

DEREGULATION DICTIONARY

One of the cleverest tricks of the deregulation agenda is its language. Problematic and undemocratic ideas are wrapped in harmless-sounding words that make them seem sensible, even inevitable. This is framing: choosing language carefully to shape how people understand a political strategy.

So we're here to translate — and call things what they really are.

You hear: "Simplification"

We hear: "Deregulation"

What this means: The Commission's approach this term has shifted from pushing a green transition for Europe to bowing to corporate interests. The use of 'simplification' is being used as a thinly veiled cover for deregulating hard-won laws. It is arguable whether these laws make life harder for big businesses but they protect nature, our environment and our health. Deregulation is not new. It has been a central demand of big oil and - until more recently - cigarette companies for much of the 20th century, aided by free-market think-tanks.

Further reading:

You hear: "Gold-plating"

We hear: "Improvement on the bare minimum"

What this means: Member States have the right to go beyond the provisions of EU law. With 27 Member States having to agree on EU laws and policies they tend to be on the conservative end of the spectrum. Some countries are already going further than the EU law and many want to do so to benefit more fully. Recently business lobbies and some politicians have used "gold-plating" to criticise this ambition when it doesn't serve them. But we know better!

Further reading:

You hear: "Red tape"

We hear: "Important and democratically agreed upon protections"

What this means: This one is fairly self-explanatory. Talking about "cutting red tape" might sound like a good thing, but framing it as "cutting vital protections" doesn't sound so good. Essentially, this is a PR tactic for deregulation, helping to garner public support for weakening laws in areas like the environment, workers' rights, corporate accountability, chemicals, and technology – often under pressure from intense industry lobbying.

Further reading:

You hear: "Administrative burden"

We hear: "Paperwork"

What this means: Ok, we don't love it either. But we've all got to do it. In this context "administrative burden" is used to refer to the short-term compliance costs of businesses directly affected by regulation, ignoring the less easily quantifiable long-term benefits to people, nature, and the environment.

And when those safeguards are weakened? The bill doesn't disappear – it gets passed on to taxpayers and communities, who end up paying to clean up pollution, cover rising healthcare costs, and recover from worsening climate disasters. That's not cutting "burden." That's shifting the cost.

Further reading:

You hear: "Compliance fatigue"

We hear: "Following rules is inconvenient"

What this means: Yes, rules can often be inconvenient. But what is a minor inconvenience next to a livable future? Don't be fooled by this quack diagnosis.

Further reading:

You hear: "Stakeholder fatigue"

We hear: An excuse.

What it means: The Commission has used this term to describe current consultation practices, where they involve repeated requests for input from businesses, NGOs, experts, and citizens, and can be complex and resource-intensive. The suggestion is that too much engagement risks creating "fatigue." But we're not tired. We would rather contribute our input a hundred times over than be shut out of the conversation altogether. This diagnosis should not become a justification for excluding NGOs and citizens or for skipping consultations entirely. The best policies are the ones we build together.

Further reading:

You hear: "Better regulation"

We hear: "Business privilege"

What it means: The European Commission's Better Regulation programme, launched in 2015, did not emerge in a vacuum. It followed sustained pressure from corporate lobbies to hold off EU rules that they saw as a threat to their profits. To this day, the EU's 'Better Regulation' framework privileges business voices.

The current revision is a crossroads: it could lead to a reform with strengthened transparency and participation, or it could be used to further sideline civil society and use "simplification" and emergency procedures to bypass meaningful consultation.

We support better regulation – not Better Regulation that makes laws that pay for the most powerful.

Further reading:

You hear: "Political urgency"

We hear: "Opportunity to sidestep proper process"

What it means: Too often, "political urgency" is just a shortcut for fast-tracking decisions that serve the powerful, not the public. That is not to say we are not facing unprecedented times – confronted with the triple planetary crisis and with war on our doorstep. But Europe needs to keep a cool head. Urgency shouldn't be a free pass to skip consultations, ignore civil society, or weaken environmental and human rights protections. Especially when skipping these can aggravate real emergencies. Democracy and due process are not up for debate.

