




Policy Brief #4

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The European Institute
for Animal Law & Policy
ACHIEVING BETTER TREATMENT FOR ANIMALS

Still Trapped

On the Widespread Support for the
Long-Awaited Ban on Cages in the EU

Introduction

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- 1 European Commission, Communication from the Commission on the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "End the Cage Age", C(2021) 4747 final.
 - 2 Case T-151/24: Action brought on 16 March 2024 – End the Cage Age v Commission.

Dozens of millions laying hens, gilts and sows, rabbits, ducks, geese, calves and breeding poultry are kept in cages across the EU. This is the current, abysmal state of European farming – hens unable to spread their wings or engage in comfort behaviours; mother pigs confined in cages so narrow that they are unable to turn around; rabbits standing on wire mesh in barren cages; calves isolated from their mothers and caged soon after birth...

Keeping animals in such conditions violates Council Directive 98/58/EC concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes, the core legislative act on farmed animal welfare applicable for over a quarter of a century. The Directive prohibits restricting animals' freedom of movement in a way that causes unnecessary suffering or injury.

But the EU has not done enough to address the widespread confinement of farmed animals in cages. While limited progress has been achieved since the adoption of this act in 1998, including bans on conventional barren cages for hens and traditional veal crates for calves, as well as keeping sows and gilts in stalls throughout their whole pregnancy, cruel cages that confine animals to a lifetime of suffering remain a widely used legal tool on farms across the EU.

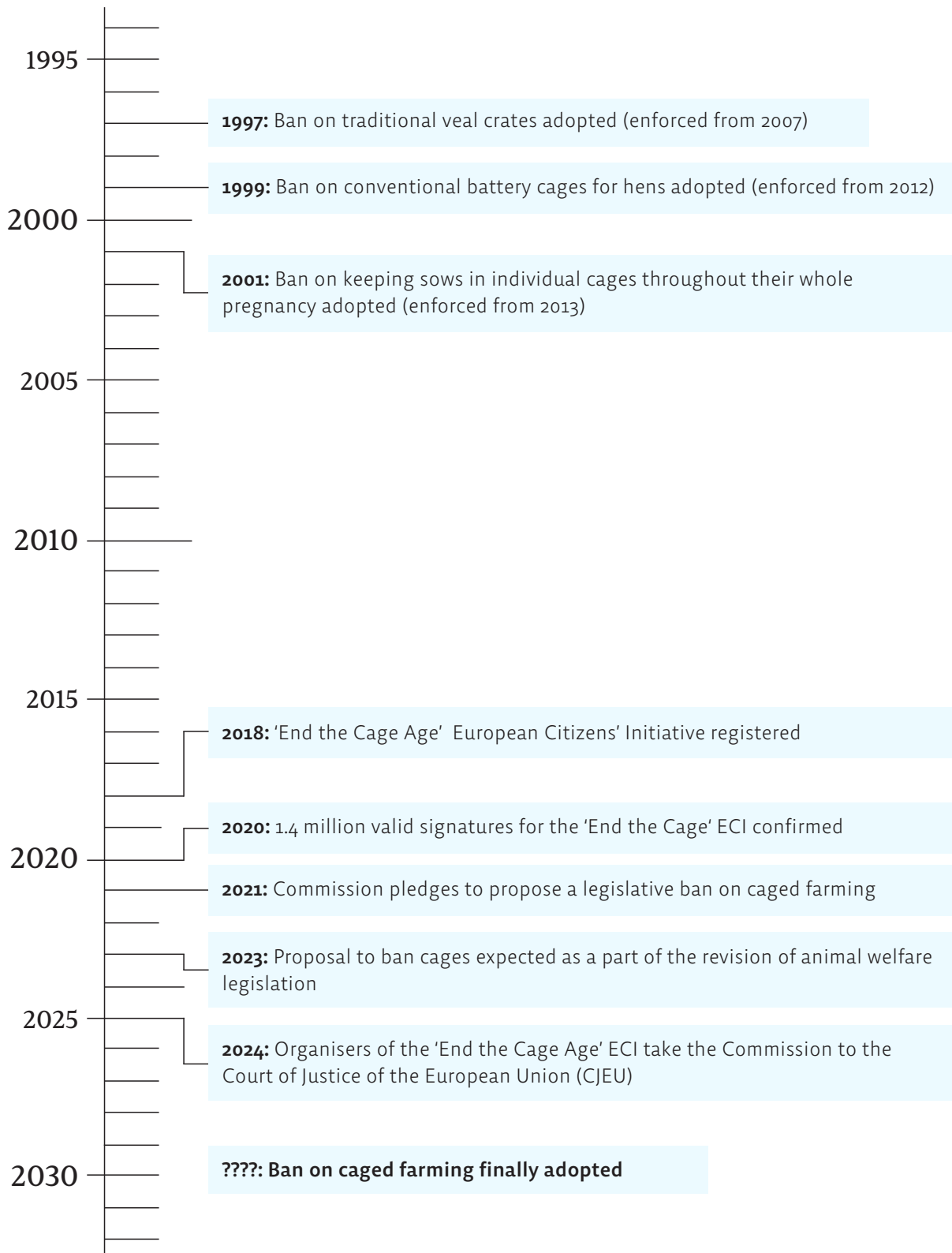
In response to the public outcry against this cruel, outdated practice, as expressed through the 'End the Cage Age' European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the European Commission announced its plans to propose a legislative ban on caged farming as part of the revision of animal welfare legislation under the Farm to Fork Strategy.¹ However, this commitment never materialized, and the proposal was not published within the promised timeline. As a response, the citizens behind the ECI have filed a lawsuit with the European Court of Justice of the European Union.²

