Commission resignation over mismanagement, fraud, and nepotism, which triggered the 2000 White Paper on Reform and the “Kinnock reforms,” introducing revised staff rules, the IDOC disciplinary body, a Code of Good Administrative Behaviour, and stronger audit and financial controls (Cini, 2007; Ban, 2013). In 2000,

² This brief is primarily concerned with the “governance of ethics,” while its recommendations also engage with the idea of “ethical governance,” following the distinction outlined in Cini and Nastase (2025). The former corresponds to a conventional understanding of public ethics, implemented through specific policy instruments. The latter refers to a more integrated approach, in which ethics is embedded across policy areas through a process of ethical mainstreaming.

an Advisory Group on Standards in Public Life was also created³, though its scope was limited by the exclusion of key institutions. More recently, scandals such as “Qatargate” (2022) renewed pressure for reform⁴, leading to proposals for an independent ethics body supported by the Commission, Council, and European Parliament. This culminated in the 2024 establishment of the Interinstitutional Body for Ethical Standards, marking a major step toward unified EU ethics governance.

2. Institutional Design of the Body: A Normative or a Coordination-based Model?

The Body’s primary mandate is to foster a shared understanding and implementation of ethical standards across institutions – an ambitious objective in a context characterised by institutional diversity and the legal complexity of a multi-level governance system.

- Participating institutions and composition

The Body brings together eight major EU institutions and advisory bodies referred to in Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union:

- The European Parliament;
- The Council of the European Union;
- The European Commission;
- The Court of Justice of the European Union;
- The European Central Bank;
- The European Court of Auditors;
- The European Economic and Social Committee;
- The European Committee of the Regions.

The European Investment Bank may join at a later stage.⁵ The Court of Justice participates as an observer rather than a full member, and therefore does not take part in decision-making, on the grounds of preserving judicial independence (Alemanno, 2020).

³ Advisory Group on Standards in Public Life with the Parliament, Council, Court of Justice, Court of Auditors, EESC and Committee of the Regions (SEC(2000)2077)

⁴ Council Conclusions on the European Court of Auditors’ “Special Report No 13/2019: The Ethical Frameworks of the Audited EU Institutions: Scope for Improvement”, 10.01.2020

⁵ European Commission, Interinstitutional Body for Ethical Standards for Members of Institutions and Advisory Bodies of the EU. Joint publication by all Parties to the agreement. https://commission.europa.eu/about/service-standards-and-principles/ethics-and-good-administration/interinstitutional-body-ethical-standards-members-institutions-and-advisory-bodies-eu_en

The Body will be composed of one senior representative per participating institution (at Vice-President level or equivalent), alongside five independent experts in an advisory capacity. The Chair rotates annually among the participating institutions, reinforcing the interinstitutional character of the arrangement (Article 4). A Secretariat, composed of ethics officials from each institution, is administratively hosted by the Commission but operates under the authority of the rotating Chair. This institutional design promotes coordination but also raises questions about the degree of independence of the expert position, particularly regarding the nomination process and the potential influence of participating institutions.

- Mandate and functions

According to Article 6 and 7 of the proposal, the Ethics Body is primarily a standard-setting and procedural mechanism, not an enforcement authority. The EU parliament originally proposed to extend the mandate to EU staff beyond the participating institutions' members. The body is prohibited from deciding on individual cases: it is therefore not going to replace other ethical mechanisms in the EU, but complement them.

Its functions remain essentially advisory in nature and include:

- Development of common minimum ethical standards within six months of its establishment (Article 8(5) of the IIA). These standards would define a set of EU-wide rules covering: (i) declarations of financial and non-financial interests; (ii) external activities during the mandate; (iii) gifts, hospitality, travel, as well as awards, prizes and honours; (iv) post-mandate activities; and (v) general procedures ensuring compliance, including provisions on composition, reporting, and enforcement mechanisms. The framework thus combines both substantive ethical requirements and procedural safeguards.
- Specification of priority areas of harmonisation, as outlined in Article 7 of the proposal, which identifies domains in which common standards should be developed, including members' interests and assets, external activities during and after office, and the acceptance of gifts, decorations, prizes, and honours.
- Promotion of alignment across institutional ethical rules, with the aim of reducing divergence between existing codes of conduct.
- Facilitation of inter-institutional exchanges of views, supporting dialogue and coordination among EU institutions on ethical matters.
- Publication of reports on compliance and convergence,

contributing to transparency and monitoring of ethical practices.

