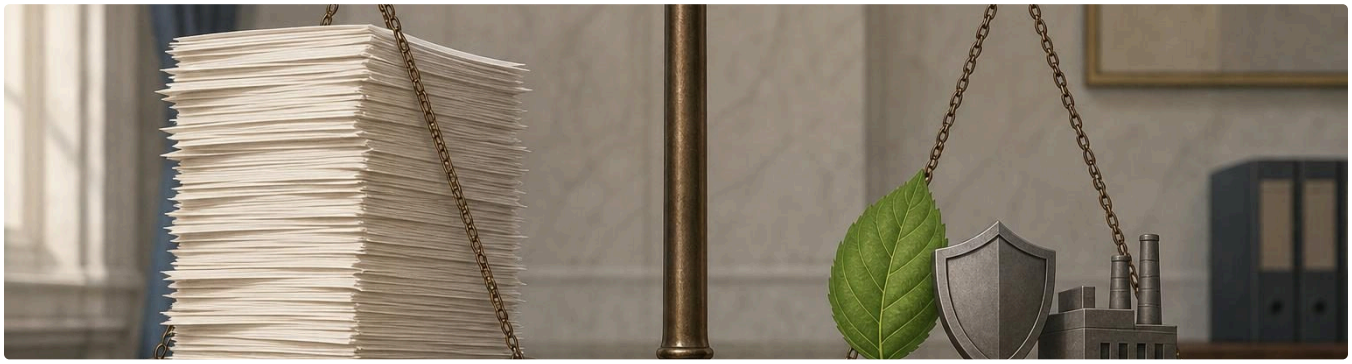
Europe’s rulebook is growing. Is that a problem?

A new index says EU law has more than doubled since 2010, raising a hard question about when regulation becomes overload.



A scale balances a stack of legal papers against symbols of regulation goals like safety, environment and industry.

European Union law has more than doubled in size since 2010, according to reporting by Phys.org on a new EU Bureaucracy Index. The index says that, at the end of 2025, EU regulations and directives in force filled about 47,600 standard pages, a unit that treats each page as 1,500 characters of legal text. That was 118% more than in 2010.

The finding matters because the European Union, whose rules affect companies, governments and citizens across member countries, often sets standards that national governments then have to follow or enforce. Regulations are EU rules that apply directly, while directives tell member countries what result they must achieve, usually leaving them some choice about how to do it. More legal text can mean clearer standards and wider protections. It can also mean more time, money and expertise required to understand and obey the rules.

That is the tension at the center of the index. Calling something bureaucracy can make it sound automatically wasteful, but the index does not judge whether a law is wise, necessary or harmful. It measures volume. The debate is not simply rules versus no rules. It is about whether democratic governments can respond to security threats, environmental damage, **consumer** risks and health concerns without building a rulebook so large that ordinary people, small businesses and public agencies struggle to navigate it.

The index was compiled by Stefan Wagner, a professor at the University of Vienna, in collaboration with ESMT Berlin. It counts EU regulations and directives in force on Dec. 31 of each year if they were adopted by the European Parliament and the Council together, or by the Council alone. It uses consolidated versions, meaning updated versions that include later changes. It does not include legal acts from the European Commission, so it is not a count of everything the EU produces.

The biggest driver of growth was foreign and security policy. That area added almost 12,900 standard pages, nearly all from **sanctions** regulations. Sanctions are legal penalties aimed at countries, companies or people, often used to pressure governments or groups without using military force. These rules can be long because they include lists of people, companies and goods covered by the penalties. In that case, a large page count may partly reflect a deliberate political choice: naming exactly who and what is restricted.

The second-largest area of growth was law on the environment, consumer protection and health. That category more than doubled, from about 4,300 to 9,800 standard pages. The report says new rules

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on medical devices, **renewable** energy and industrial **emissions** helped drive the increase. The Environmental Noise **Directive** alone grew by around 700 standard pages because of new calculation methods. That example shows why page-counting is complicated: technical detail can be burdensome, but it can also be the part that makes a rule precise enough to apply fairly.

Even when sanctions law is excluded, EU law still grew by 60% since 2010. Including **annexes**, which are attached sections containing items such as lists, limit values and technical specifications, the total reached about 90,800 standard pages. Eighteen of 20 policy areas grew over the period. In other words, this is not only a story about one crisis or one policy area. It points to a broader pattern of governments using detailed rules to manage complex problems.

The index also compares EU law with German federal law because both are measured in the same kind of standard page. German federal **statutes** grew from 24,765 standard pages in 2010 to 40,270 in 2025. The EU rules counted in the index, not including annexes, are now roughly as long as all German federal statutes combined. Including annexes, EU law is more than twice as extensive.

