

# European Council: Facts and Figures

The European Council brings together the Heads of State or Government of the 27 EU Member States in regular 'summit' meetings which seek to define the overall political direction and priorities of the European Union. This Briefing offers a selection of key facts and figures about this institution, detailing its membership, role, work and development over time.

## Membership of the European Council

The European Council consists of the Heads of State or Government of the 27 EU Member States, who constitute the voting members of the institution, as well as the Presidents of the European Council (currently Charles Michel) and of the European Commission (currently Ursula von der Leyen), who have no vote. Although not a member, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP, currently Josep Borrell) also takes part in European Council meetings. The President of the European Parliament (currently Roberta Metsola) is 'invited to be heard' at European Council meetings, followed by an exchange of views. This practice, which originated in 1987 and was codified in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, normally features as the first point on the agenda of each European Council meeting.

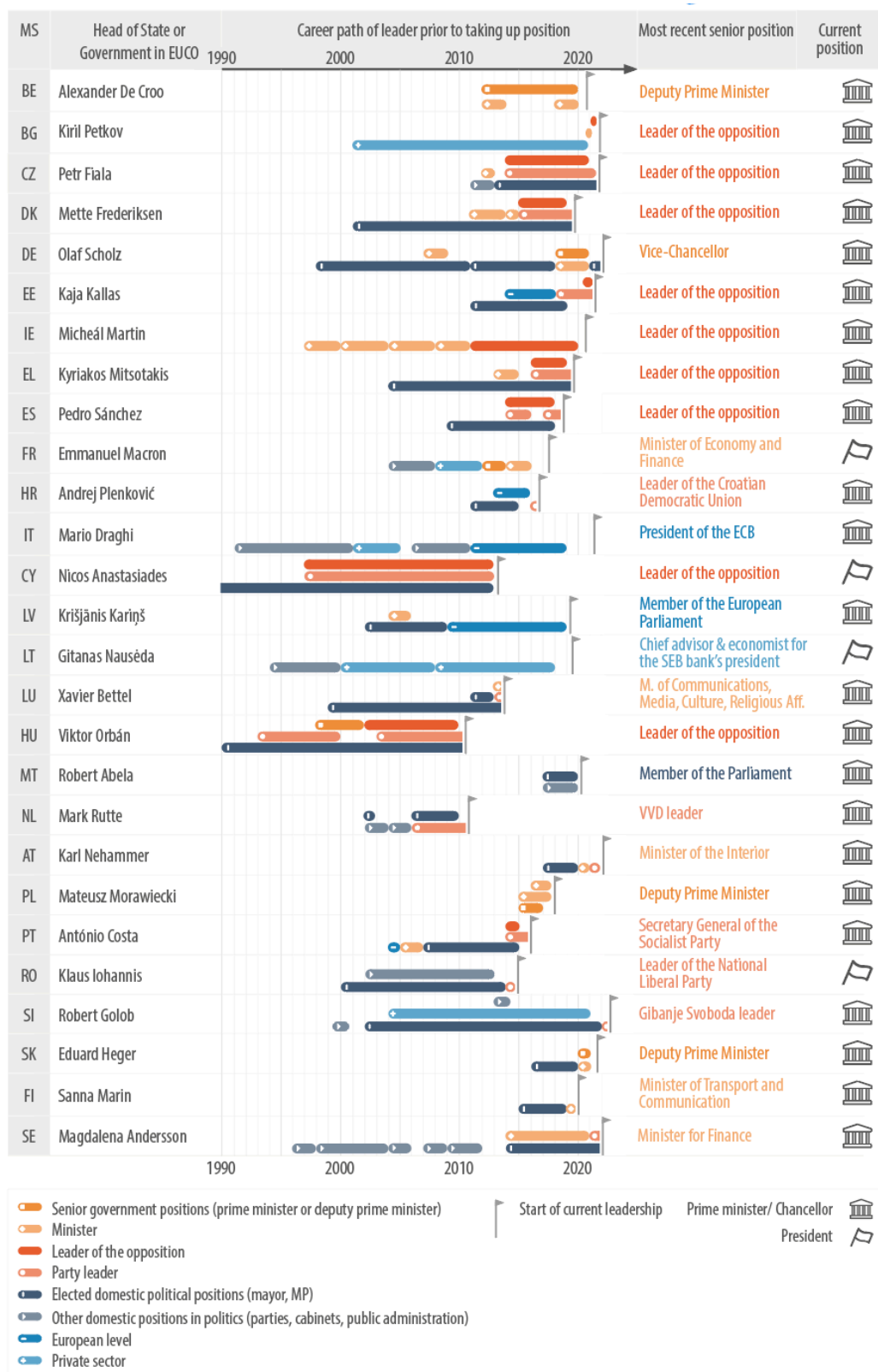
 <b>Alexander De Croo</b> Belgium Prime Minister 2020	 <b>Kiril Petkov</b> Bulgaria Prime Minister 2021	 <b>Petr Fiala</b> Czechia Prime Minister 2021
 <b>Mette Frederiksen</b> Denmark Prime Minister 2019	 <b>Olaf Scholz</b> Germany Chancellor 2021	 <b>Kaja Kallas</b> Estonia Prime Minister 2021
 <b>Micheál Martin</b> Ireland Prime Minister 2020	 <b>Kyriakos Mitsotakis</b> Greece Prime Minister 2019	 <b>Pedro Sánchez</b> Spain Prime Minister 2018
 <b>Emmanuel Macron</b> France President 2017	 <b>Andrej Plenković</b> Croatia Prime Minister 2016	 <b>Mario Draghi</b> Italy Prime Minister 2021
 <b>Nikos Anastasiades</b> Cyprus President 2013	 <b>Krišjānis Kariņš</b> Latvia Prime Minister 2019	 <b>Gitanas Nausėda</b> Lithuania President 2019
 <b>Xavier Bettel</b> Luxembourg Prime Minister 2013	 <b>Viktor Orbán</b> Hungary Prime Minister 2010	 <b>Robert Abela</b> Malta Prime Minister 2020
 <b>Mark Rutte</b> Netherlands Prime Minister 2010	 <b>Karl Nehammer</b> Austria Chancellor 2021	 <b>Mateusz Morawiecki</b> Poland Prime Minister 2017
 <b>António Costa</b> Portugal Prime Minister 2015	 <b>Klaus Iohannis</b> Romania President 2014	 <b>Robert Golob</b> Slovenia Prime Minister 2022
 <b>Eduard Heger</b> Slovakia Prime Minister 2021	 <b>Sanna Marin</b> Finland Prime Minister 2019	 <b>Magdalena Andersson</b> Sweden Prime Minister 2021
23  Heads of Government		4  Heads of State
 <b>Charles Michel</b> European Council - Pres- 2019		 <b>Ursula von der Leyen</b> European Commission - President 2019

The chart above shows the current members of the European Council and the year that they joined the institution. The great majority of leaders in the European Council (23) are Heads of Government, while a small number (four) hold the office of Head of State.<sup>1</sup> The representation of a given Member State is entirely defined at national level, based on national constitutional provisions.