- Provision of advisory opinions, supported by independent experts, to assist institutions in interpreting and applying ethical standards.

In addition, the body may support institutions in assessing declarations of interest and in updating existing ethical frameworks. The European Parliament has further suggested a more robust role, proposing that the ethics body should be empowered to verify the accuracy of declarations of financial interests and ensure compliance with post-mandate (“revolving door”) rules.⁶

Overall, the instrument is not a fully-fledged enforcement authority, but clearly exceeds a mere coordination mechanism. It is best characterized as a hybrid governance body, combining coordination, standard-setting, interpretative authority, and limited quasi-regulatory and supervisory functions.

3. The Challenge of Inter-Institutional Tensions

The proposal for an Interinstitutional Ethics Body in the EU has generated a series of criticisms, both between institutions, within them, and outside them. Tensions relate to whether the Body should investigate individual cases; the role and authority of independent experts; the inclusion of staff within the scope of the Body; the legal limits imposed by the Treaties.

- The “Duplication” Critique

Several observers argue that the proposed Ethics Body would not fill a regulatory gap but rather replicate or overlap with existing ethics and integrity mechanisms already operating within the EU system. These include, notably, the European Ombudsman and the European Court of Auditors, both of which already issue recommendations and reports on ethical standards in EU administration, through strategic inquiries and normative instruments such as the Code of Good Administrative Behaviour and the Public Service Principles for the EU Civil Service. The concern is therefore the multiplication of parallel structures with potentially blurred mandates and limited added value.

⁶ European Parliament. Strengthening transparency and integrity in the EU institutions by setting up an independent EU ethics body. European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021, (2020/2133(INI)), P9_TA(2021)0396, 2019–2024 parliamentary term, paragraph 33.

- The Council's Reluctance

A second tension lies in the position of the Council of the EU and Member States. Belgium, among others, has argued that the Treaties provide no legal basis allowing the Council to impose harmonised ethical standards on Member State representatives. Consequently, national representatives cannot be formally bound by the Ethics Body's standards, and their participation would rely on voluntary commitments. In contrast to the European Parliament's initial proposal, the scope *ratione personae* of the Body is restricted to members of EU institutions, and does not extend to EU career staff, as it had been envisaged in the Parliament's resolutions. This creates a structural asymmetry: the Council would participate in shaping the framework while remaining only partially subject to its obligations. The European Parliament has criticised this arrangement as undermining both the coherence and the credibility of the proposed ethics system. The underlying issue is that ethics standard-setting at EU level risks exceeding the limits of delegated competence under the Treaties, particularly in areas touching upon national constitutional identities and ministerial accountability.

- The EU Parliament's Leadership: between Strong Advocacy and Internal Divisions

The committee initiative was primarily driven by the European Parliament, in its resolutions of 2021 and 2023, advocating for stronger and more formalized ethics standards at EU level. However, this apparent recent leadership masks significant internal divergences. Political groups within the Parliament do not share the same level of support for the proposal. The S&D group has been very favourable to the EU interinstitutional body⁷, whereas the EPP "strongly opposed the creation of a new external body regulating the functioning of the European Parliament," concerned with institutional overreach.⁸ These divisions reflect broader ideological differences and political cultures regarding the need of an inter-institutional body on transparency, accountability, and the balance between political autonomy and regulatory oversight, contributing

⁷ European Parliament. Strengthening transparency and integrity in the EU institutions by setting up an independent EU ethics body. European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021, (2020/2133(INI)), P9_TA(2021)0396, 2019–2024 parliamentary term, paragraph 33.

⁸ EPP, Parliament's committee rejects implementation of extrajudicial body, Press release, 14 May 2025. Committee AFCO. <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/ep-committee-rejects-implementation-of-extrajudicial-body>

either to a narrative that supports the moralization of political life or, conversely, criticizes "ethics policing."

However, the European Parliament globally advocates a more ambitious model of ethical governance, including investigative powers, greater independence of experts, coverage of both members and staff. By contrast, the Commission favors a more limited role.