For German companies and public agencies, the two levels can stack on top of each other. A national government can promise to cut red tape, meaning unnecessary paperwork or **procedures**, but some obligations may come from the EU level rather than the national level. Wagner argues that any serious effort to reduce bureaucracy has to look at both.

Still, fewer pages would not automatically mean better government. A short law can be vague, leaving people unsure what is allowed. A long law can be excessive, forcing people to spend energy on **compliance** instead of work, innovation or public service. The hardest question is not whether the rulebook has grown. The index shows that it has. The harder question is which parts of that growth are the price of governing modern problems, and which parts are avoidable weight.

Written from reporting by Phys.org.

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THINK IT THROUGH

1. **Is the volume of legal text a fair way to judge bureaucracy, or does it risk confusing necessary detail with unnecessary burden?**

   > **A strong answer:** A strong answer should weigh the usefulness of a measurable page count against the fact that some complex problems require precise rules.

2. **If a government wants to reduce red tape, should it focus first on cutting rules, simplifying how rules are followed, or proving which rules still serve a purpose?**

   > **A strong answer:** A strong answer should distinguish between the existence of regulations, the process of complying with them, and the goals those regulations are meant to achieve.

3. **When rules come from both a national government and a larger union such as the EU, who should be responsible for making the system easier to navigate?**

   > **A strong answer:** A strong answer should consider shared responsibility across levels of government and the practical effects on citizens, agencies and businesses.

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E S U I E G O R G O M O X X O S E S
R M H E E E S G I O I R X T S B E E
L H S N S N I E H C S X E T R F S A
M D R A Y S E H T D N I I M S E U L
I N T S E T E F D C C A S E I N O U
S F U T F A S A T I U O E E T S U E
E R S E T I E N S S R N M Q N U D M
S C P I V C O N S U M E R R X N T I
C T N R L E A T I S A N C T I O N S
E C A E O S N N U Y E C O T E A R S
T L T T E C N M O M P X M P I A E I
Z I T S U C E L N D E E P R E V N O
E E I E E T X D S N A A L I R C E N
B N L L N R E G U L A T I O N S W S
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I O T C S X N S M I E N N I S T B U
I S N I N E A E T E A S C J E A L U
P O I T A T M N T O O H E E T C E R

ANNEXES COMPLIANCE CONSUMER DIRECTIVE EMISSIONS PROCEDURES REGULATION RENEWABLE SANCTIONS STATUTES

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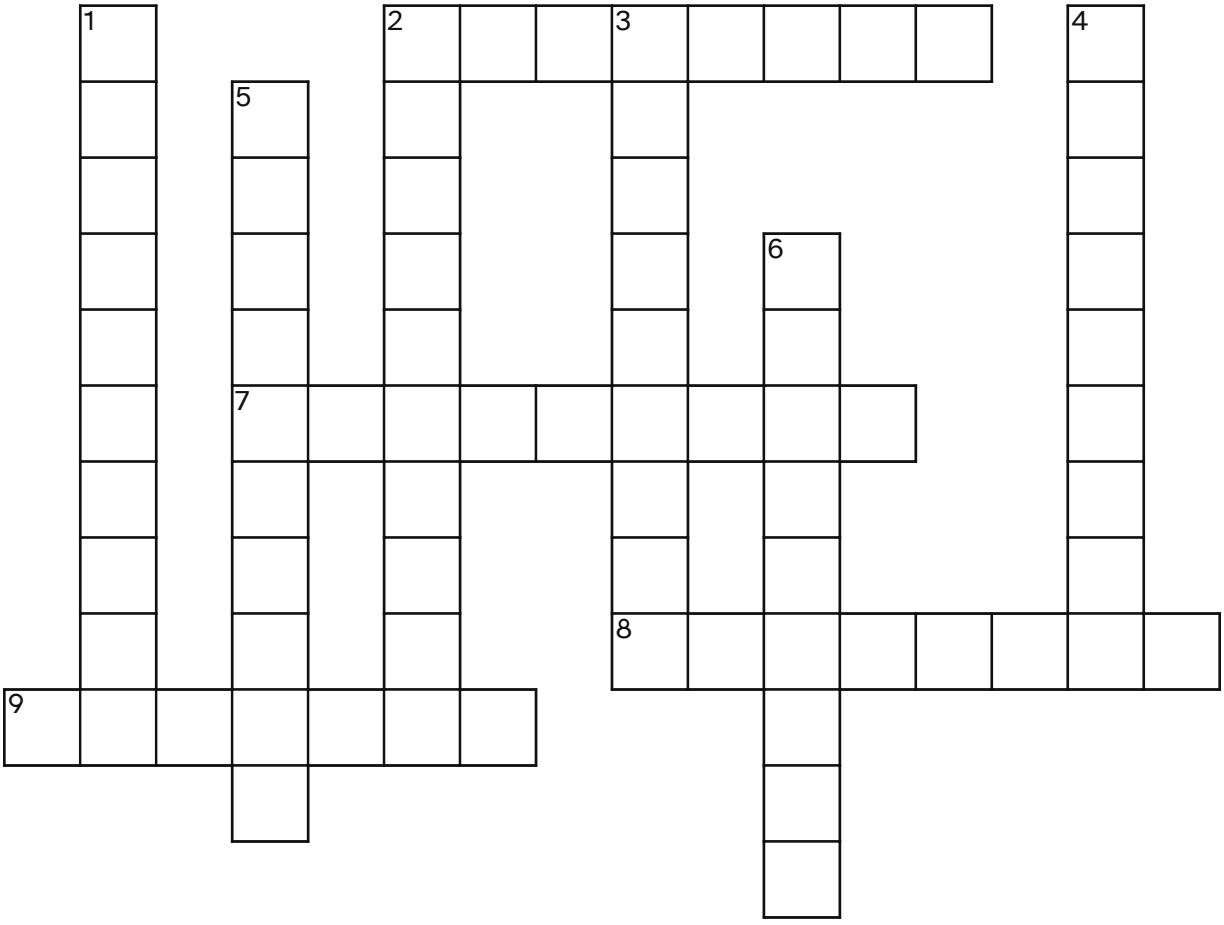

