Council of the European Union: Facts and Figures

The Council of the European Union – often referred to as the Council of Ministers, or simply the Council – forms one part of the legislature and the budgetary authority of the Union. The Council and European Parliament together adopt much of the EU’s legislation and the Union’s annual budget, on the basis of proposals put forward by the executive, the European Commission. The Council also takes decisions on specific areas of EU action, in particular in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), where it seeks to coordinate Member States’ positions, and concludes – subject to the consent of the Parliament – international agreements, usually negotiated by the Commission on the basis of a mandate from the Council.

The Council of the EU is distinct from the European Council, which is now a separate institution made up of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States. The European Council is responsible for defining the general political directions and priorities for the Union, but does not have formal legislative functions.

The rotating presidency of the Council

The Council is chaired by a rotating presidency. Each Member State takes a six-month term at the helm, chairing Council meetings themselves as well as the gatherings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) and the working parties which prepare the Council’s work. To ensure some degree of continuity between Member States’ terms, ‘trios’ covering three successive presidencies over an 18-month period are designated to try to develop and implement joint work programmes. Informal meetings, at ministerial or official level, often take place in the country holding the presidency, providing an opportunity to discuss priority issues, but without formal decisions being taken. (The Foreign Affairs Council and working parties in that field are chaired by the EU’s High Representative or his representatives.)

The graphic below shows the order in which Member States will take on the presidency and the designated trios. National delegations are seated around the table in order of the rotation, with each moving one place clockwise at the start of every six-month period. In addition, the graphic shows the voting weight of each Member State.
Council configurations

The Council of the EU meets in ten different thematic configurations, as shown in the graphic below, comprised of government ministers from each Member State responsible for the policy area concerned. In these configurations, Member States negotiate with each other to agree the Council’s position. On legislative proposals from the European Commission, the Council, normally represented by its presidency, then negotiates with the European Parliament to agree a compromise text that can then be formally adopted by each institution.

Discussions at ministerial level are prepared by the permanent representatives of the Member States and their deputies – Brussels-based diplomats at ambassador level – who meet in the Committee of Permanent Representatives of the governments of the Member States to the European Union. This body is known by the acronym ‘Coreper’, after its title in French. In fact, there are two parallel divisions, Coreper I, the deputy permanent representatives, covering the more technical Council formations; and Coreper II, the permanent representatives, who deal with the most politically sensitive issues. Below the ambassadors, a large number of working parties discuss legislative proposals in detail and prepare other work for the Council. Member States are represented on these working parties either by specialist officials, who travel from national ministries, or by staff in their Brussels permanent representations. The graphic above shows the number of preparatory bodies under each thematic Council configuration.

Council meetings

The Council met 75 times, an average of just over six times per month, in 2018 (not including informal meetings). However, many preparatory meetings take place to pave the way for each occasion the Council convenes at ministerial level. The graphics below show the number of meetings at each level in recent years.
Historical overview of Council presidencies

The Council held its first meeting in January 1958, as the Council of the European Economic Community, with Belgium's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Victor Larock, in the chair.

This graphic illustrates the Council presidencies held by EU Member States over the subsequent 60 years. It distinguishes between presidencies in the first and second half of any given year, as the annual working schedules of the EU institutions have a bearing on the workload of a presidency's time in charge. For instance, the presidency in the second half of a given year generally deals with the entire process of adopting the following year's EU budget. Meetings during those presidencies tend to be concentrated in the four months from September to December, rather than spread across all six months, as is the case for first-half presidencies.

For the schedule of presidencies in the coming years, see the graphic on the first page of this publication.
Legal acts adopted by the Council

In 2018, the Council adopted a total of 610 legal acts – regulations, directives or decisions. This included 85 legislative acts (that is, following a legislative procedure as set out in the Treaties). Most of these were adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure, with Parliament co-deciding with the Council. A few followed a special legislative procedure, with Parliament either required to give its consent or merely being consulted for its opinion. In addition, the Council adopted a total of 525 non-legislative acts. Of these, the Parliament was required to give its consent or opinion in 44 cases. Whereas legislative acts are in most cases of general application, non-legislative acts are usually of direct interest to specific persons or bodies only.

The graphic below depicts the legislative (right) and non-legislative acts (left) adopted by the Council from 2014 to 2018.
Voting weights in the Council

Voting system
The Council takes its decisions by using three distinct voting procedures, depending on the specific issue under discussion. Qualified majority voting (QMV) has now become the most commonly used system.