- An Advisory rather than A Binding Mechanism

A further structural limitation lies in the essentially advisory nature of the proposed body. Article 9 of the proposal establishes a system of institutional self-assessment, whereby each participating institution produces a written report evaluating the alignment of its internal rules with common ethical standards. These reports are then presented to the Ethics Body and examined by a panel of independent experts, who issue an opinion either supporting or contesting the assessment. This is followed by an exchange of views among participating institutions. While the mechanism may generate reputational incentives, it ultimately lacks enforcement capacity. The result is a soft governance structure grounded in deliberation rather than legal obligation.

4. Some Recommendations for Increasing the Coherence of the EU Interinstitutional Body on Ethical Standards

The final design of the Interinstitutional Ethics Body reflects a clear "spirit of interinstitutional compromise"⁹ in which divergent institutional preferences are sought to be reconciled through a restrained architecture. The agreement seeks to produce a mechanism that preserves institutional autonomy but also enables the emergence of a shared normative and procedural framework. The creation of the EU Ethics Body highlights a persistent structural tension in EU governance between safeguarding institutional autonomy and ensuring coherent, uniform ethical standards across multi-level institutions.

⁹ European Commission, Interinstitutional body for ethical standards for members of institutions and advisory bodies of the EU, Sixth Political Meeting – EU Ethics Body – minutes, Strasbourg, 12 March 2024, SG.C.2/GR, including record of subsequent developments, p. 4.

Several recommendations are outlined below to reinforce inter-institutional coordination and increase the effectiveness of oversight.

- **Recommendation 1:** Broadening the remit and selection of Independent Experts to enhance governance credibility

The governance credibility of the Ethics Body will depend heavily on the transparency and merit-based selection of independent experts. As outlined by Ionescu and Nastase (2024, p. 187): “It is doubtful that the independent experts associated with the ethics body will be truly independent. They are to be appointed “by common agreement” by the participating institutions, according to a procedure as yet unspecified, but in practice they will be administratively attached to the European Commission as Special Advisers.” In line with prior proposals from the Group of Twelve¹⁰, independent experts could be drawn not only from EU institutions but also from academia, civil society organisations, and comparable national integrity bodies.

- **Recommendation 2:** A Dedicated Research Capacity

A key policy recommendation is to equip the EU Ethics Body with a dedicated research capacity. If it is to function as a standard-setting institution, the EU Ethics body cannot rely solely on a small panel of experts. Ethics standards evolve continuously and must be informed by comparative frameworks such as those of the OECD and GRECO, as well as broader societal developments (Ionescu and Nastase, 2024, p. 187). Without an in-house analytical capacity, the Body risks lacking the expertise and continuity needed to update and interpret standards effectively.

The research capacity (Ionescu and Nastase, 2024, p. 187) should be tasked with ensuring convergence rather than setting binding ethics norms. Under this umbrella, a dedicated working group could be established to map the distinct ethical cultures of the 27 Member States, in order to concerns from the Council. Such an initiative would help foster convergence while taking into account national specificities.

- **Recommendation 3:** Mapping existing oversight instruments to solve the conundrum of administrative coherence

¹⁰ Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century* (Paris-Berlin, 18 September 2023), 27.

A major issue concerns the lack of coherence across administrative levels within the EU institutional framework. At present, ethical rules governing Members of EU institutions and those applicable to staff remain partially fragmented. Addressing this gap is essential to foster a coherent ethical culture across the EU administration. This requires clarifying the articulation between different regimes.

A more systematic mapping of existing instruments, their strengths and weaknesses, extending to the EU Transparency Register, could be conducted by the above-mentioned research group to help identify functional overlaps, gaps, and inconsistencies in how transparency and ethical obligations are distributed across roles.

Ensuring the online publication of detailed reports would further strengthen public accountability and legitimacy of the body, not only within the EU Institutions but with the general public.

- **Recommendation 4:** Defining the Substantive Scope of Ethics Standards through Better Institutional Coordination

The establishment of the Ethics Body raises a broader question about the substantive nature of ethical standards, beyond their traditional focus on conflicts of interest.

There is much to gain in adopting a more comprehensive approach to ethics in EU governance would require expanding the scope of standards to include issues such as integrity in decision-making, revolving doors, lobbying practices, and the cultivation of an institutional culture of responsibility.