Further reading:

You hear: “Competitiveness”

We hear: “Profit at any cost”

What it means: There is no business on a dead planet. Yet “competitiveness” is often used to justify weakening rules that protect people and the environment, as if safeguards were a barrier to prosperity. In reality, Europe’s long-term competitiveness depends on strong standards, healthy ecosystems, and investment in sustainable innovation — not a race to the bottom. Real competitiveness means building an economy that works for people, planet, and future prosperity, not just short-term profits.

You hear: “Omnibus”

We hear: “Legislative Trojan horse”

What it means: An “omnibus” proposal bundles together many different legislative changes into a single package. While this might sound efficient, it can make complex and far-reaching changes harder to scrutinise properly. When dozens of amendments to different laws are wrapped into one file, it becomes easier to rush decisions, limit debate, and quietly weaken protections that would otherwise face stronger opposition on their own. Efficiency should never come at the expense of transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight.

WHAT YOU HEAR	WHAT WE HEAR	WHAT IT MEANS
“Simplification”	“Deregulation” "Only regulate what is necessary. Avoid excessive regulation which often creates preconditions for market fragmentation. Strongly commit to the 1-in-1-out principle based on proper evaluation of compliance costs and simplification, and prioritise a better and leaner implementation of the already	Putting corporate interests above the protection of people and the planet. ⁴ Ironically, an agenda that is supposed to be about simplification has made the process of regulation far more complex, delaying and changing laws before they even come into effect (ex.: CSDDD Omnibus I), creating legal uncertainty and confusion, as well as endangering early investments. Whole new bureaucracies are

	<p>existing legislation before proposing new initiatives."¹</p> <p>Deregulation has been a central demand of big oil and cigarette companies for much of the 20th century, aided by free-market think-tanks.² British American Tobacco, for example, directly lobbied for the introduction of Better Regulation³ as a way to hold off what they saw as an increasing threat to their business (selling tobacco).</p> <p>Mission Letter for Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis Commissioner-designate for Economy and Productivity Commissioner-designate for Implementation and Simplification</p>	<p>created inside bureaucracies in the ostensible service of reducing bureaucracy. Civil servants find themselves wrapped up in their own red tape, diverted from other tasks in service of tallying the ‘costs’ of regulations. Civil society organisations have also had to divert significant resources away from other vital campaigning to engage with deregulation. The truth: a neoliberal goal, the deregulation drive is fundamentally about reducing the ability of lawmakers to make laws and is a veiled attack on the size and role of government.</p>
<p>“Gold-plating”</p>	<p>"Ensure a regulatory regime that either provides full harmonisation law or effectively applies country of origin principles based on a culture of trust among Member States and their administrations. This is necessary to address over-implementation and gold-plating "⁵</p>	<p>Used to criticise legislative ambition to protect workers, consumers and human health, in the name of freeing up potentially damaging business activity. One of the first acts of the Macron government, in July 2017, was to issue a circular effectively banning the so-called gold plating of EU regulation, ie,</p>

¹ Joint statement by BusinessEurope, DIGITALEUROPE, ERT, Eurochambres and EuroCommerce. 27 June 2022, <https://ert.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Joint-industry-statement-on-the-Single-Market-27-June-2022.pdf>

² Glenza, J. (2019). Revealed: the free-market groups helping the tobacco industry. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/ng-interactive/2019/jan/23/free-market-thinktanks-tobacco-industry>

³ Smith, K., Fooks, G., Gilmore, A.B., Collin, J. & Weishaar, H. (2015). Corporate coalitions and policy making in the European Union: How and why British American Tobacco promoted “Better Regulation”. Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law, 40(2). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-2882231>

