

Information Guide



European Council

A guide to information sources on the European Council, with hyperlinks to further sources of information within European Sources Online and on external websites

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Introduction

Our institution gathers together the Union's highest executive leaders: around the table are the 27* Heads of State or Government, the President of the Commission, and the President of the European Council. Our task is to set the Union's strategic course. We establish political priorities and we take responsibility in crisis situations. At its best, the European Council is able to meet high public expectations with a strong decision-making capacity – as we have shown on a number of occasions.

From: [The European Council in 2012](#)

* In July 2013, Croatia became the 28th member of the European Union.

Overview

The European Council consists of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, the President of the European Council, and the President of the European Commission. Its main purpose is to provide the 'necessary impetus' for the Union's development and to define its general political directions and priorities; it is not a legislative body. The European Council is scheduled to meet four times per year (i.e. twice during each six-month Presidency of the EU).

The European Council should not be confused with the [Council of the European Union](#) (whose Members are Ministers from the Member States) or the [Council of Europe](#) (an international organisation distinct from the EU, dealing with education, culture and the protection of human rights; all EU Member States are part of the CoE).

History

The first 'European summit' meeting between the Heads of State or Government of the European Community Member States was held in Paris in 1961. Although initially organised on an ad hoc basis at the request of any Member State, the 1974 Paris summit decided that such meetings should be held regularly under the name 'European Council', with the aim of co-ordinating Community activities and addressing problems of European integration. The frequency and composition of the meetings were set out in 1986 by Article 2 of the Single European Act, but it was not until the 1993 Treaty on European Union that the role of the European Council was formalised and not until 2009 that the Treaty of Lisbon made the European Council an EU institution.

The June 2002 [Seville European Council](#) (see Annex I, p.19-22) agreed a package of measures to reform the structure and functioning of the European Council. Changes included: giving the General Affairs and External Relations Council responsibility for preparing European Council meetings; limiting meetings to one day; cutting the size of delegations to a maximum of 20 people per Member State; promoting greater co-operation between successive presidencies; and allowing, 'in exceptional circumstances', an extraordinary meeting of the European Council to be convened.

Since the Seville summit, the European Council has usually met four times a year, with meetings usually held in March, June, October and December (the June and December ones marking the end of the current Presidency; since 2000, in accordance with the [Lisbon strategy](#), the annual March summit addresses economic, social and environmental issues). Each Presidency also sees a number of informal summit meetings, and extraordinary European Councils are organised as required (such meetings have included those on [21 September 2001](#) following the terrorist attacks in the United States; on

16-17 April 2003 for the signing of the Accession Treaty of 10 new Member States; on [1 September 2008](#) in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict; on [19 November 2009](#) to decide on senior appointments following ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon; on [11 March 2011](#) to discuss developments in Libya and the EU's Southern Neighbourhood region and those of [26 October 2011](#) and [30 January 2012](#) on the Euro crisis).

Role

The [Treaty of Lisbon](#), which was adopted in 2007 and entered into force on 1 December 2009, amends both the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty establishing the European Community (which is renamed the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - TFEU).

In the revised [TEU](#), Article 10 states:

1. The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy.
2. Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament.

Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.

Article 13 adds the European Council to the list of the Union's institutions, with Article 15 setting out the relevant provisions:

1. The European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof. It shall not exercise legislative functions.
2. The European Council shall consist of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, together with its President and the President of the Commission. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy shall take part in its work.
3. The European Council shall meet twice every six months, convened by its President. When the agenda so requires, the members of the European Council may decide each to be assisted by a minister and, in the case of the President of the Commission, by a member of the Commission. When the situation so requires, the President shall convene a special meeting of the European Council.
4. Except where the Treaties provide otherwise, decisions of the European Council shall be taken by consensus.

The European Council appoints the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Article 18).

Under provisions on the Union's external action, Article 22 states that the European Council 'shall identify the strategic interests and objectives of the Union' relating to the common foreign and security policy and to other areas, with decisions concerning the Union's relations with a specific country or Region.

Article 50 requires any Member State wishing to withdraw from the EU to notify the European Council of its intention to do so.

Articles 235 and 236 of the [TFEU](#) deal specifically with the European Council, setting out a number of provisions, including that the European Council 'shall be assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council'.

The European Council is also mentioned elsewhere in the TFEU. Under Article 68 it:

shall define the strategic guidelines for legislative and operational planning within the area of freedom, security and justice.

Article 148 provides that it:

shall each year consider the employment situation in the Union and adopt conclusions thereon, on the basis of a joint annual report by the Council and the Commission.

Under provisions on 'solidarity' between Member States, Article 222 requires the European Council to:

regularly assess the threats facing the Union in order to enable the Union and its Member States to take effective action.