## Background of members of the European Council

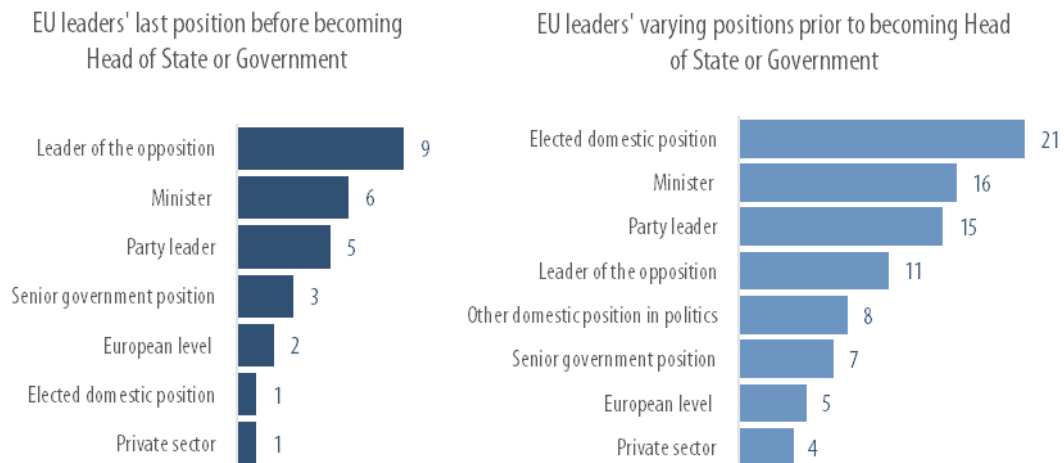
The leaders who serve in the European Council do not, of course, start their political career as a Head of State or Government. The chart below shows their most recent political office, as well as other positions they had held, before becoming a member of the European Council.



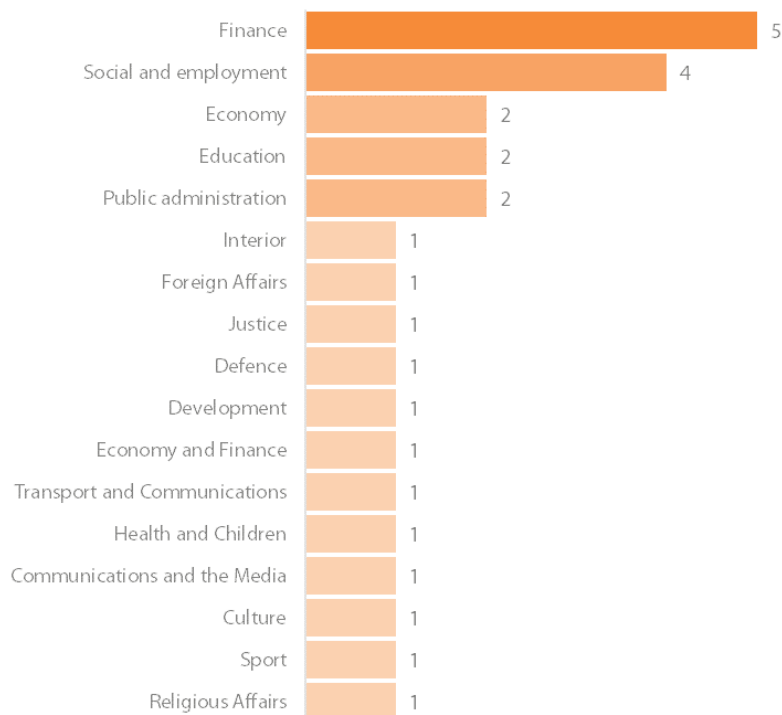
## Types of political job previously held

Looking at the different types of job that the current Heads of State or Government have held, both immediately prior to taking up their current office and more broadly in their careers, the graphics below show (perhaps unsurprisingly) that most have been either leader of the opposition and/or a minister before taking their current position. One-third won elections, moving to head their government directly from leading the opposition.

Five of the current EU Heads of State or Government have held positions at EU level before entering the European Council, with four of them having been a Member of the European Parliament (MEP).

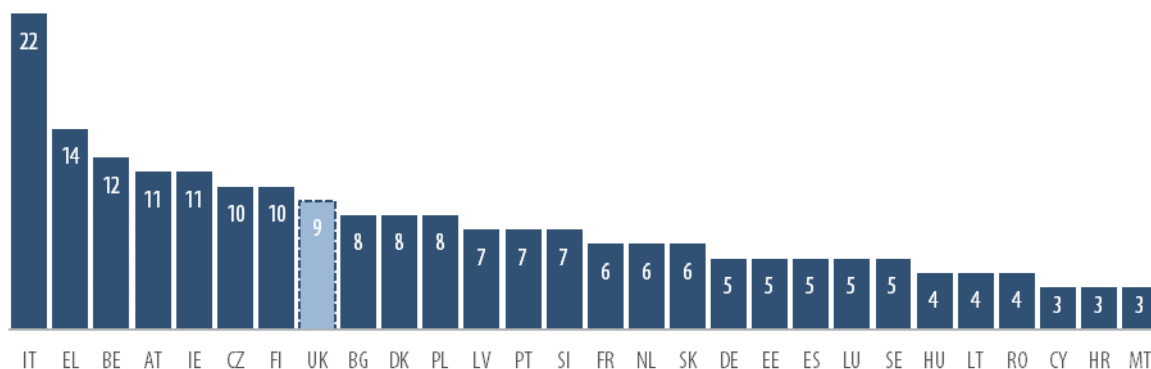


The breakdown of ministerial portfolios previously held by current Heads of State or Government suggests that the finance ministry or social and employment ministry offer the best springboard for higher office.



## Number of different members of the European Council per country

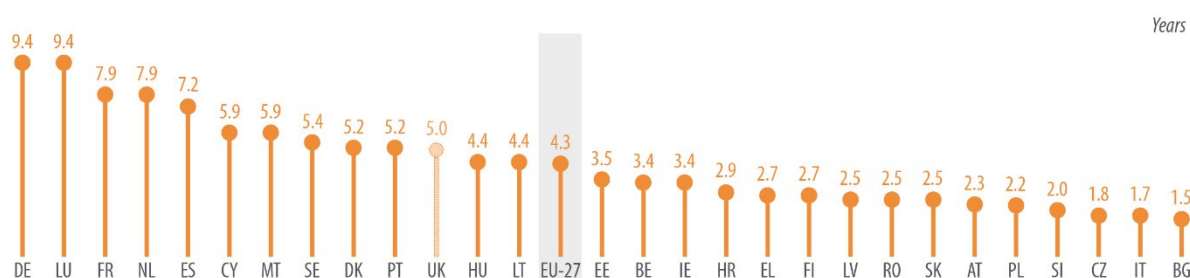
From its first meeting in 1975 up to May 2022, a total of 208 individuals have represented their Member State as Head of State or Government in the European Council. The chart below indicates the number of individual members representing each country over time (starting from the date of accession for those Member States that have joined since 1975).



## Average length of European Council membership, by country

The chart below shows the average duration of European Council membership (in years) for the leaders of each Member State. There are significant variations between Member States, reflecting the electoral cycle and frequency of changes in leadership in the country concerned since its accession to the EU (or since the European Council was established in 1975, for the first nine Member States).