ACROSS

2 Person who buys or uses goods and services

7 Gases or other substances released into the air

8 Written laws passed by a government or legislature

9 Attached sections with lists, technical details, or limit values

DOWN

1 Binding rule that applies directly in all member countries

2 Following legal requirements and official standards

3 Nonmilitary legal measures used to pressure a government, group, company, or person

4 Legal measure requiring member countries to meet a goal in their own way

5 Required steps that people and organizations must follow

6 Able to be naturally replaced, like sunlight or wind energy

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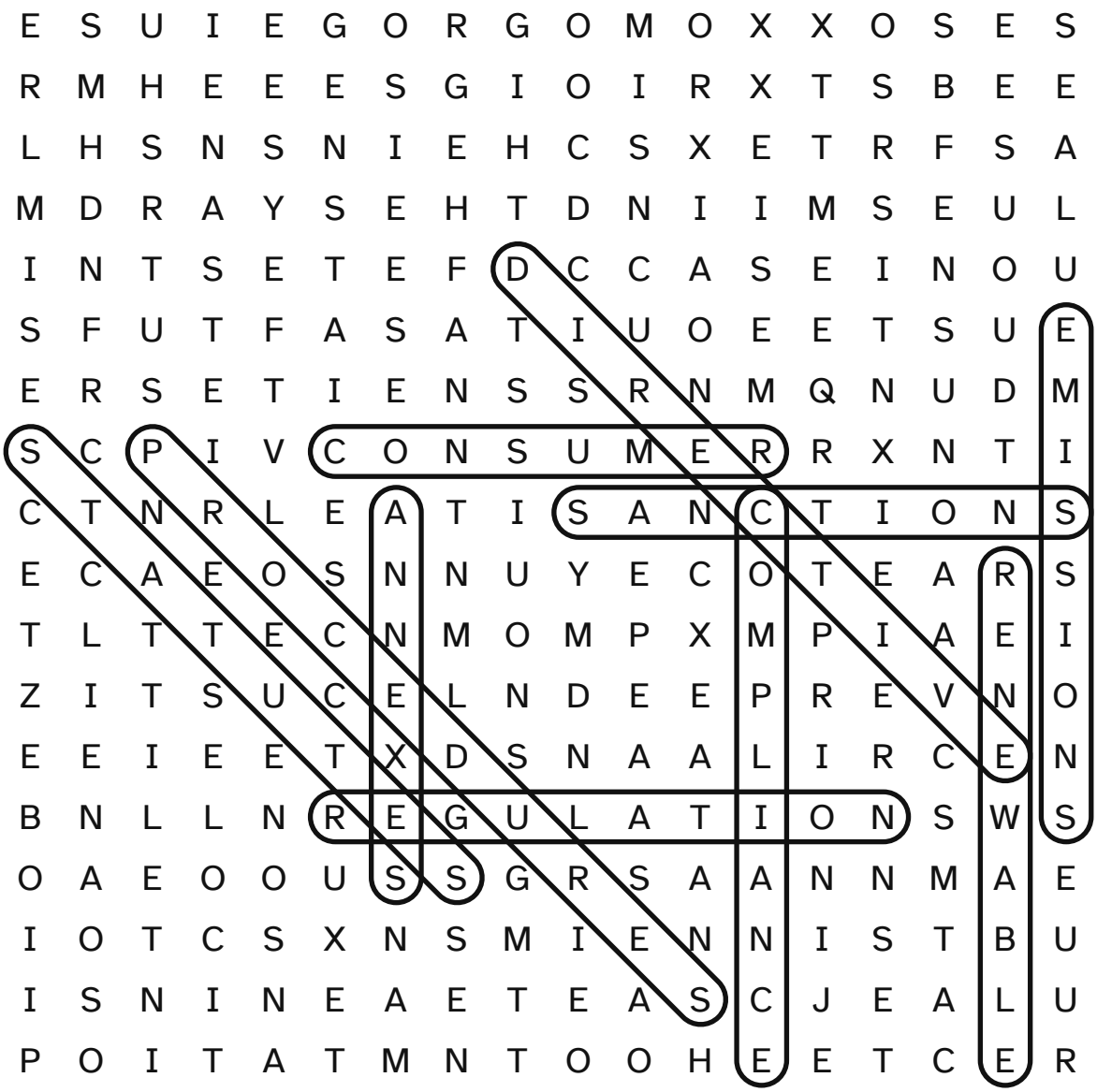
— answer key