Now, under the new Work Programme, the Commission has a chance to pick up the thread and propose a legislative ban on cage farming – a measure that responds to scientific recommendations and the expectations of both citizens and businesses in the EU. This policy brief summarizes the widespread support that the cage-free movement has garnered and the measures that might be taken to facilitate this transition, making it an inevitable next step in the EU's animal welfare policy.

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Cage-Free Movement in the EU: Brief Timeline



1. From the ECI to Institutional Support

- 3 European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021 on the European Citizens' Initiative 'End the cage age' (2021/2633(RSP)).
- 4 European Commission, Communication from the Commission on the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "End the Cage Age", C(2021) 4747 final.
- 5 Placing Animal Welfare at the core of the Next European Commission's Agenda - Information from the Slovenian delegation on behalf of the Bulgarian, French, Portuguese, Slovenian and Swedish delegations (10208/24).

In 2019, the 'End the Cage Age' ECI collected 1.4 million signatures in support of phasing out caged farming in the EU for all species farmed for food, including poultry, sows, calves, and rabbits. Despite the EU's self-proclaimed status as a leader in animal welfare, hundreds of millions of animals suffer in cages that severely restrict their freedom of movement, preventing them from fulfilling their physiological and behavioral needs.

The ECI's goal was positively received by the EU institutions. On 10 June 2023, the European Parliament's Plenary adopted a Resolution calling on the Commission to phase out the use of cages in animal farming in the EU, with an overwhelming majority of MEPs (558) voting in favour and only 37 against.³ Additionally, the Parliament has also acknowledged other gaps in the legislation, calling for species-specific law on keeping rabbits, a ban on the force-feeding of ducks and geese to produce foie gras and restricting imports of animal products from third countries to those produced in full compliance with EU animal welfare standards.

Later that month, on 30 June 2021, the European Commission published a Communication committing to propose a ban on caged farming for all species named in the Initiative by the end of 2023.⁴ It was the first – and so far, the only – instance in which the Commission pledged to fully comply with all the demands of an ECI and revise the legislation accordingly. The Commission highlighted the fact that the Initiative *"reflects social concerns, supported by scientific evidence"*.

Finally, the AGRIFISH Council endorsed the plans in July 2021, with Ministers overwhelmingly welcoming the proposed phase-out of cage systems and stressing the need for scientific evidence and financial assistance to ensure a smooth transition. Three years later, several Member States reiterated the importance of keeping the commitment to end cage use central to the next Commission's agenda.⁵

“Animals are sentient beings, and we have a moral, societal responsibility to ensure that on-farm conditions for animals reflect this.”

Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety from 2019 to 2024

2. Progress at the Member State Level

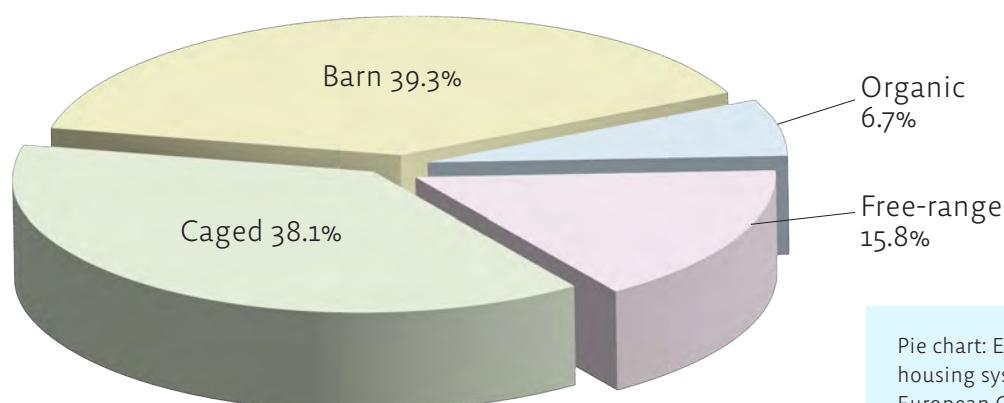
⁶ The original prohibition was brought about by the 1988 Act (Djurskyddslag (1988:534), or the ordinance to it (Djurskyddsförordning (1988:539). Both the Act and the Ordinance have been replaced (Djurskyddslag (2018:1192), Djurskyddsförordning (2019:66)), with the Ordinance now stipulating the requirement that 'pigs must be kept free-range'. Temporary confinement of animals in cages is possible (e.g. for feeding purposes), see Statens jordbruksverks föreskrifter och allmänna råd om grishållning inom lantbruket m.m., SJVFS 2019:20.

⁷ Arrêté du Gouvernement wallon modifiant l'arrêté royal du 29 juin 2014 relatif au bien-être des lapins dans les élevages.

⁸ European Commission. Eggs - Market Situation [online] 2024 [cit. 20.7.2025]. Retrieved from: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9bdf9842-1eb6-41a2-8845-49738b812b2b_en.

Long before this development at the EU level, some Member States started to take steps to phase out caged farming in their jurisdictions. As a result, several countries have now prohibited or limited the use of cages for hens, sows, or rabbits. These Member States have accumulated experience and expertise in raising animals in alternative systems, from which the EU can draw during the transition to cage-free farming. For example, free farrowing of sows has been the standard practice in Sweden for nearly four decades,⁶ demonstrating that confining sows during birth and weaning to restrictive cages is not a necessity, but rather a reflection of established production preferences. Similarly, Belgium was the first EU country to require so-called park system for rabbit housing,⁷ replacing both barren and enriched cages.

The egg sector is the most advanced in this regard, keeping the highest number of animals in cages, but showing the fastest progress towards cage-free systems among all animal farming sectors. In 11 Member States, caged farming of hens has been tackled through legislative bans, has been phased out of commercial production by low demand for caged eggs from consumers or there are plans to ban such a production method in the near future (see Annex I). As a result, approximately 62% of EU's laying hens now live in alternative systems, i.e. barn, free-range or organic systems.⁸



Pie chart: EU laying hens by housing systems (data from the European Commission, 2024)

3. Science in Support of the Cage-Free Transition



9 Commission Staff Working Document, *Fitness Check of the EU Animal Welfare legislation*, SWD(2022) 328 final.





10 European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of laying hens on farm*. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7789.

11 European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of broilers on farm*. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7788>.

The results of the so-called 'Fitness Check' of EU animal welfare legislation showed that this legislation is outdated and fails to keep up with decades of scientific findings.⁹ That was confirmed by the scientific opinions prepared by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which included a thorough assessment of the most common housing systems used commercially, as well as alternative systems which may replace them. The opinions indicated that natural behaviors such as foraging, exploring, nest building, dustbathing, and grooming become nearly or entirely impossible in commercially used cages. Close confinement hampers animals' ability to socialize naturally with others, including their young, and often leads to aggression or even cannibalism in stressed and frustrated individuals. In such environments, the animals' health is undeniably under constant threat.