⁵ Joint statement by BusinessEurope, DIGITALEUROPE, ERT, Eurochambres and EuroCommerce. 27 June 2022, <https://ert.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Joint-industry-statement-on-the-Single-Market-27-June-2022.pdf>

		<p>going further than minimum standards.⁶</p> <p>The truth: minimum harmonisation is a basic principle of EU law,⁷ and means that most EU legislation (in the form of Directives, usually) establishes a floor, not a ceiling, allowing Member States to maintain or adopt higher protection standards (e.g., in consumer protection or environmental law), often in recognition of the fact that the legal systems in some Member States have already set higher standards. In this case, Member States have the right to set higher standards than those set in the directive.</p>
"Red tape"	<p>"Commission proposes to cut red tape and simplify business environment"⁸</p> <p>"Cutting red tape means giving companies more time to do business, to innovate, create jobs and to train young people (...) Red tape is costing people</p>	<p>Used to refer to vital protections in legislation that limit (often harmful) business activity.</p> <p>The truth: European Commission moves to "cut red tape" in environmental, social/worker, corporate accountability, chemicals and tech sectors are a result of intense lobbying by industry.¹⁰</p> <p>And corporate lobbies do not care about youth employment</p>

⁶ French Senat. 2018).Project de Loi. Retrieved from <http://www.senat.fr/leg/pjl18-010.pdf> 126 New Economics Foundation / France Nature Environnement / Institut Veblens. (2019). La dereglementation en France et dans l'UE. Retrieved from

https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/NEF_La_de%CC%81re%CC%81glementation_en_France.pdf

⁷ Article 288 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)

⁸ News Article, 26 February 2025, Directorate-General for Communication, European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-proposes-cut-red-tape-and-simplify-business-environment-2025-02-26_en

¹⁰ [EU rules for advanced AI are step in wrong direction. Google says](#), POLITICO, February 10, 2025 4:28 am CET, by Pieter Haeck; [the Antwerp Declaration](#), February 2024: this is a demand for a "European Industrial Deal", "a comprehensive action plan to elevate competitiveness as strategic priority," reflecting most of all the demands from energy-intensive industries.

	time and dampening economic growth" ⁹	and social welfare, they care about making money for their shareholders.
“(administrative/regulatory) Burden”	"BusinessEurope has issued an urgent call to comprehensively reduce the growing regulatory burden on companies operating in the EU" ¹¹	It refers to short-term compliance costs of businesses directly affected by regulation over the less easily quantifiable social and environmental benefits. ¹² It is a libertarian/neoliberal talking point used to push a negative story about what regulation is, painting protections as burdens on businesses and administrations and suggesting that the reduction in regulation as an end in itself is of value to society. It refers to easier-to-quantify, short-term estimates of compliance cost than the more diffuse and long-term benefits to people, nature, and the environment. ¹³ For as long as the fundamental narrative remains unchecked – that regulation is guilty of being

⁹ German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Article, <https://www.bundeswirtschaftsministerium.de/Redaktion/EN/Dossier/cutting-bureaucracy.html>

¹¹ BusinessEurope press release, 22 January 2025, <https://www.businesseurope.eu/publications/businesseurope-proposes-targeted-actions-to-comprehensively-reduce-regulatory-burden/>

¹² As the NGO Finance Watch notes: “Compliance costs are not the same as the (negative) impact of regulation on a certain business model. Often, this impact is often the purpose of the regulation. (...) Is it OK that large banks will lose hundreds of millions in potential profits, in exchange for taxpayers not paying billions to save banks?” Source: Finance Watch. (2015). Beware of the impact assessment. Retrieved from <https://www.finance-watch.org/beware-of-the-impact-assessment/>

