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GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE COUNCIL

The European Council and the Council

*Two institutions
acting for Europe*

INFORMATION SERIES

2010

Notice

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For information on the European Council and the Council, you can consult the following websites:

www.european-council.europa.eu

www.consilium.europa.eu

or contact the Public Information Department of the General Secretariat of the Council at the following address:

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A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu>).

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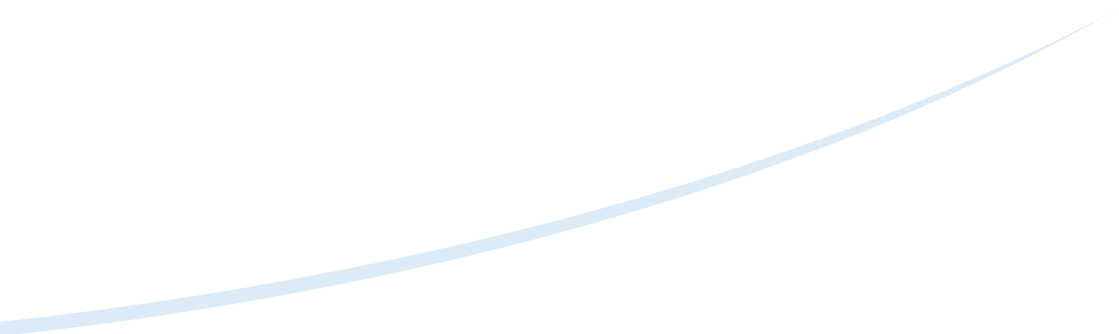
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The European Council - EU strategy body



Herman Van Rompuy at the Council press centre on 19 November 2009, on his election as President of the European Council



The European Council is the driving force behind the European Union. It meets at least four times a year, bringing together Europe's top political leaders, i.e. the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy also takes part in the European Council's discussions.

When required by the agenda, the Heads of State or Government may decide to draw on the assistance of a minister, depending on the subject matter being dealt with.

Meetings of the European Council are usually preceded by a meeting with the President of the European Parliament.

The European Council determines the EU's guidelines and political priorities: it identifies major issues to be dealt with by the Council, i.e. the meetings of ministers, in each of the policy areas under their responsibility. Meetings of the European Council are therefore central to the life of the EU. That is why these 'summits' are followed by so many journalists.

On 1 December 2009, when the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force, the European Council became a fully fledged institution in its own right. It has a president, elected for a term of two and a half years, renewable once. Herman Van Rompuy, formerly Prime Minister of Belgium, is the first to occupy the post. Previously the European Council was chaired by the president or prime minister of the Member State holding the six-monthly Council presidency.



'The European Council has to set the necessary guidelines for the EU, and the only way to do that is by reflecting on these matters together, in a free and ongoing debate.'

Herman Van Rompuy,
President of the European Council

The President prepares, chairs and leads the meetings of the European Council, and seeks consensus among its members. He makes sure that the decisions which are taken are subsequently put into practice. Together with the President of the European Commission, he acts as the EU's representative, at his level, in relations with third countries. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy also represents the EU to the outside world.

The Council – essential EU decision-maker

Acts which are directly relevant to the lives of EU citizens and have a considerable international impact are adopted by the Council, usually in conjunction with the European Parliament.

The Council is the EU institution where the Member States' government representatives sit, i.e. the ministers of each Member State with responsibility for a given area. The composition and frequency of Council meetings varies depending on the issues dealt with. Foreign ministers, for example, meet roughly once a month in the Foreign Affairs Council. Similarly, economics and finance ministers meet once a month in the Council which handles economic and financial affairs, called the Ecofin Council.

There are 10 Council configurations, covering the whole range of EU policies. The General Affairs Council, which is usually attended by foreign ministers or European affairs ministers, makes sure that the various Council configurations are working consistently with one another and makes the preparations for European Council meetings.



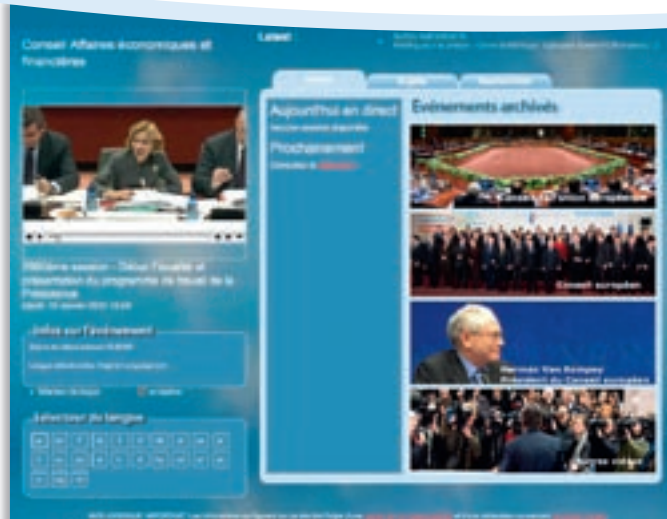
The farm ministers of the 27 Member States at a meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The 10 Council configurations