In summary, EFSA reached the following conclusions:

	Laying hens and parent birds of laying hens and broilers^{10, 11}	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All birds should be housed in non-caged systems.• Cage systems and floor systems without elevated structures should be transitioned to non-cage systems with elevated structures and one or multiple tiers for laying hens, pullets and layer breeders because provision of sufficient space to avoid restriction of movement is extremely challenging in any cage system.• Birds should be provided with adequate, dry and friable substrate. High stocking densities should be avoided.
	Parent birds of broilers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keeping chickens in single cages leads to severe welfare consequences that cannot be prevented in this housing system. The birds should be kept in non-caged systems.

	Sows and gilts¹²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To avoid the welfare consequences of stall housing and stress during early pregnancy, it is recommended to group sows at the time of weaning. • Periparturient and lactating sows should not be housed in farrowing crates but in farrowing pens. • The minimum available space for the sow should be around 6.6 m², which equates to ~ 7.8 m² total pen size. • Materials such as long-stemmed or long-cut straw, hay and haylage should be offered to sows and gilts in an amount to allow all behavioural elements of nest-building to be performed at a functional level.
	Calves¹³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unless they have contact with the dam, calves should be moved to and kept in pairs or small groups. • Groups should be kept as stable as possible. • Space allowance of 20 m² per animal is needed to show the full extent of play behaviour.
	Ducks, geese, quail¹⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The currently used husbandry systems and the systems currently used during the overfeeding phase for foie gras production should be avoided as they lead to high risk for animal welfare. • Birds require a minimum total floor area in their enclosure to prevent restriction of movement, group stress, locomotory disorders, soft tissue lesions and integument damage and to enable exploratory and foraging behaviour.
	Rabbits¹⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cages (both barren and enriched) score the lowest for rabbits' welfare. • Restriction of movement, together with inability to perform gnawing behaviour and resting problems, has the highest impact on the welfare of growing rabbits in cages.

12 European Food Safety Authority (2022). *Welfare of pigs on farm*. EFSA Journal, 20(8). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2022.7421.

13 European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of calves*. EFSA Journal, 21(3). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7896.

14 European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of ducks, geese and quail on farm*. EFSA Journal, 21(5). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7992.

15 European Food Safety Authority (2020). *Health and welfare of rabbits farmed in different production systems*. EFSA Journal, 18(1). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2020.5944.

4. Market Outlook

16 European Commission (2023). Special Eurobarometer 533: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare. Retrieved from: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2996>.

17 European Commission, Factual summary report of the online public consultation in support to the fitness check and revision of the EU animal welfare legislation, Ref. Ares(2022)2359311 - 30/03/2022.

18 Chicken Watch. Available at: <https://chickenwatch.org/progress-tracker/>.

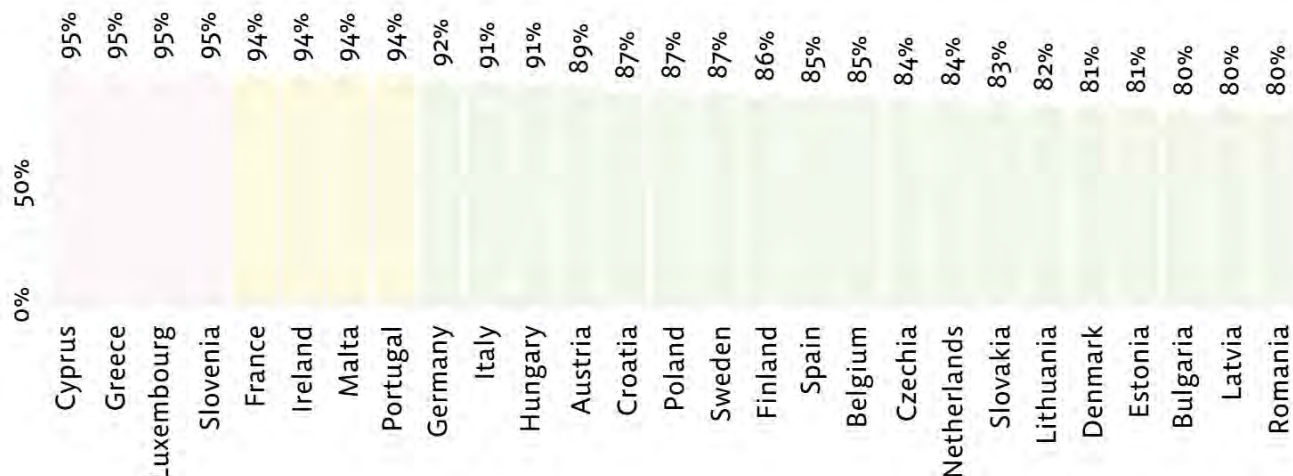
19 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2465 of 17 August 2023 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards marketing standards for eggs, and repealing Commission Regulation (EC) No 589/2008, OJ L, 2023/2465, 8.11.2023.