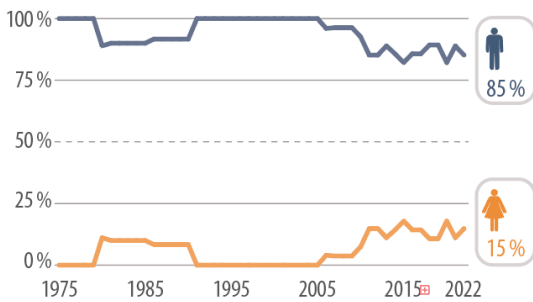
Whereas the leaders of some Member States have, on average, each spent barely two years in the European Council, the leaders of others have spent four or five times as long in the institution. The average tenure of German chancellors and Luxembourgish prime ministers has been over nine years, whereas the Bulgarian, Czech and Italian prime ministers have served for an average of less than two years.



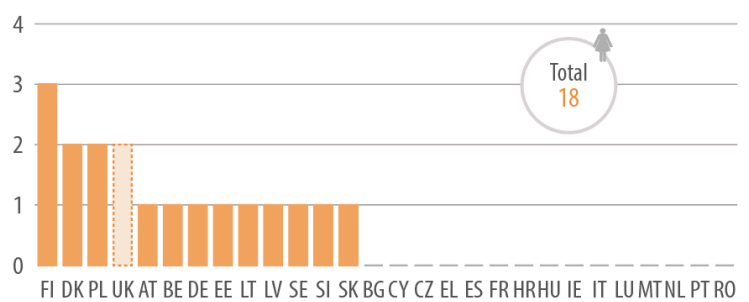
## Gender of European Council members

As can be seen from the chart below, since its creation, the European Council has been a largely male-dominated forum. Until 1979, there had been no female Heads of State or Government in the European Council, but female membership has increased in recent years. In 2015, with five women among the Heads of State or Government, female membership reached its highest level to date. If one also includes the President of the European Commission, there are currently five female members of the European Council.

Gender balance of European Council members



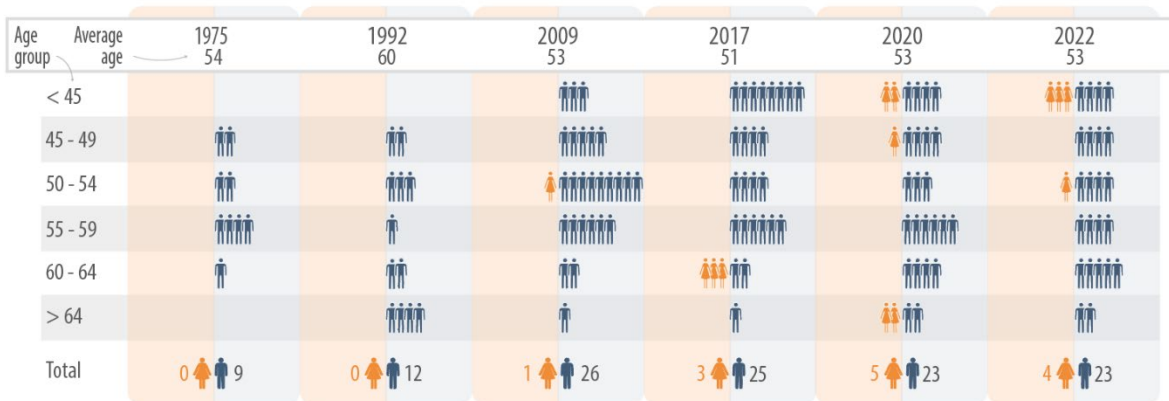
Women among European Council members, by Member State - 1975-2022



Note: Values in the line chart (on the left) represent EUCO leaders in office on 1 January each year, one person per year and per Member State. The graph on the right side counts all female leaders, regardless of the time or duration of their leadership.

The chart to the right above also shows that 13 Member States have had female leaders to date, with Finland having three who have sat in the European Council since its accession in 1994.

## Age of European Council members



Note: Values represent EUCO leaders in office on 1 January each year, one person per year and per Member State.

The chart above shows that the average age of European Council members peaked in 1992 at 60 years, but has since fallen, stabilising recently in the low 50s. It also shows that the proportion of members who are under 45 has increased substantially in the last five years. Seven EU Heads of State or Government out of 27 are currently under 45 years old.

## Coalition governments in the European Council

The head of a coalition government needs to take the views of their coalition partner(s) into account and cannot simply follow their own party line in the European Council. In early 2022, 18 leaders in the European Council led a coalition government in their Member State. These coalition governments collectively included a total of 68 different national parties.

The chart below shows all national political parties belonging to Member State governments in May 2022 and their affiliation to European political parties and/or political groups in the European Parliament.

MS	HoG in EU CO	No of parties	Party and group affiliation of HoG (1)/ Coalition partners (2-7)							Head of Government (HoG) and national political party names
			1 p g	2 p g	3 p g	4 p g	5 p g	6 p g	7 p g	
BE	Yes	7	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	1. Alexander De Croo, Open VLD 2. Socialist Party 3. RM 4. Ecolo 5. C&D 6. Forward 7. Groen
BG	Yes	4	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	1. Kiril Petkov, PP (electoral alliance of VOLT, SEC and PDS) 2. BSP 3. ITN 4. DB (electoral alliance of DSB, Yes Bulgaria and the Green Movement)
CZ	Yes	5	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	1. Petr Fiala, ODS 2. Pirati 3. STAN 4. TOP 09 5. KDU-ČSL
DK	Yes	1	●●							1. Mette Frederiksen, Social Democrats
DE	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Olaf Scholz, SPD 2. Grüne 3. FDP
EE	Yes	2	●●	●●						1. Kaja Kallas, Reform 2. The Estonian Centre Party
IE	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Micheál Martin, Fianna Fail 2. Fine Gael 3. Green Party
EL	Yes	1	●●							1. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, New Democracy
ES	Yes	5	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●		1. Pedro Sánchez, PSOE, 2. PSC 3. Podemos 4. United Left 5. PCE
FR	No	1	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●			1. Élisabeth Borne, La République En Marche! 2. MoDem 3. RAD 4. Agir 5. TDP
HR	Yes	2	●●	●●						1. Andrej Plenković, HDZ 2. SDSS
IT	Yes	6	○	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	1. Mario Draghi, Independent 2. Lega 3. Partito Democratico 4. Forza Italia 5. Italia Viva 6. Articolo Uno 7. Movimento 5 Stelle
CY	Yes	1	●●							1. Nicos Anastasiades, DISY
LV	Yes	5	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●		1. Krišjānis Kariņš, New Unity 2. AP! 3. JKP 4. KPV LV 5. NA
LT	No	3	●●	●●	●●	●●				1. Ingrida Šimonytė, Homeland Union 2. Liberal Movement 3. Freedom Party
LU	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Xavier Bettel, Democratic Party 2. Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party 3. The Greens
HU	Yes	2	●●	●●						1. Viktor Orbán, Fidesz 2. KDNP
MT	Yes	1	●●							1. Robert Abela, Partit Laburista
NL	Yes	5	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●		1. Mark Rutte, VVD 2. CDA 3. D66 4. PVDA 5. GL
AT	Yes	2	●●	●●						1. Karl Nehammer, ÖVP 2. Die Grünen
PL	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS 2. Porozumienie 3. Solidarna Polska
PT	Yes	1	●●							1. António Costa, Partido Socialista
RO	No	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Florin Cițu, PNL 2. USR PLUS, RMDSZ
SI	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●					1. Robert Golob, Gibanje Svoboda 2. SD 3. Levica
SK	Yes	3	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●			1. Eduard Heger, OĽaNO 2. SR 3. SaS 4. ZĽ
FI	Yes	5	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●		1. Sanna Marin, Social Democratic Party of Finland 2. Centre Party 3. Left Alliance 4. VIHR 5. SFPRKP
SE	Yes	1	●●							1. Magdalena Andersson, SAP