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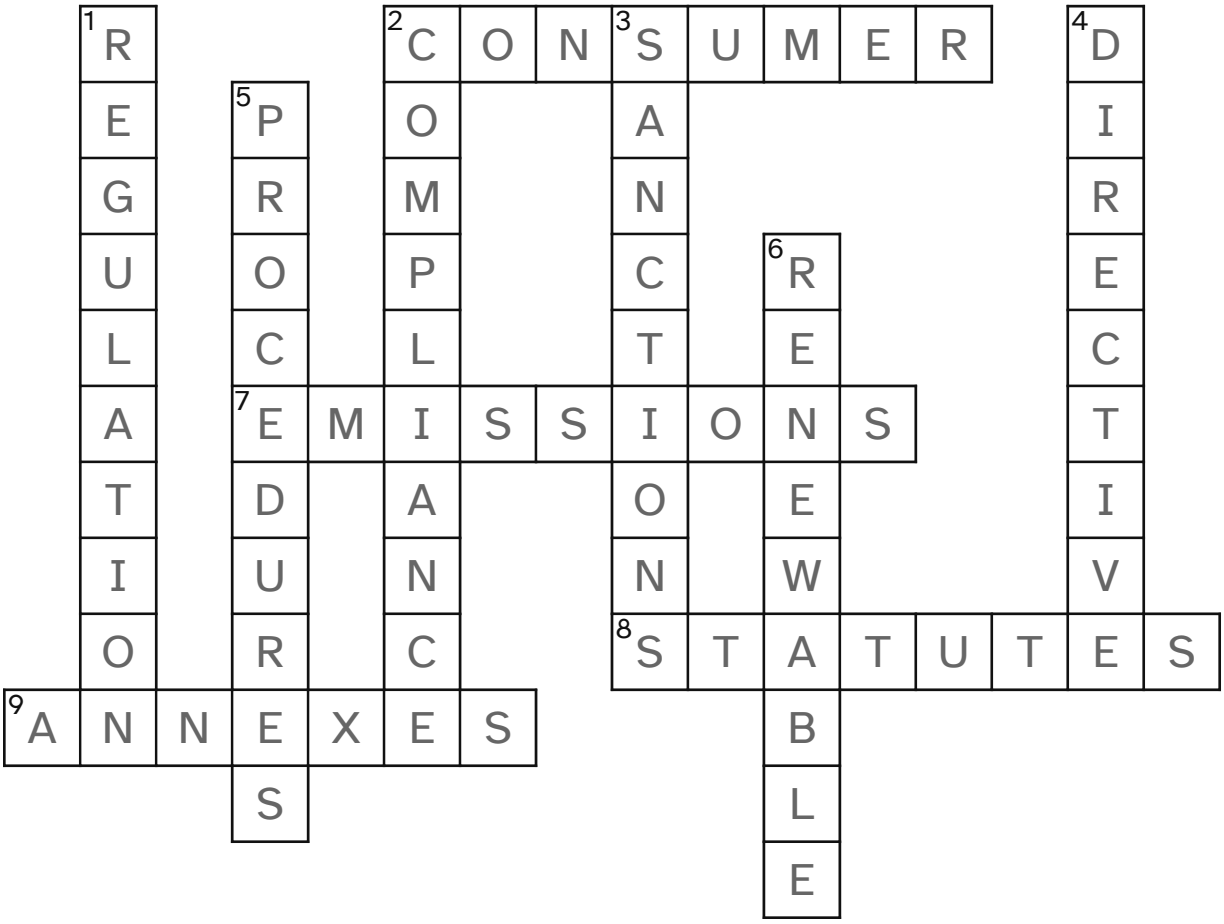

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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Phys.org

"New EU Bureaucracy Index: EU law has more than doubled since 2010"

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Read by us on	Wednesday, November 25, 2026

https://phys.org/news/2026-11-eu-bureaucracy-index-law.html

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article with a note on each question, a word search, a crossword, and the answer key to both.

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