20 European Commission: Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, ICF, Maestre, M., Campbell, L., Etienne, J. et al. (2022). *Study on animal welfare labelling – Final report*. Publications Office of the European Union, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2875/676603>.

As documentary evidence of the horrendous quality of life for animals in cages floods traditional and new media, the acceptance of caged farming among the general public is steeply declining. According to the 2023 Eurobarometer survey, the overwhelming 89% of Europeans support a ban on individual cages for animals.¹⁶ Moreover, the 2022 public consultation on the revision of animal welfare legislation showed that 93% out of 59,000 respondents thought that the maximum transition time to switch to cage-free systems should be five years.¹⁷

Many businesses across the EU have responded to changing consumer expectations by committing to source cage-free eggs. To date, over 1,400 companies, including major market players, have pledged to transition away from cage systems in their egg supply chains.¹⁸ The egg sector is where the demand for cage-free products is most visible, as method-of-production labelling for shelled eggs is mandatory under EU law,¹⁹ making it easier for consumers to distinguish how eggs are produced and make more informed choices while grocery shopping. It is suggested that this labelling scheme has contributed to reduced demand for eggs from cage systems, increasing the market appeal of alternatives.²⁰

Graph: Percentage of EU citizens that support a ban on individual cages by country (data from Eurobarometer, 2023)



5. Facilitating the Transition

- 21 J. Urios, D. Baldock, J.-F. Hulot and F. Bas-Defosse (2022). *Funding the cage-free farming transition in Europe*. Policy Report, Institute for European Environmental Policy, Brussels.
- 22 A. Di Concetto (2021). *Animals in the EU Agricultural Policy*. The European Institute for Animal Law & Policy, Brussels.
- 23 A. Godfroy, and M. Muro (2025). *Improving animal welfare through the Common Agricultural Policy*. Report, Institute for European Environmental Policy, Brussels.
- 24 Eurobarometer (2025). Special Eurobarometer 556: Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3226>.
- 25 I. Ofor, I. (2017). *The chilling effect of the World Trade Organisation on European Union animal welfare protection*. University of Aberdeen.