European political party (p)

- EPP
- PES
- ALDE
- European Green Party
- ID
- ECR
- The European Left
- No affiliation
- Independent
- European Democratic Party

Political group in the European Parliament (g)

- EPP
- S&D
- Renew Europe
- Greens/ EFA
- ID
- ECR
- The Left
- NI
- Independent

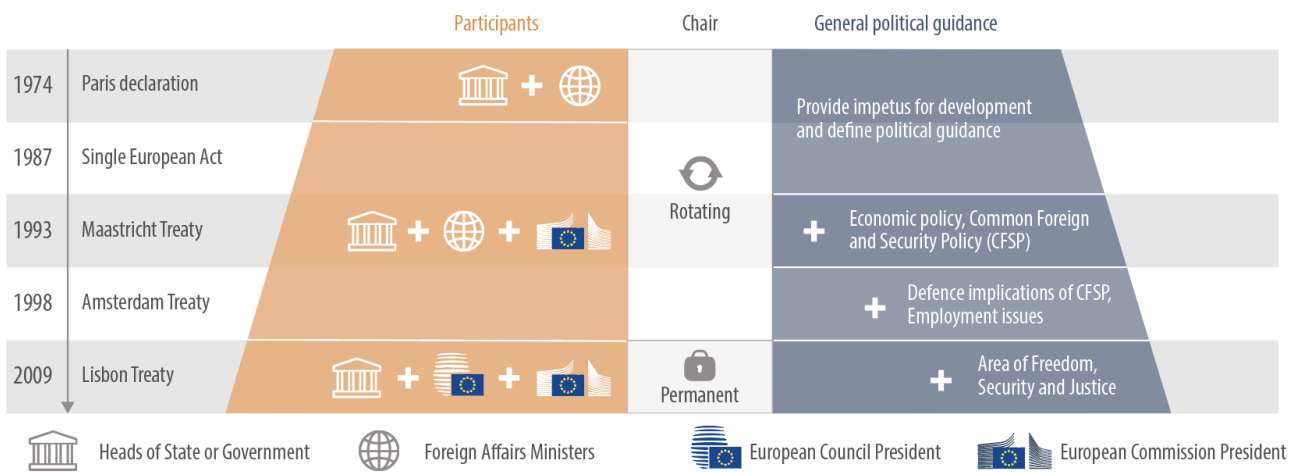


## Role of the European Council

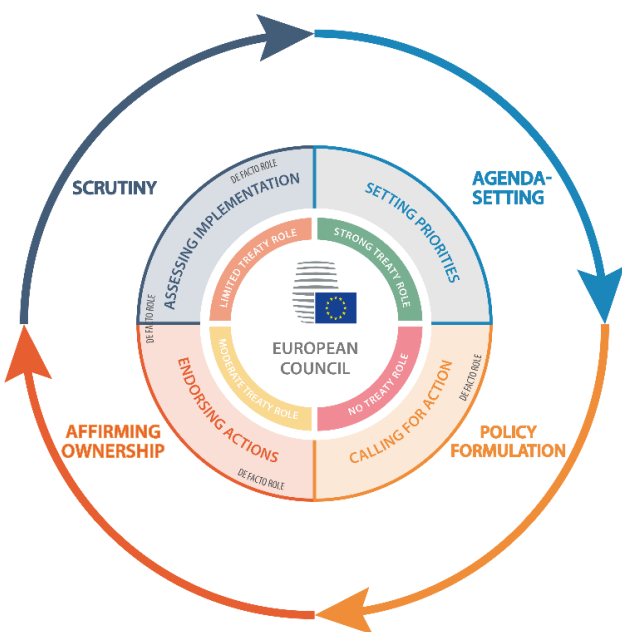
The role of the European Council, as defined in Article 15(1) TEU, is to ‘provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development’ and to define its ‘general political directions and priorities’. Although EU leaders have been meeting routinely in the European Council since 1975, that title did not appear in the Treaties until 1987. At that point, the President of the European Commission also officially became a member of the European Council.

It was only with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 that the European Council and its role were, for the first time, broadly defined. The office of full-time President was created in 2009 by the Lisbon Treaty, which made the European Council a formal EU institution. The Lisbon Treaty also ended the routine attendance of foreign affairs ministers at European Council meetings; until then, they had taken part in meetings to assist their corresponding Head of State or Government.

The graphic below shows how both the membership and organisation of the European Council have developed through successive Treaty changes, and how the institution’s role and areas of responsibility have expanded.



## The European Council in the EU policy cycle

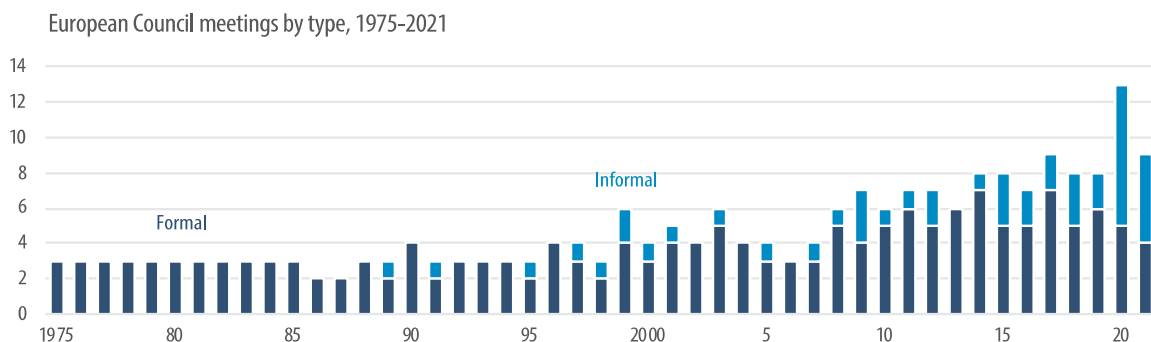


Herman Van Rompuy, its then President, said in 2011 that a European Council meeting ‘is both the end of a process and the start of new beginnings’. The European Council’s involvement in the EU policy cycle is very broad and continuous, covering tasks from agenda-setting to exercising scrutiny. In successive stages, the European Council (i) sets long-term objectives (agenda-setting); (ii) calls for action by other EU institutions (policy formulation); (iii) endorses actions by other EU institutions (affirming ownership); and (iv) assesses policy implementation at European and national levels (scrutiny). In practice, the European Council’s activities often go beyond the role envisaged in the Treaties. The level of involvement has a significant impact both on the role of the other EU institutions within the policy cycle and the functioning of the ordinary legislative procedure.