¹³ This bias in how the regulatory burden is calculated earned the European Commission, already in 2006, a warning by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): " Socio-economic impacts of environmental policies are typically subject to more detailed scrutiny than the environmental effects of sectoral policies. In some cases, even when environmental concerns have been identified, they are subsequently neglected... short-term priorities take place over longer-term perspectives, and ‘hard’ forms of analysis, such as cost-benefit analysis and monetisation, prevail over qualitative approaches. This is especially problematic in relation to environmental and other non-market considerations. " Source: Network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils. (2006). Impact assessment of European Commission policies: achievements and prospects. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/40033017.pdf>

		<p>an intolerable burden on business until proven innocent – then the threat of ever greater deregulation will remain. The truth: the point of regulation is to curtail particular types of damaging activity for the economy as a whole and to promote fair and sustainable business; what it might cost (some) business to comply with this new regulation should not be given undue prominence. Costs that are not met by those who would otherwise profit from unsustainable activity will instead be borne by society, the economy as a whole, or the environment.</p>
<p>“Competitiveness”</p>	<p>" Companies cannot scale-up to other countries without facing a wide variety of barriers and their innovative drive is hampered by the myriad of technical limitations, undermining the EU’s capacity to be globally competitive. Especially SMEs are struggling with the growing number of compliance obligations and the costs that are associated with them, which is in turn hampering their ability to be competitive"¹⁴</p>	<p>Neoliberal goal, used as an excuse/justification for deregulation. Neoliberalism is described as “extolling the market, encouraging globalisation and generally being on the side of business”.¹⁵ It has its roots in the writings of Austrian economist Ludwig van Mises and his protégé Friedrich Hayek, who believed that, left to its own devices without government interference, the competitive free market would deliver on the public good thanks to the incentive to profit.¹⁶ was created and implemented by an unaccountable bureaucracy, which would distort business</p>

¹⁴ Joint statement by BusinessEurope, DIGITALEUROPE, ERT, Eurochambres and EuroCommerce. 27 June 2022, <https://ert.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Joint-industry-statement-on-the-Single-Market-27-June-2022.pdf>

¹⁵ Wren-Lewis, S. (2018). Why Brexit is a neoliberal project. Retrieved from <https://mainlymacro.blogspot.com/2018/08/why-brexit-is-neoliberal-project.html>

¹⁶ Boettke, P. (n.d.). Austrian School of Economics. The Library of Economics and Liberty [webpage]. <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/AustrianSchoolofEconomics.html>

		<p>profit incentives, thus stifling progress and innovation.¹⁷</p> <p>The truth: This is a lobbying success of corporate lobby groups like the European Round Table for Industry (ERT) and BusinessEurope, whose lobby campaigns have shaped Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines, which set out the main priorities for the ongoing mandate. As a consequence, we are going through a disastrous half-decade of deregulation, while climate change, the environment, equality and social rights are put on the backburner – all in the name of ‘competitiveness’.¹⁸ As for SMEs, legislation such as the CSDDD would not apply to them, only to very large companies – this is not about SMEs.</p>
“Streamlining”		
“Overregulation”	<p>" Over the last 5 years, the EU adopted 13,000 legislative acts (vs 3,500 in the US). This mass of legislation was largely ineffective in removing existing Single Market barriers and brought major reporting and compliance costs for European companies. As a result, intra-EU trade has stagnated at around 20% of EU GDP since 2007 vs more than 70% of GDP for</p>	<p>The truth: The European Union’s first aim is to “promote peace, its values and the well-being of its citizens”. Yet the primary metric it uses for measuring progress captures none of these goals; quite the opposite, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is hindering sustainable and inclusive wellbeing.²⁰ As the ecological crisis deepens, a metric of</p>

¹⁷ Van Lerven, F. & Welsh, M. (2018). How markets became masters. Retrieved from <https://neweconomics.org/2018/09/markets-became-masters>

¹⁸ 'Competitiveness': inside the troubling corporate blueprint for the coming Commission, 16.09.2024, Corporate Europe Observatory, <https://www.corporateeurope.org/en/2024/09/competitiveness-inside-troubling-corporate-blueprint-coming-commission>