- General Affairs
- Foreign Affairs
- Economic and Financial Affairs
- Justice and Home Affairs
- Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Protection
- Competitiveness (Internal Market, Industry and Research)
- Transport, Telecommunications and Energy
- Agriculture and Fisheries
- Environment
- Education, Youth and Culture

The Council's remit

- It adopts legislative acts (regulations, directives etc.), in many cases in 'co-decision' with the European Parliament.
- It coordinates Member States' policies, for example, in the economic field.
- It develops the common foreign and security policy, on the basis of strategic guidelines set by the European Council.
- It concludes international agreements on behalf of the Union.
- It adopts the Union's budget, together with the European Parliament.



Video transmission of a public debate in the Economic and Financial Affairs Council on the Council's Internet site

The Council as lawmaker

The EU's laws are made by the Council, together with the European Parliament. In most cases, the Council can only legislate on the basis of proposals submitted to it by the European Commission. It can ask the Commission to submit any proposals it may deem appropriate. Since entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, a million citizens may also sign a petition inviting the Commission to submit a proposal. This is the citizens' right of initiative.

The Council sits in public when it is discussing and voting on a proposal for a legislative act or when there is a general debate. You can follow these discussions in real time on the Council's Internet site (www.consilium.europa.eu) and see, for example, how your minister is putting your country's point of view. The written documentation available to the ministers is also accessible to everyone.

Conversely, discussions on matters which do not involve legislation, for example foreign affairs, are not public. However, Council meetings are always followed by a press conference and a press release explaining what decisions have been taken.

The Presidency of the Council

The EU's 27 Member States take it in turn to chair the Council for a period of six months. During this six-month period, the Presidency chairs meetings at every level, proposes guidelines and draws up the compromises needed for the Council to take decisions.

In the interests of continuity of Council business, the six-monthly presidencies work together closely in groups of three. These three-presidency teams draw up a joint programme of Council work over an 18-month period.



Logos of the 'three-presidency team' from 1 January 2010 to 30 June 2011



Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and President of the Foreign Affairs Council

Only one Council configuration is not chaired by the six-monthly presidency: the Foreign Affairs Council, which, since entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, has been chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Since 1 December 2009 this post has been held by Catherine Ashton. Roughly 20 working parties in the foreign affairs field also have a permanent chairman appointed by the High Representative.

Order of six-monthly presidencies

2010

January–June Spain
July–December Belgium

2011

January–June Hungary
July–December Poland

2012

January–June Denmark
July–December Cyprus

2013

January–June Ireland
July–December Lithuania

2014

January–June Greece
July–December Italy

2015

January–June Latvia
July–December Luxembourg

2016

January–June Netherlands
July–December Slovakia

2017

January–June Malta
July–December United Kingdom

2018

January–June Estonia
July–December Bulgaria

2019

January–June Austria
July–December Romania

General Secretariat of the Council



The Justus Lipsius building, headquarters of the Council and the European Council, and the Lex building, which houses the translation service and the legal-linguistic experts

The General Secretariat assists both the European Council and its President, and the Council and its presidencies. It provides advice and helps to coordinate their discussions. It is headed by a Secretary-General appointed by the Council.

The General Secretariat includes directorates-general (including the legal service), a directorate for general political questions, press, translation and protocol services and other logistics and support units.

Aside from logistical and organisational matters (meeting rooms, document production, translation, etc.) the General Secretariat assists in the preparation for Council meetings, helps to see that they run smoothly and then contributes to follow-up. It does the same for the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) and for preparatory bodies, providing presidencies with the necessary support to achieve their objectives.



The press centre at the Justus Lipsius building, during a meeting of the European Council.

Enlargement of the Union

The original European Economic Community of six Member States, established more than 50 years ago, has gradually grown into the European Union, which currently has 27 Member States and a population of approximately 500 million.

The Member States of the Union

- 1958** Founding countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands
- 1973** Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom
- 1981** Greece
- 1986** Spain, Portugal
- 1995** Austria, Finland, Sweden
- 2004** Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia
- 2007** Bulgaria, Romania

Useful addresses and contacts

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