## Frequency and type of European Council meetings

The Lisbon Treaty specifies that ‘the European Council shall meet twice every six months, convened by its President’. If required, the President can also convene special meetings. While the number of meetings formally required was previously only two or three per year, in practice the European Council has nearly always met at least four times a year since 1996. The number of meetings grew from 2008, as a result of the global financial crisis and subsequent euro-area debt crisis, the migration crisis, and most recently the coronavirus pandemic, reaching an all-time high of 13 meetings in 2020.

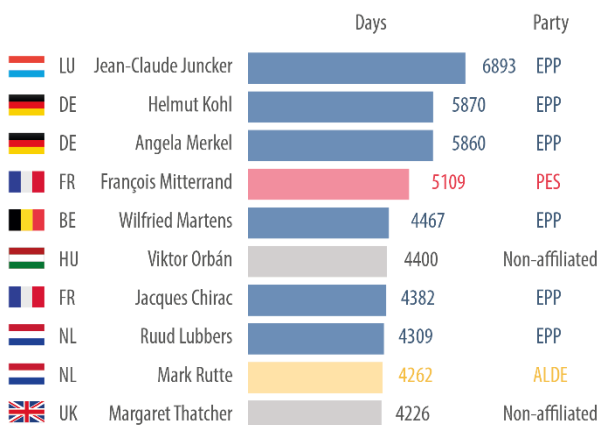
Not only has the total number of meetings increased over the years, but the types and formats of meetings of EU leaders have also diversified, often taking place consecutively. The multiplication of formats has developed to a situation in which EU Heads of State or Government, when meeting over two days in Brussels, actually participate in several types of meeting – some of which also have a different level of formality or membership (for example, Leaders’ Agenda meetings, Euro Summits and Article 50 meetings). Since 2020, the Heads of State or Government have also met by video-conference as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. All of the European Council formats can basically be divided into formal and informal meetings; the main differences are, on the one hand, the formality of the preparations (i.e. annotated draft agenda, guidelines, draft conclusions) and, on the other, the expected result (i.e. the need to adopt formal conclusions and decisions). The graphic below shows all formal and informal European Council meetings between 1975 and the end of 2021.



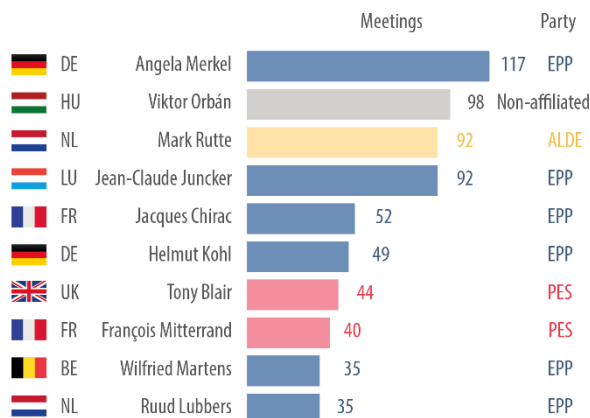
## Total meetings from 1975 to 2022 and ‘top 10’ attendees

By the end of May 2022, the European Council had met 227 times since its creation.<sup>2</sup> The first chart below shows the 10 leaders who have spent longest in office as Head of State or Government and the number of days they ‘belonged’ to the European Council. The second chart below shows the 10 leaders who have attended the highest number of European Council meetings and their affiliation to European political parties. The difference in the ranking of the two charts is linked to the fact that, in recent years, there have been more meetings than there were in the early years.

Top 10 EU Heads of State or Government by days in European Council



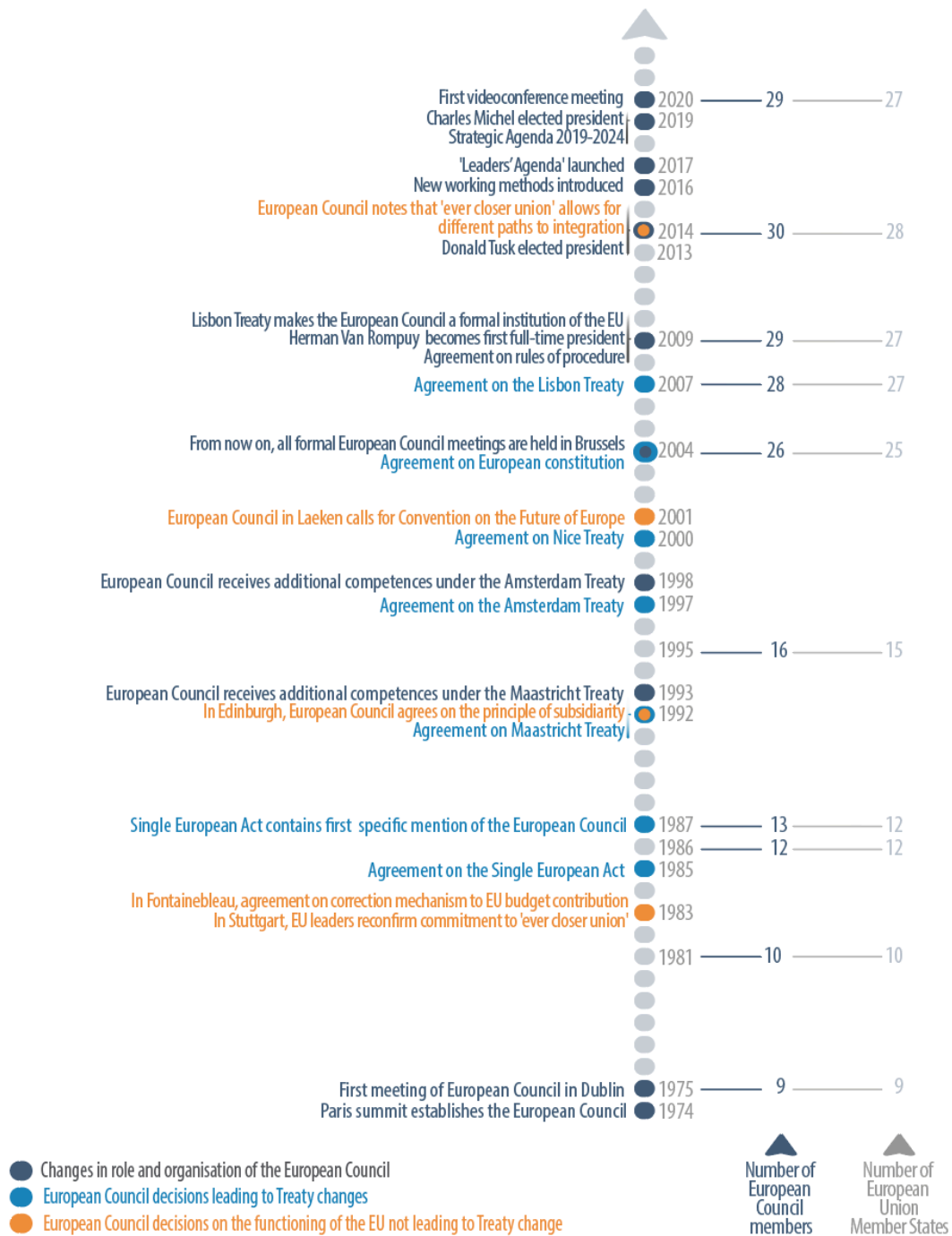
Top 10 EU Heads of State or Government by European Council meetings





# Historical evolution of the European Council

Although Heads of State or Government had met occasionally from 1961 for ad hoc European summits, it was not until the Paris Summit of December 1974 that European leaders decided to formalise this practice and started meeting regularly as the 'European Council', a name promoted by the then French President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The timeline below shows some of the milestones in the European Council's institutional and organisational development, as well as the growth in its number of members as a result of successive EU enlargements. A full-time President was established in 2009, when the European Council became an EU institution in its own right.