²⁰ "Measuring Wellbeing After GDP", Joseph Eastoe, 19 February 2026, Green European Journal, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/measuring-wellbeing-after-gdp/#anchor>

	intra-US trade. The fact that our Single Market is underdeveloped and overregulated is particularly damaging for SMEs. Moreover, it discourages start-ups from scaling up from Europe. ¹⁹	“progress” based solely on economic output is clearly not suitable. It's past time to move away from GDP.
“Strategic autonomy”	[the Single Market]" is instrumental to our ability to absorb external shocks, leverage geopolitical power, strengthen open strategic autonomy, drive recovery and deliver on the green and digital transitions." ²¹ "EU trade policy is crucial for future European growth and employment. It is also essential to diversify our import and export markets and improve our strategic autonomy in an increasingly uncertain world." ²²	Red flags when we use ‘strategic’, shouldn’t everything be?
“Compliance fatigue”		Yes, rules are boring, but without them we don’t have a game.
“Better regulation”	"The Commission strives to simplify and lighten the administrative burden of EU regulations to ensure they are proportionate, stable, coherent, and technology neutral.	Capitals are key here (“Better Reg” is a fundamentally deregulatory policy agenda, “better reg” is what we’d love to see) The truth: Until now, it has meant less regulation. ²⁴ Deregulation is a central plank of an ideological project to put the interests of (some) business over people and the planet. It

¹⁹ BusinessEurope ‘Reboot Europe’ campaign, <https://rebooteurope.eu/>

²¹ Joint statement by BusinessEurope, DIGITALEUROPE, ERT, Eurochambres and EuroCommerce. 27 June 2022, <https://ert.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Joint-industry-statement-on-the-Single-Market-27-June-2022.pdf>

²² BusinessEurope ‘Reboot Europe’ campaign, <https://rebooteurope.eu/>

²⁴ European Trade Union Institute. (2015). “Better Regulation”: a bureaucratic simplification with a political agenda. <https://www.etui.org/Publications2/Working-Papers/Better-regulation-a-bureaucratic-simplification-with-a-political-agenda>

	<p>In this context, the better regulation agenda helps the EU deliver evidence-based policies and laws that achieve their objectives in the most efficient way, while being tailormade to the needs of EU citizens, businesses, and civil society. "²³</p>	<p>has been a central demand of big oil and cigarette companies for much of the 20th century, aided by free-market thinktanks. British American Tobacco, for example, directly lobbied for the introduction of the European Commission's 'Better Regulation' programme to hold off what they saw as an increasing threat to their business. To this day, the EU's 'Better Regulation' framework privileges business voices over others: not just consumers, but also over those far from the ear of regulators and elected politicians, or those with no voice or rights at all, such as animal species and habitats. The European Commission's Better Regulation programme is deregulation by stealth and needs to be reformed. It has made it harder to get important new regulations off the starting blocks, tilted the emphasis of regulatory policy towards minimising the costs to business rather than effectively regulating in the public interest, and subjected existing legislation to needless and unjustifiable review. It has introduced impact assessment methodologies that are biased towards evidencing the short-term compliance costs of businesses directly affected by regulation over the less easily quantifiable social and environmental benefits. There is very little 'better' about Better Regulation for most people or for sustainability, which is being</p>
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²³ European Commission website
https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation_en

		given insufficient weight in policy assessment. ²⁵
“Stakeholder fatigue”		An excuse to exclude CSOs and citizens

Visuals: chart in page 5 [Reprotecting Europe 200121.pdf](#)

Deregulation Watch by Corporate Europe Observatory:
<https://corporateeurope.org/en/deregulation-watch>

- Sunset clauses for EU laws.
- Fast-track ten omnibus packages.
- Launch the 28th regime, branded as “EU Inc.”
- The direction is becoming unmistakable.

²⁵ [Reprotecting Europe: The EU Green Deal v The War on Regulations \(2020\)](#), EEB and New Economics Foundation (NEF)