



Council of the  
European Union

## THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL IN A NUTSHELL



# THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL – THE EU’S STRATEGY BODY

The European Council is the driving force behind the European Union, setting its course and its political priorities. Its policy orientations feed into the work of the Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the member states.

European Council meetings set the agenda for future policy-making and are therefore central to the life of the EU. That is why the summits attract a large amount of media attention.

The European Council brings together Europe’s top political leaders, i.e. the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and EU leaders (heads of state or government, whether president, prime minister, chancellor, Taoiseach, etc.). The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy also takes part in the meetings.

The work of the European Council is coordinated by its President, who prepares, chairs and leads the meetings, building consensus among its members. Together with the President of the European Commission, he represents the EU at its top level. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy represents Union interests in foreign affairs and security matters.



*Donald Tusk, President of the European Council*

The President is elected for a term of two-and-a-half years, renewable once. The post of President of the European Council is a full-time job; the President may not simultaneously hold a national office. The current President is Donald Tusk, former Prime Minister of Poland. His term of office began on 1 December 2014 and runs until 31 May 2017.

European Council meetings usually take place four times a year, but the President can convene extra meetings to address urgent issues. Summits

are usually convened in Brussels and are preceded by a meeting with the President of the European Parliament.

*For more information on the European Council:  
[www.consilium.europa.eu/european-council](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/european-council)*

# THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION – A LAWMAKER

The Council – or the Council of the EU, or Council of Ministers, as it is commonly known – is one of the key EU decision-making institutions. This is where national ministers from each EU country meet to discuss and adopt EU law, coordinate member states' economic policies, develop policies, such as the EU's common foreign and security policy, conclude international agreements and adopt the EU budget. Acts which are directly relevant to the lives of EU citizens and have a considerable international impact are negotiated and adopted by the Council, usually in conjunction with the European Parliament. The Council meets in different formations, called configurations, depending on the issues dealt with. Foreign affairs ministers, for instance, meet roughly once a month in the Foreign Affairs Council, whereas environment ministers meet around four times a year in the Environment Council. It is the national minister responsible for a certain field who represents his country and expresses its views in the Council. There are ten Council configurations, covering the whole range of EU policies.



*Meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, 6 May 2014*

The member states' representatives negotiate and vote on behalf of their government in the Council. European Commissioners responsible for the areas concerned also take part in Council meetings, although they cannot vote.

The Council takes decisions by a simple majority (15 member states vote in favour), qualified majority (55% of member states representing at least 65% of the EU population vote in favour), or unanimous vote (all votes are in favour), depending on the issues under discussion. About 80% of all EU legislation is adopted with qualified majority voting. Qualified majority implies a weighting of the votes of each member state according to the population size of each state.

Matters concerning foreign and security policy, taxes, employment and social security still require unanimity, as well as agreements with developing countries, and decisions for the accession of new member states.

Most Council meetings take place at the headquarters of the Council in the Justus Lipsius building in Brussels. However, in April, June and October each year the Council’s regular meetings take place at the Kirchberg Conference Centre in Luxembourg.

## THE COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

The 28 member states take it in turns to chair the Council for a period of six months each. The presidency organises and chairs meetings in the Council and its preparatory bodies, and draws up compromises that can pave the way for Council decisions.

Only one Council configuration is not chaired by the six-month presidency: the Foreign Affairs Council, which is chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who is also vice-president of the Commission. This post is currently held by Federica Mogherini.

In order to ensure continuity of Council business, successive presidencies work together in teams of three ('trios') and draw up a joint programme of Council work for a period of 18 months. The current trio includes the Italian, Latvian and Luxembourg presidencies, covering the period 1 July 2014–31 December 2015.



*Federica Mogherini,  
High Representative of the Union for  
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*

The order of presidencies is as follows:

		<b>2014</b> July–December	<b>Italy</b>
<b>2015</b> January–June	<b>Latvia</b>	July–December	<b>Luxembourg</b>
<b>2016</b> January–June	<b>Netherlands</b>	July–December	<b>Slovakia</b>
<b>2017</b> January–June	<b>Malta</b>		

For more information on the Council of the EU:  
[www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu)

# THE GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE COUNCIL

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

The Press Service provides the media with information on the different Council policy areas. It organises press events such as press conferences and background briefings, and issues press releases. Related video and photo material is made available before, during and after meetings.

*For more information on the Press Service:*

[www.consilium.europa.eu/press](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press)

The Public Information Service answers requests for information about the work of the European Council and the Council in any official language of the EU.

*For more information on enquiries:*

[www.consilium.europa.eu/infopublic](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/infopublic)

## THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL AT A GLANCE

The **European Council** is the EU's strategy body. It brings together the EU's political leaders who set the orientations and the political priorities of the Union's work. In general, it meets four times a year. After each meeting, the European Council issues conclusions summarising the outcome of discussions. The work of the European Council is organised by its President, elected for a period of two-and-a-half years.

The **Council of the European Union**, also known as the Council of Ministers or the Council of the EU, is one of the EU's decision-making bodies. It is the institution where national representatives and ministers from each EU country meet to discuss and adopt laws and decisions and coordinate policies. For the organisation of work, the presidency of the Council rotates between member states for a period of six months.

These two EU bodies should not be confused with the **Council of Europe**, which is the Strasbourg-based human rights and cultural organisation that is totally separate from the European Union.



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