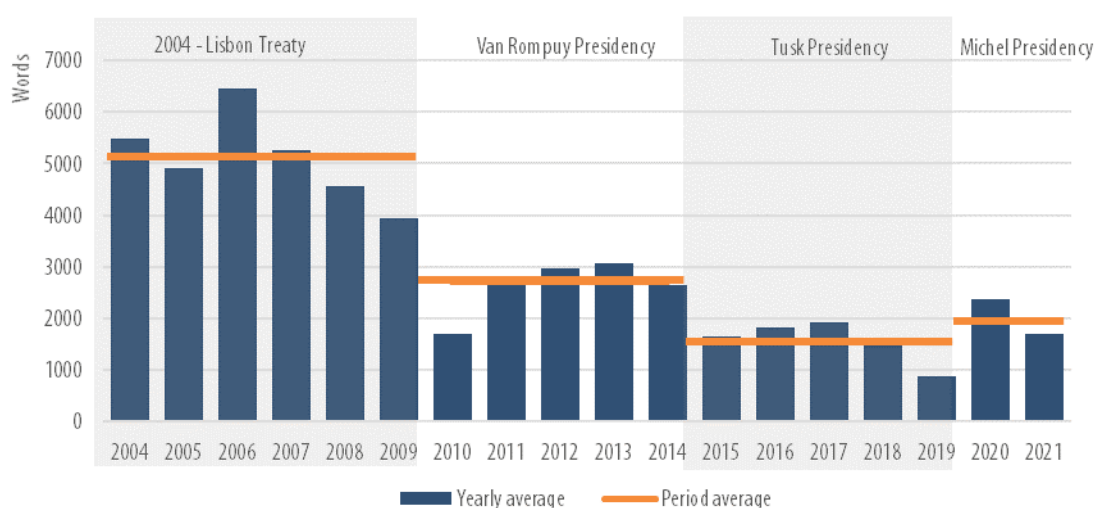


## European Council conclusions

The European Council has always used the 'conclusions' of its formal meetings to exercise influence at the different stages of the EU policy cycle and to give political guidance on EU policy. They are the main instrument through which the institution gives general political directions for the European Union and expresses priorities on different policy issues. The conclusions can set policy objectives, request other EU institutions and actors to carry out certain tasks or activities (for example, inviting the Commission to come up with a proposal on a certain issue, or calling on the 'co-legislators' (Council of Ministers and European Parliament) to speed up their deliberations), or comment on developments concerning on-going (legislative) 'files' (for example, asking the co-legislators to come to an agreement on a given proposal by a certain deadline).

The chart below shows that the conclusions of the European Council have become, on average, shorter over the last 12 years than they were in the period before it was made a distinct EU institution and the post of full-time President created. President Van Rompuy reduced the length of the conclusions by a third compared to the average length of the conclusions under the rotating presidency in the five-year period before the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Donald Tusk reduced the conclusions by a further half compared to the average of the previous five years. During Charles Michel's term so far, the average length of the conclusions has increased slightly, but they still remain shorter than before Donald Tusk's mandate.

Average word count of European Council conclusions, by year and by presidency



## Main topics discussed by the European Council

The chart below shows that, between December 2009 and December 2014, under the presidency of Herman Van Rompuy, the most prominent topics to feature in European Council conclusions were economic governance, external relations, and jobs and growth. The high degree of attention paid to economic issues was clearly a result of the global financial crisis.

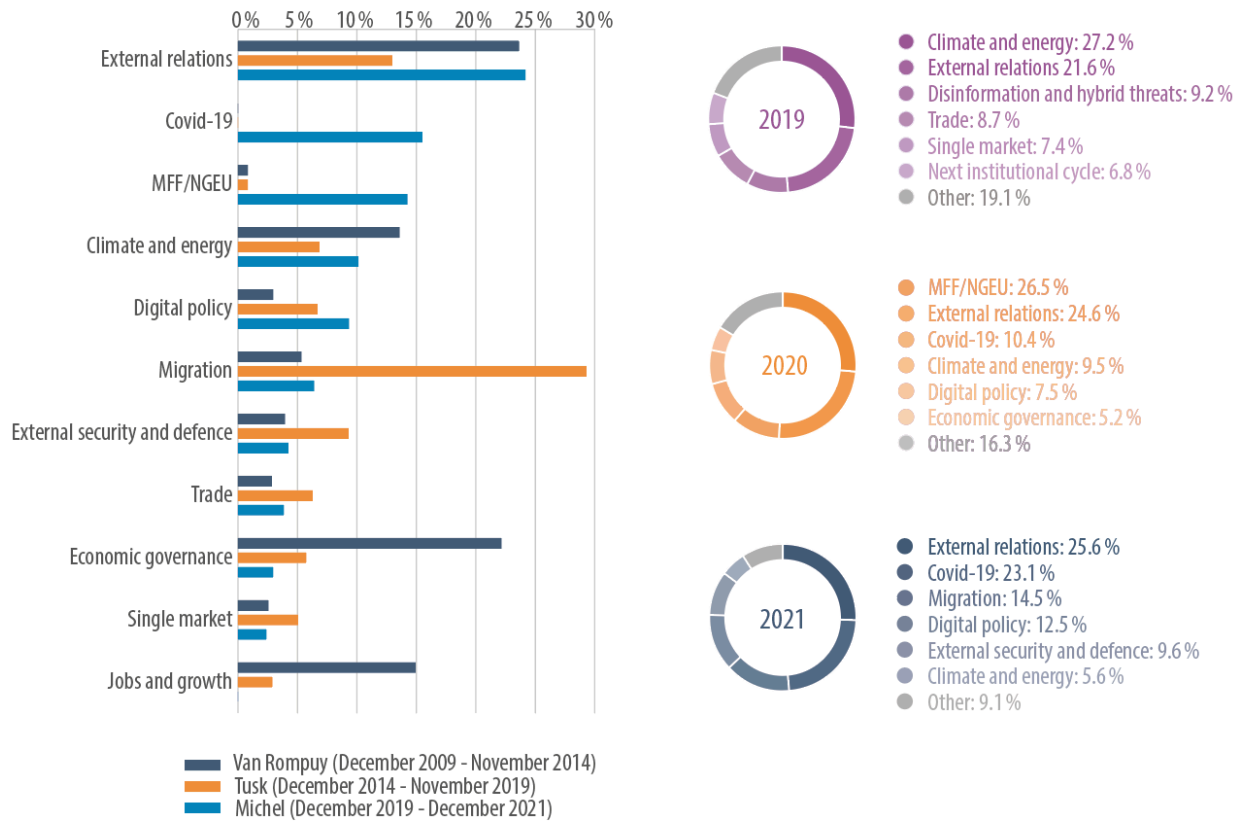
Due to the unprecedented flows of migrants into the EU from 2015, migration was the most prominent topic during Donald Tusk's mandate as President of the European Council (December 2014 to November 2019). Other topics which featured prominently in the conclusions during his tenure were external relations, external security and defence, digital policy, and climate and energy.