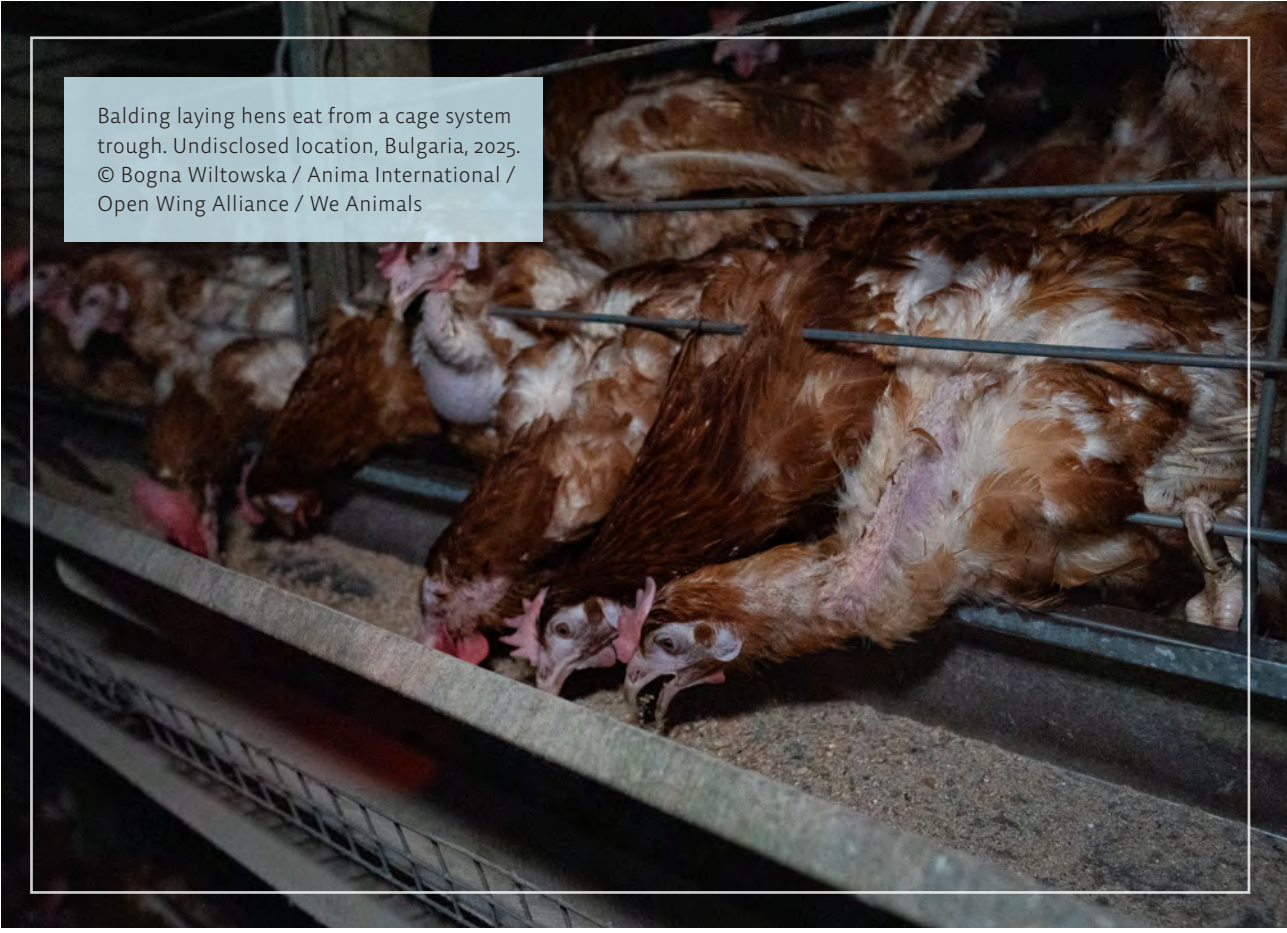
While the market is moving forward, we cannot rely solely on market forces and consumer demand to drive the transition, as the limited transparency within the industry makes it essential for clear and robust legislation to guide this process. A legislative ban would contribute towards a level playing field, offer clarity and predictability for future investment decisions, and help farmers to plan accordingly and avoid investing in housing systems that are no longer viable and acceptable in our society.

There are subsidies available under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to finance the transition to cage-free farming, especially under the second pillar.²¹ However, these subsidies have been continuously underutilized to support animal welfare in general²² and cage-free transition in particular. For instance, during the current 2023–2027 CAP period, only 5 CAP Strategic Plans (in Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Latvia, and Slovenia) have offered payments supporting a cage-free transition for laying hens and sows, with none of these subsidies exclusively targeting the phasing out of cages.²³ The Commission should therefore raise awareness about animal welfare payments, and other related payments in and outside the CAP, as a way to fund the cage-free transition in EU animal agriculture.

To support the level playing field on the EU market, an EU-wide ban on cages should apply to products of animal origin imported into the EU from third countries – a measure supported by the EU citizens, as 88% of them believe imports of any origin should only enter the EU if their production complies with the EU's environmental and animal welfare standards.²⁴ While a few animal welfare rules already apply extra-territorially, the EU has traditionally refrained from erecting additional technical barriers to trade in animal-based foods for animal welfare reasons, on account of a conservative interpretation of the WTO rules.²⁵

- 26 I. Ofor, and J. Walter (2017). *The Applicability of GATT Article XX(a) to Animal Welfare*. The UK Journal of Animal Law, 1 (1). pp. 10-20. ISSN 2516-2225.
- 27 J. Zöllmer (2025). *Race to the Top of Farm Animal Welfare Policies in US States: What Can Explain the New Development? A Qualitative Comparative Analysis*. Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2025.2493820>

However, well-constructed trade restrictions aimed at the protection of animal welfare can be justified under Article XX(a) of the GATT.²⁶ Moreover, legal bans which extend to imported products have the potential to push trade partners to raise their regulatory standards to be able to retain market access, while keeping a level playing field for domestic producers.²⁷ Considering the fact that the EU is one of the world's most attractive markets, third country producers will likely align their standards on EU rules to maintain access.