Although the European Council officially comprises Heads of State or Government, President of the European Council and President of the Commission, meetings are also attended by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who is also a Vice-President of the Commission) and - 'when the agenda so requires' - by Foreign Ministers, assisting the Heads of State or Government, and by a member of the European Commission, assisting the President of the Commission. The President of the European Parliament traditionally makes a formal address at the start of each summit.

On 1 December 2009, the European Council adopted its Rules of Procedure, as annexed to [Decision 2009/882/EU](#).

President and Presidency

Article 13 of the [TEU](#) sets out provisions concerning the new post of President of the European Council. For the first time, the European Council has a permanent President, elected for a term of two-and-a-half years (renewable once). The Treaty sets out the role of the President of the European Council, who:

- (a) shall chair it and drive forward its work;
- (b) shall ensure the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council in cooperation with the President of the Commission, and on the basis of the work of the General Affairs Council;
- (c) shall endeavour to facilitate cohesion and consensus within the European Council;
- (d) shall present a report to the European Parliament after each of the meetings of the European Council.

Article 13 also states that the President of the European Council shall 'ensure the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy', but emphasises that the role is to be undertaken 'without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy'.

According to [The European Council in 2010](#), the President's task is:

to prepare, chair and lead the meetings of the European Council, to seek consensus among the members, and to make sure that the decisions we take are subsequently put into practice. Together with the Commission president, the

European Council president acts as the Union's representative, at his level, in relations with third countries.

The Treaty of Lisbon entered into force on 1 December 2009. At an informal meeting of the European Council on [19 November 2009](#), EU Heads of State or Government appointed Herman Van Rompuy as the first permanent President of the Council (re-elected for a second term [1 March 2012](#)) and also appointed Catherine Ashton to the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (see [High Representative's page](#)). Based at the Council's Justus Lipsius building, the President - and the European Council itself - shares the secretariat of the Council.

There had been widespread anticipation that the European Council might choose a high-profile figure as the first President of the Council, with the aim of increasing the Union's global profile. As it was - after much consultation with Member States - the Swedish Presidency brokered a deal which saw the Belgian Prime Minister Mr Rompuy appointed to the post of President, but with his role down-played to that of an administrator rather than global representative (see General Secretariat of the Council Background Note on the [President of the European Council](#)).

The primary aim of the new post was to bring more consistency to the Union's much-criticised 'rotating presidency', which has traditionally seen responsibility for managing the work of the Council - and thus for guiding the work of the EU - pass from one Member State to another every six months. It had been assumed by many people that the advent of the permanent President would see an end to the six-monthly change-overs. The reality, however, is that the rotating Presidency will continue. From January 2010, Mr Van Rompuy will prepare and chair meetings of the European Council and Ministers of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council will chair the various [Council configurations](#) (of which there are now 10, rather than nine).

In a [speech](#) made on 11 November 2009, following his appointment as President of the European Council, Mr Van Rompuy said:

The position to which you have just elected me is a new one. One of the aims of the Lisbon Treaty is to bring more continuity and coherence to the work of the European Council of Heads of State and Government. The six monthly presidencies held by one country have the advantage of involving every one of the 27 Member States in the work of the Union. They have the disadvantage of lacking perspective. It is my firm intention to ensure that our work develops over the long term. A perspective that goes beyond six months will allow us to be better organized where the major multi-annual dossiers are concerned, such as the financial perspectives and the Lisbon Strategy.

The first Member State to hold the Presidency under the new regime was Spain. As the Swedish Presidency noted:

it will now be the task of Spain's Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero to decide together with the new permanent President what form future cooperation will take in practice.

On [15 December 2009](#), it was announced that Mr Zapatero and Mr Van Rompuy had agreed to set up a working group to co-ordinate implementation of the permanent EU Presidency.

To coincide with the advent of the Treaty of Lisbon, [European Council Decision 2009/881/EU](#), of 1 December 2009, 'on the exercise of the Presidency of the Council', formally initiated the 'trio Presidency' arrangement, under which - with the aim of ensuring greater continuity:

The Presidency of the Council, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs configuration, shall be held by pre-established groups of three Member States for a period of 18 months.

The Decision requires that each member of the group 'shall in turn chair for a six month period all configurations of the Council, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs configuration', with members of the group assisting the Chair 'on the basis of a common programme', but also allowing Members of the group to make alternative arrangements among themselves.

On this basis, the governments of Spain, Belgium and Hungary drew up a work programme for their 18-month trio Presidency starting in January 2010. The programme was divided into two parts: one containing the strategic framework and priorities, the other comprising the operational programme and agenda for the coming 18 months. According to the Introduction to the programme:

The three Presidencies will exercise their respective functions on the basis of the new Treaty which entered into force on 1 December 2009. They will make every effort to ensure a smooth functioning of the new rules and provisions. This implies very close cooperation between the three Presidencies and between them and the new President of the European Council and the [High Representative] who will chair the Foreign Affairs Council.