During Charles Michel's first term (December 2019 to end of May 2022), the most visible topics were external relations, the coronavirus pandemic, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery fund.

The chart below shows the main topics discussed during the two mandates of Herman Van Rompuy and Donald Tusk, as well as during Charles Michel’s first mandate, based on the proportion of the conclusions devoted to each issue. The spiral charts show the topics discussed in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Main topics in conclusions of the European Council, per presidency

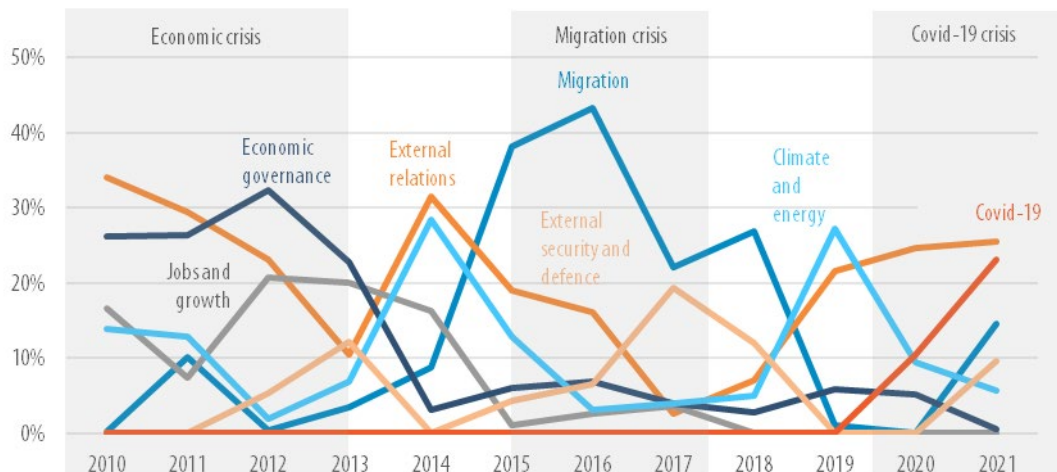
Main topics in conclusions of the European Council, between 2019 and 2021



Note: The above chart shows topics covered by a minimum of 5% of EUCO conclusions in at least one of the three presidencies.

The chart below outlines the varying average annual prominence of major policy areas in European Council conclusions over the last decade.

Word count of European Council conclusions, 2010-2021



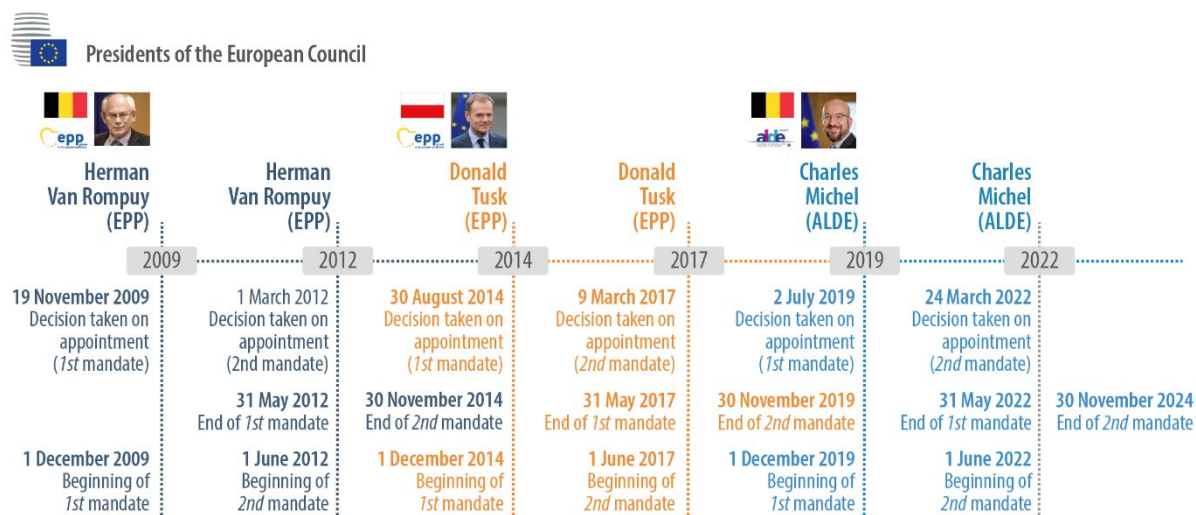
## President of the European Council

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty established the office of full-time President of the European Council. Previously, the European Council was chaired on a rotating basis by the Head of State or Government of the Member State holding the six-month presidency of the Council of the EU (Council of Ministers). The full-time President is appointed by qualified majority vote for a 30-month term, renewable once. The principal aim of this important change was to bring greater continuity and coherence to the work of the European Council.

The role of the President of the European Council is set out in Article 15(6) TEU, whereby he or she:

- chairs the European Council and drives forward its work;
- ensures the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council, in cooperation with the President of the Commission and based on the work of the General Affairs Council;
- endeavours to facilitate cohesion and consensus within the European Council;
- presents a report to the European Parliament after each meeting of the European Council;
- ensures the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

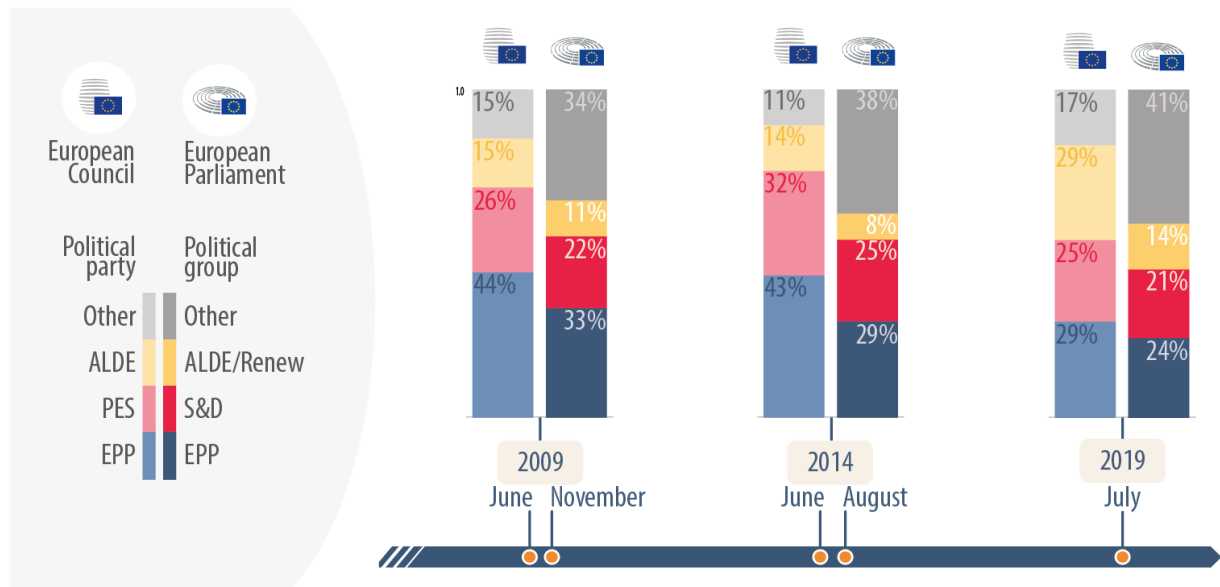
Since 1 December 2019, [Charles Michel](#) has been the third person to hold the office of President of the European Council.