Balding laying hens eat from a cage system trough. Undisclosed location, Bulgaria, 2025.
© Bogna Wiltowska / Anima International / Open Wing Alliance / We Animals

5 Reasons Why

the EU Should Phase Out the Use of Cages

1

Animal welfare: Cages restrict the ability of animals to engage in natural behaviours and are associated with a range of physical and behavioural challenges. Phasing out their use should proceed without undue delays, ensuring a timely and effective transition.

2

Public expectations: Surveys consistently indicate that a significant share of EU citizens are concerned about animal welfare and support measures to improve it, including the phasing out of cages. This reflects a broad societal expectation for continued progress in this area.

3

Strengthening participatory democracy: Despite over a hundred ECIs submitted to date, none has translated into substantial legislative outcomes. 'End the Cage Age' stands out as one of the most widely supported ECIs, highlighting a strong public mandate. Its consideration offers an opportunity to reinforce the credibility and impact of participatory democratic tools within the EU policy process.

4

Future-proofing EU agriculture: The transition toward a more resilient agricultural model is challenged by the continued intensification of livestock production. The use of cages is a clear example of this development, limiting the space available to each animal. Phasing out cages represents a practical and forward-looking step in the evolution of farming practices within the EU.

5

Demonstrating leadership in animal welfare: The EU aspires to be a global leader in animal welfare. Achieving this goal requires continued progress in farming practices. Phasing out the use of cages would offer a clear opportunity for the EU to lead by example and contribute to raising standards internationally.

Annex

Cage Farming of Egg Laying Hens in the EU: State of Play

Belgium	Legally banned for the breeding of laying hens in Wallonia (transition period until 1 January 2028)
Art. D.27., Art. 25, Décret relatif au Code wallon du Bien-être des animaux (04 octobre 2018)	

France	Moratorium on the construction of cage farms and the transition of existing cage farms into non-caged farms since 2018
Art. L214-11, Code rural et de la pêche maritime [#]	