A majority of Council members have to be present for a vote to take place.

Voting weights
When qualified majority voting is used, weights are also based on the size of Member States’ populations.

The graphic on the right illustrates this voting key, with countries grouped (for this chart) by the political group of which the leading party in government in December 2019 is a member.

Elections from 2020 onwards
The graphic below shows the timing of the next regular general election in each Member State, any of which could logically lead to a change in the political composition of the Council.
Attendance at Council meetings

The Council meets, on average, more than once a week. Some configurations, including Foreign Affairs, General Affairs, and Economics and Finance (ECOFIN), meet more or less monthly, whereas others meet only a few times each year. Configurations that meet more regularly tend to have single-day meetings, whereas others often have meetings over two days. In practice, those with broad portfolios tend to be subdivided, with the TTE Council, for instance, often holding separate sessions to discuss telecoms, transport or energy questions.

The graphic to the right shows on average the total number of Member States’ representatives per meeting in each Council configuration for each of the four years. Those Council configurations that meet most frequently tend to see only one representative per Member State at individual meetings, although there are significant differences in the average attendance between years – in both directions – for nearly all configurations.

Female participation in Council meetings

The graphic opposite shows the proportions of women and men among the representatives of all 28 Member States, plus Commissioners, in 2018, by Council configuration. The graphic below shows the proportion of women and men representing each Member State at all Council meetings in 2018.
Seniority of delegates at Council meetings

Member States decide themselves who represents them in each Council meeting. Often the division of portfolios in the national government means that the subjects on the agenda of a Council meeting fall within the competences of different ministers. It is thus common, particularly for Council meetings which run over two days, for a national delegation to include several ministers, with the person speaking for the Member State changing depending on the topic. Regional ministers may also represent their Member State in the Council, depending on national arrangements. This is the case for Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom.

The graphic below shows, by Council configuration, whether a given Member State was most often represented by a cabinet-level minister or by a more junior minister or official, in 2018. It also illustrates the average number of representatives taking the Member State's chair over the course of a meeting, by Council configuration. While average delegation sizes are broadly comparable within each configuration, there are significant differences in the seniority of delegates among Member States, illustrating the different priorities attached to the different configurations – particularly those in the remit of Coreper I – by different Member States.

When a minister is unable to attend, the permanent representative or his or her deputy, depending on the configuration concerned, normally takes the Member State’s chair. They cannot vote; however, a minister present may exercise a vote for a second Member State, in addition to their own.

In this graphic, the category 'minister' represents a cabinet-level minister, while 'other national representative' indicates a junior minister or senior official, depending on the national system of the Member State concerned.

Council meetings normally take place in Brussels (although the Council meets in Luxembourg in April, June and October). Even if Belgium and Luxembourg regularly send large delegations, geographical distance does not appear to discourage other Member States – with Sweden, Slovakia, Portugal, Malta, Romania and Cyprus all among the top ten for delegation size.
Budget

The Council’s overall budget for 2018 amounted to €573 million, 57 per cent of which was devoted to its establishment plan, essentially budgeted salaries (as depicted in the graphic to the right).

The next biggest item in the Council’s budget is interpreting costs. While interpretation into all EU languages is provided for Council meetings, most preparatory bodies operate with interpretation to and from fewer languages. Member States receive an annual envelope to cover the costs of their requests for interpretation, and this is linked in part to the envelopes to cover travel costs for meetings. Thus if interpretation into or from their language is requested for relatively few meetings, the Member State concerned will have a larger envelope available to support the costs of delegates’ travel to meetings.

Staff of the General Secretariat

The Council’s General Secretariat has a total of 2 889 staff, 57 per cent of whom are women and 43 per cent men (December 2019 figures). By far the largest directorate-general is the Translation Service, which accounts for almost one third (878) of the total staff.

The General Secretariat supports the work of both the Council and the European Council, in particular supporting the rotating presidency of the former and the full-time President of the latter. It facilitates and hosts more than 4 000 meetings per year, from Heads of State or Government level down to that of officials. In addition to assisting the Council’s rotating presidency in its efforts to find compromises among Member States, the General Secretariat also provides legal advice to both presidencies and the Council/European Council more broadly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DATA SOURCES

The authors thank Christian Dietrich for his substantial contribution to this publication, through design, conception and data modelling for various drafts. In addition, Marc Hall, Jack Meredith, Hannah Nicklas and Johannes van der Vegt have each worked on data relating to Council meetings.

Sources


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