The Presidencies from 2007 onwards were decided by the General Affairs Council of 13 December 2004 (see Press Release [15460/04](#)). Bulgaria and Romania were included in the schedule, although at that point they were not members of the Union. The order was then confirmed in a [Corrigendum](#) to Council Decision 2009/908/EU). Presidencies from 2007 until mid-2020 are:

	January-June	July-December
2007	Germany	Portugal
2008	Slovenia	France
2009	Czech Republic	Sweden
2010	Spain	Belgium
2011	Hungary	Poland
2012	Denmark	Cyprus
2013	Ireland	Lithuania
2014	Greece	Italy
2015	Latvia	Luxembourg
2016	Netherlands	Slovakia
2017	Malta	United Kingdom
2018	Estonia	Bulgaria
2019	Austria	Romania
2020	Finland	

(The Council maintains a [page](#) showing Presidencies since 1998, with links to websites where available; the Commission's [European Council](#) page links to Conclusions since 1993; the European Parliament's [European Council summits since 1985](#) offers access to the text of the Conclusions of each Presidency from 1985 until June 2006, together with the annual speech given by the President of the European Parliament to the European Council.)

The current programme for the European Council was outlined in June 2012, by Mr Van Rompuy when he presented the [European Council priorities up to 2014](#) at the meeting of the Heads of Government/State.

Location

The European Council - which, until its promotion to the status of an EU institution, was effectively a forum, not an organisation - has never had its own dedicated secretariat or fixed location. Summits have been held at various venues within the Member States, with support provided by the General Secretariat of the Council. That support will continue for the next few years, with the President of the European Council sharing accommodation in the Council's Justus Lipsius building until a new European Council building is completed (scheduled for 2013; see General Secretariat of the Council [Background Note](#)).

The address of the Justus Lipsius building is:
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 175
B-1048 Brussels
(See [map](#)).

A Declaration (no. 22) annexed to the [Treaty of Nice](#) called for one European Council in each Presidency to be held in Brussels with effect from 2002 and for Brussels to be the sole venue for European Council meetings as soon as the number of Member States reached 18. In fact, since the June 2003 summit in Thessaloniki, no formal European Council meetings have been held outside Brussels (Presidencies are free to organise informal European Council meetings wherever they like).

Information sources in the ESO database

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- [Report](#)
- [Statistics](#)
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- [Periodical article](#)
- [Textbook, monograph or reference](#)
- [Background](#)

Relevant material may also be found under:

[Current institutional developments](#)
[The policy-making process](#)
[Decision-making process/procedure](#)
[Council of the European Union](#)

Further information sources on the internet

- European Council
 - [Homepage](#)
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- Council of the European Union
 - [Homepage](#)
 - Background Note: [President of the European Council](#)
 - Press releases - [European Council](#) (Presidency Conclusions from European Councils since 1993)
 - [Publications](#) (includes: [The European Council and the Council: Two institutions acting for Europe](#), [History of the European Council: Fifty years of summit meetings](#))
- Europa
 - Institutions and bodies: [European Council](#)
 - Summaries of EU legislation
 - [The institutions, bodies and agencies of the union](#) (includes [Rules of procedure of the European Council](#))
 - EU Bookshop
 - [Sources of information on the European Council and the Council](#)
 - [The European Council and the Council in a nutshell](#)
- European Commission: DG Communication
 - [RAPID](#) press releases database - expand 'Search by institution/by type of document' and choose 'European Council'; choose date or date range as appropriate
 - EU news: [Institutional affairs](#)
- European Union: EUR-Lex

The text of proposed and adopted legislation relating to the European Council can be found via EUR-Lex:

 - [Proposed](#) - 01 General, financial and institutional matters - [01.40 Provisions governing the institutions](#))
 - [Adopted](#) (01 General, financial and institutional matters - 01.40 Provisions governing the institutions)
 - [Treaty on European Union](#) notably Articles 10, 13, 15
 - [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) Articles 235-236
- Court of Justice of the European Union: InfoCuria

[Homepage](#): in 'Names of parties' box insert "'European council'" (in speech marks). Select dates if required. Hit 'Search' at top or bottom of page.
- European Parliament: Legislative Observatory (OEIL)

[Homepage](#): Carry out a [Search](#): from the right-hand menu choose 'Other institutions and bodies' and select 'European Council'.

- European Commission: PreLex [Homepage](#). In [advanced search](#) either choose 'Fields of activity' and select 'Institutions'
- European Parliament: Committees
 - [Constitutional Affairs](#) (AFCO)
- European Parliament: Fact Sheets
 - [The European Council](#)

Eric Davies

ESO Information Consultant

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