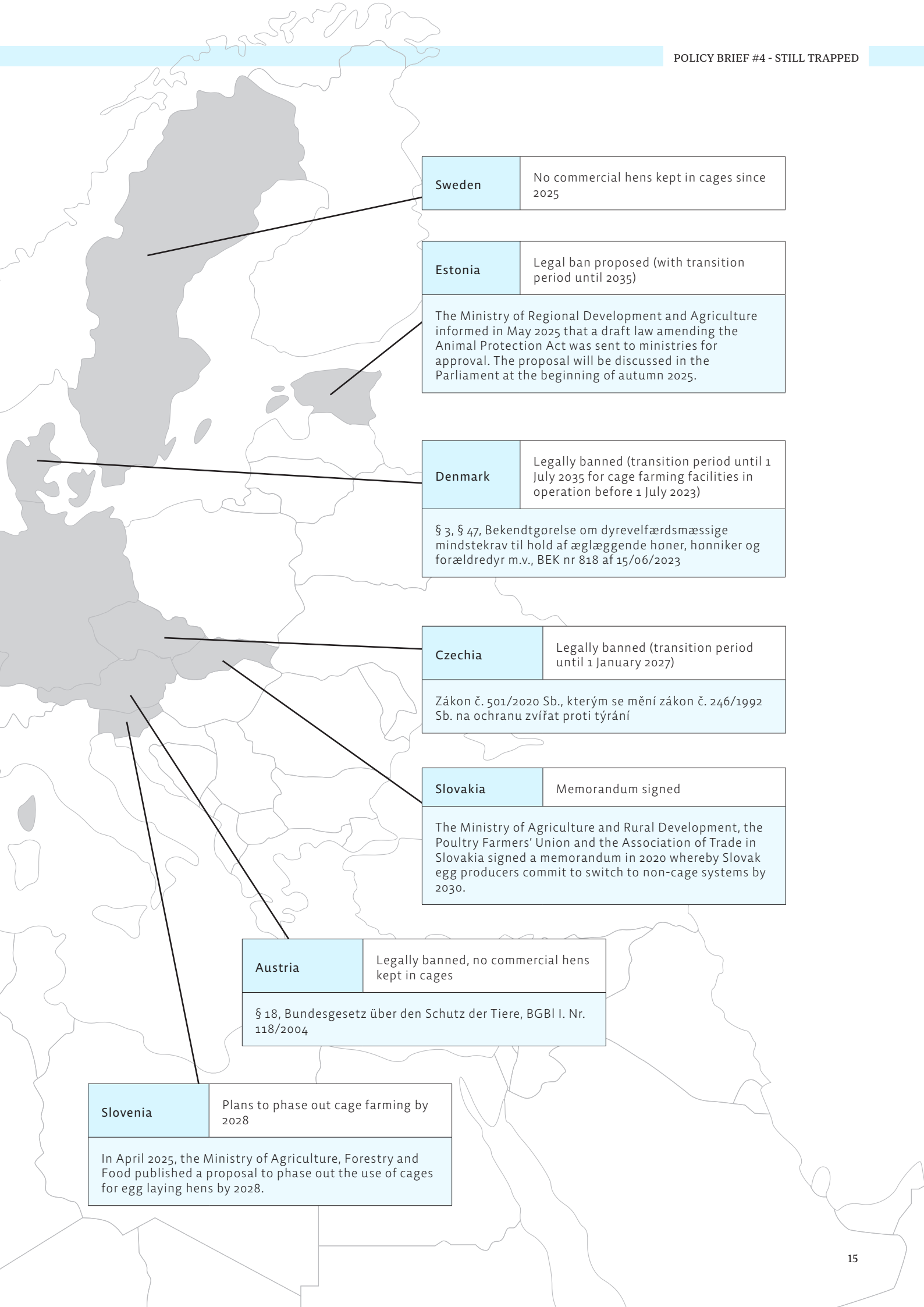
Germany	Legally banned (applicable from 2025, with certain farms benefitting from a transition period until 31 December 2028), with only 3.7% of laying hens kept in cages in 2024
§ 45, Verordnung zum Schutz landwirtschaftlicher Nutztier und anderer zur Erzeugung tierischer Produkte gehaltener Tiere bei ihrer Haltung	

Luxembourg	No commercial hens kept in cages
Data from the European Commission (Eggs - Market Situation – Dashboard (July 2025))	

28 PRIA.EE. Terras: munakanade puurispidamine keelustatakse alates 2035. Aastast. Available at: <https://www.pria.ee/uudised/terras-munakanade-puurispidamine-keelustatakse-alates-2035-aastast>.

29 GOV.SI. 151. redna seja Vlade Republike Slovenije. Available at: <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2025-04-24-151st-regular-session-of-the-government-of-the-republic-of-slovenia/>.

30 Project 1882. Sweden Becomes Cage-Free. Available at: <https://www.project1882.org/news/sweden-becomes-cage-free>.

**Sweden**

No commercial hens kept in cages since 2025

Estonia

Legal ban proposed (with transition period until 2035)

The Ministry of Regional Development and Agriculture informed in May 2025 that a draft law amending the Animal Protection Act was sent to ministries for approval. The proposal will be discussed in the Parliament at the beginning of autumn 2025.

Denmark

Legally banned (transition period until 1 July 2035 for cage farming facilities in operation before 1 July 2023)

§ 3, § 47, Bekendtgørelse om dyrevelfærdsmæssige mindstekrav til hold af æglæggende honer, hønniker og forældredyr m.v., BEK nr 818 af 15/06/2023

Czechia

Legally banned (transition period until 1 January 2027)

Zákon č. 501/2020 Sb., kterým se mění zákon č. 246/1992 Sb. na ochranu zvířat proti týrání

Slovakia

Memorandum signed

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Poultry Farmers' Union and the Association of Trade in Slovakia signed a memorandum in 2020 whereby Slovak egg producers commit to switch to non-cage systems by 2030.

Austria

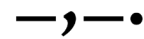
Legally banned, no commercial hens kept in cages

§ 18, Bundesgesetz über den Schutz der Tiere, BGBl I. Nr. 118/2004

Slovenia

Plans to phase out cage farming by 2028

In April 2025, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food published a proposal to phase out the use of cages for egg laying hens by 2028.



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