



THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Council of the European Union, often referred to as the Council of Ministers or simply 'the Council', is the European Union's main decision-making body. It consists of a government representative from each Member State who is empowered to make binding decisions on behalf of its government. Council members are politically accountable to their national parliaments. The Council has legislative power, which it shares with the European Parliament under the 'co-decision procedure'. In addition to this, the Council and the Parliament share equal responsibility for adopting the EU budget. The Council also concludes international agreements that have been negotiated by the Commission

The Ministerial Council has six main areas of responsibility:

- It adopts EU laws; in many areas it legislates jointly with the European Parliament.
- It coordinates the broad economic policies of the Member States.
- It concludes international agreements between the EU and other states or international organisations.
- It approves the EU's budget with the European Parliament.
- It develops the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP).
- It coordinates the actions of Member States in the area of police and judicial co-operation in criminal matters.

All the meetings are chaired by the Member State presiding over the Council of the European Union at the time. Each meeting is attended by at least one representative of the Commission. The Council's headquarters are in the Justus Lipsius Building in Brussels. All meetings are held there except for the meetings in April, June and October, when the Council meets in Luxembourg.

COUNCIL CONFIGURATIONS

There is formally only one Council but it meets in different configurations. Which minister attends which meeting depends on the subject to be dealt with. If, for example, the Council is scheduled to discuss environmental issues, then the environment ministers from each Member State will take part. At the Seville summit in July 2002 it was decided that the Council would meet in the following configurations:

- General affairs and external relations (including European Security and Defence Policy and development cooperation)
- Economic and financial issues (including budgets)
- Justice and home affairs (including civil protection)
- Employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs
- Competitiveness (internal market, industry, research and tourism)
- Transport, telecommunications and energy

- Agriculture and fisheries
- Environment
- Education, youth and culture (including audiovisual affairs)

Most of these configurations also hold a number of informal meetings every year. On those occasions the ministers meet in the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council. No decisions are made at these meetings.

SECRETARIAT GENERAL

The Secretariat General assists both the Council of the European Union and its Presidency and European Council and its President, currently Herman Van Rompuy. The Secretariat General is currently headed by Secretary General Pierre de Boissieu.

THE PRESIDENCY

The Presidency of the Council rotates between the Member States every six months. The country presiding over the Council functions as the driving force in the EU's legislative and political decision-making process. The Presidency is responsible for the Council's agenda and chairs the Council's meetings. An important task for the presiding country is to help broker compromises between Member States.

The Presidency's order of rotation up until 2020 is as follows:

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 (Jan-Jun)

DECISIONS

Article 16 of the "Treaty on European Union", as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon, stipulates that the Council voting arrangements of the Nice Treaty will apply until 31 October 2014. Moreover, until 31 March 2017, any member state can request that the Nice rules are used for a particular vote. Article 16 also states the conditions for a qualified majority, effective from 1 November 2014 (Lisbon rules):

- Majority of countries: 55% if acting on a proposal from the Commission or from the High Representative, or else 72%, **and**
- Majority of population: 65%.

A blocking minority requires—in addition to not meeting one of the two conditions above—that at least 4 countries (or, if not all countries participate in the vote, the minimum number of countries representing more than 35% of the population of the participating countries, plus one country) vote against the proposal. Thus, there may be cases where an act is passed, even

though the population condition is not met. This precludes scenarios where 3 populous countries could block a decision against the other 24 countries.

Decisions in the Council can be taken by a simple majority (on procedural matters), qualified majority or unanimously. Areas in which the Member States have the right of veto include the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and taxation. Decisions, however, are most commonly taken by a qualified majority, each Member State being allocated a certain number of votes. Votes are allocated based on the population of each Member State but are adjusted in favour of the smaller countries.

In most other cases, qualified majority voting is used. This means that a Council decision is adopted if a specified minimum number of votes are cast in its favour. The number of votes allocated to each EU country roughly reflects the size of its population.

Number of votes for each country in the Council

| | |
|---|------------|
| Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom | 29 |
| Spain and Poland | 27 |
| Romania | 14 |
| Netherlands | 13 |
| Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Portugal | 12 |
| Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden | 10 |
| Denmark, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Finland | 7 |
| Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg and Slovenia | 4 |
| Malta | 3 |
| Total | 345 |

A minimum of 255 votes out of 345 (73.9%) is required to reach a qualified majority. In addition:

- A majority of member states (in some cases two thirds) must approve the decision, and
- Any member state may ask for confirmation that the votes cast in favour represent at least 62% of the EU's total population

COREPER

The Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) is responsible for preparing the Council meetings at ministerial level.

Following discussions in one of the Council's working groups, consisting of civil servants and experts from Member States and the Commission, the proposal is discussed at a higher official level in COREPER. COREPER deals with matters that are too political for the working groups but too 'technical' for the Council. At COREPER level, an attempt is made to resolve differences between Member States that have not been resolved at working group level so as to facilitate decision-making at ministerial level. All issues must pass through COREPER before they can be included on the agenda for a Council meeting. COREPER meets in two configurations, COREPER II and COREPER I, dealing with different subject areas.

COREPER II

In COREPER II the Member States are represented by their permanent representatives, i.e. by their ambassadors at the permanent representations in Brussels. COREPER II usually meets every week on Wednesday or Thursday and deals with matters in the following areas:

- General affairs and external relations
- Economic and financial matters
- Justice and home affairs
- Overall responsibility for preparation of summits

COREPER I

COREPER I consists of the Deputy Permanent Representatives. COREPER I meets on Wednesdays and most often also on Fridays. The matters dealt with concern the following areas:

- Employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs
- Competitiveness (internal market, industry and research)
- Transport, telecommunications and energy
- Agriculture and fisheries
- Environment
- Education, youth and culture

WORKING GROUPS AND COMMITTEES

Council working groups and committees are responsible for preparing all the items before they are referred to COREPER and finally to ministerial level.

Some 160 working groups and committees are involved in preparing Council meetings. Before the items are passed on to COREPER they are dealt with in one of the working groups. The working groups comprise civil servants from the Member States, usually from the ministries or from the permanent representations in Brussels.

The groups work in different ways depending on the nature of the issue and the group culture. They are also affected by the chair, who as a rule comes from the country holding the Presidency. Some of the working groups of a more technical nature include representatives from the General Secretariat of the Council as permanent chairs.

Some groups meet at fixed times while others are convened at short notice as the need arises. The frequency of meetings varies. Some working groups may meet several times a week, whereas others may only meet once every six months.

A working group normally works through the Commission's proposals thoroughly, article by article. It does not report to COREPER until the matter is regarded as having been studied sufficiently and all the issues that are possible to resolve in the working group have been resolved. On occasions, however, the chair can choose to allow COREPER to resolve an issue that prevents a working group from making progress in its work.

LOBBYING PERMANENT REPRESENTATIONS

Permanent Representations act as an 'extended arm' of their national government in Brussels to ensure that the interests and policies of their country are pursued as effectively as possible in the EU.

In many cases, although the decision making power lies very much at the national level in terms of the Council, the staff of the Permanent Representations are worth meeting as they sit in most of the Working Groups and are more likely to pay attention to an issue for which they received some detailed explanation by stakeholders. It is useful to identify the relevant civil servants in the Permanent Representations covering your issues and to build up a two way relationship with them and to share information.

Additionally Permanent Representations may be able to arrange meetings with the relevant Ministers back in their home state.