The Ethics Body should consider how to integrate other pressing ethical concerns for the EU institutions, including artificial intelligence governance, behavioural ethics in public administration, and participatory or transparency mechanisms, notably in relation to whistle blowing, lobbying and asset disclosure registers.

In this context, the Ethics Body would gain from closer coordination with parallel EU initiatives. Notably, the Democracy Defence Package and current mechanisms in participatory democracy (citizens’ panels, petitions, but also the competence center on participatory and deliberative democracy, digital participation through the

citizens' engagement platform) all address core issues of integrity, transparency, and institutional trust. Similarly, the development of AI ethics frameworks could be more explicitly connected to AI's use in administrative and parliamentary decision-making processes. At present, these domains tend to be developed in institutional "silos," by each DG, with limited coordination.

Such interlinkages could also open the way for more robust accountability mechanisms, including those triggered by third parties such as civil society organizations. Without these safeguards, however, the Ethics Body risks becoming an additional interinstitutional structure whose effectiveness ultimately depends on the voluntary commitment of participating institutions.

- **Recommendation 5:** Raising Awareness on the EU interinstitutional ethics body among staff and the general public

Ensuring visibility and understanding of the EU's ethics body is essential to its legitimacy, both for EU officials and the general audience.

One way to raise awareness would be to conduct a quantitative study estimating the cost of ethical losses (such as corruption) to the EU, which could be carried out by the research group mentioned above. This could be supported through targeted digital communication campaigns designed to explain the purpose, scope, and added value of the initiative, in the same fashion as European Citizens Consultations organized supported by the Directorate-General for Communication.

Particular emphasis should be placed on highlighting existing good practices, while clearly demonstrating how the Ethics Body complements and enhances the current framework. This approach would not only improve transparency but also encourage broader ownership of ethical standards across both institutional and societal levels.

- Towards an Interinstitutional Compromise?

The EU Ethics Body reflects a negotiated compromise¹¹ that becomes clearer when situated in comparative perspective. In several Member States, ethics and integrity authorities

combine advisory, monitoring, and enforcement functions within a single institutional framework, as illustrated by the "Haute Autorité pour la Transparence de la Vie Publique" in France or Romania's National Integrity Agency, both of which exercise relatively broad investigative and regulatory powers. By contrast, the EU model remains more limited in scope. Constrained by Treaty architecture and the multi-level nature of EU governance, it deliberately avoids concentrating enforcement powers within a single body.

It is likely that the resulting Ethics Body will not be an investigative authority, but neither is it merely a coordination instrument. It currently occupies an intermediate position, with a normative and procedural remit based on self-assessment, peer review, and advisory opinions. It thus preserves institutional autonomy of EU Institutions and agencies, while introducing a shared ethical benchmark across EU institutions.

Conclusion

The EU Ethics body embodies the core tension of EU ethics governance: the ambition to establish common standards across institutions that operate under distinct legal mandates, varying levels of public scrutiny, and differentiated constraints, within a system where full centralisation of authority is neither normatively desirable nor legally feasible. More broadly, ethics is no longer treated as a purely internal administrative concern, but increasingly as a core component of democratic legitimacy in the EU. Ultimately, the Ethics Body functions as a key test case for the EU's capacity to adapt its governance architecture to growing demands for transparency, integrity, and accountability. Whether it develops into a more robust and normative platform for dialogue, or remains primarily a weak symbolic and procedural mechanism will significantly shape the future of ethical governance in the European Union.

¹¹ "In an effort to achieve a compromise"; "A compromise proposal was formulated during the break and subsequently presented for discussion at the meeting"; "Reactions from all other parties to this proposal from the Council indicated that, in a spirit of interinstitutional compromise and in order to being able to conclude the agreement before the European elections (...)". European Commission, Sixth Political Meeting – EU Ethics Body – minutes, Strasbourg, 12 March 2024, SG.C.2/GR.

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Suggested Citation: Gillot-Assayag, Laure. 2026. The Interinstitutional Ethics Body for Ethical Standards in the European Union: Constraints and Promises of Ethical Oversight in a Multi-Level Governance System. Policy Brief 26.12. Bruges: UNU-CRIS.

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Publisher: United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), Bruges, Belgium

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