The choice of the individual for the office of President of the European Council is related in part to the candidate's affiliation to the different European political parties, and to the party political balance in the European Council and the European Parliament at the time.

The chart below outlines the political weight the main European political families had in the European Council and in the European Parliament in 2009, 2014 and 2019.

## Weights of the political parties at the start of recent political cycles

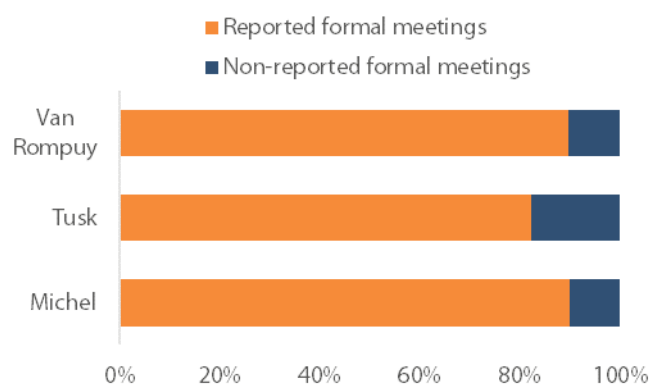


## Reporting to the European Parliament

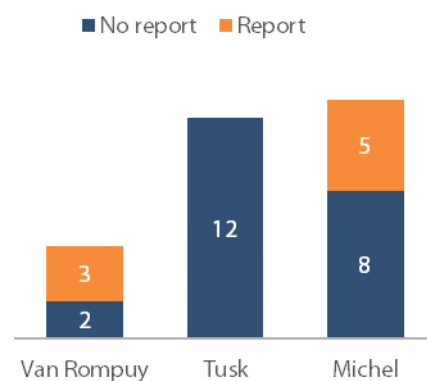
While not directly accountable to the European Parliament, the President of the European Council is required to present a report to the Parliament after each meeting of the institution. This obligation was established by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, with the duty originally performed by the Head of State or Government of the Member State holding the six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

The report to the Parliament usually takes the form of a statement by the President of the European Council, followed by a plenary debate; occasionally, there is a written report. The President may also report on informal European Council meetings, but this practice is neither required nor systematic. As the graphics below show, the reporting frequency has varied between the different full-time Presidents of the European Council so far, with some only reporting on formal meetings and others also doing so after informal meetings.

European Council President's reports for formal meetings, share of reported and non-reported meetings



European Council President's reports for informal meetings

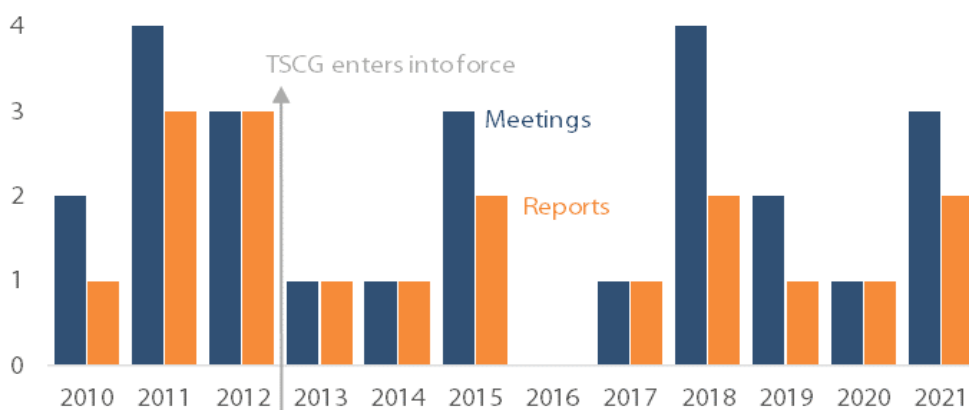


Note: The graphics above only include reports in person (to plenary or to an open meeting of the Conference of Presidents) and not written reports.

## Euro Summits

Euro Summits are gatherings of the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States which use the euro as their currency. In addition to the President of the Euro Summit, the President of the European Commission participates in Euro Summit meetings, while the President of the European Central Bank (ECB) may also be invited to take part. The President of the Euro Summit, who is responsible for convoking and chairing Euro Summit meetings, is appointed by leaders of the Member States whose currency is the euro by simple majority at the same time as the European Council elects its President and for the same (30-month) term of office. In practice, all Euro Summit Presidents to date – Herman Van Rompuy, Donald Tusk and Charles Michel – have simultaneously been President of the European Council, although this is not a formal requirement.

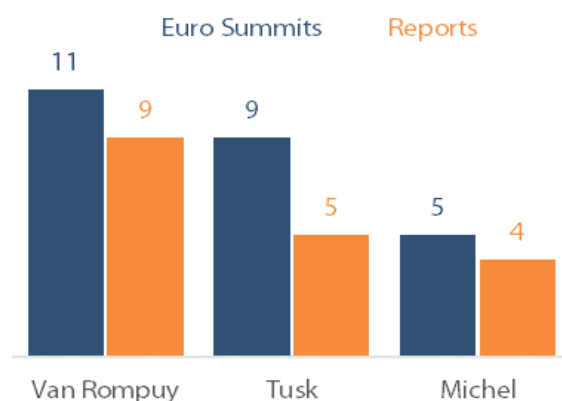
The purpose of Euro Summits is to ensure the smooth functioning of Economic and Monetary Union; thus, euro-area leaders discuss issues such as economic governance and coordination of economic policy. Leaders have met in this format since 2008, following a proposal by France’s then President, Nicolas Sarkozy, made in the context of the global financial crisis. The practice was formalised in the 2012 Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG, or Fiscal Compact Treaty). The Treaty stipulates that the Heads of State or Government of the euro area must meet informally at least twice a year. The chart below shows that, in several years, fewer Euro Summit meetings have taken place than the two required by the TSCG.



The TSCG requires the Euro Summit President to present a report to the European Parliament after each meeting. The graphic shows, however, that this requirement has not always been fulfilled in recent years, as with European Council meeting reports.

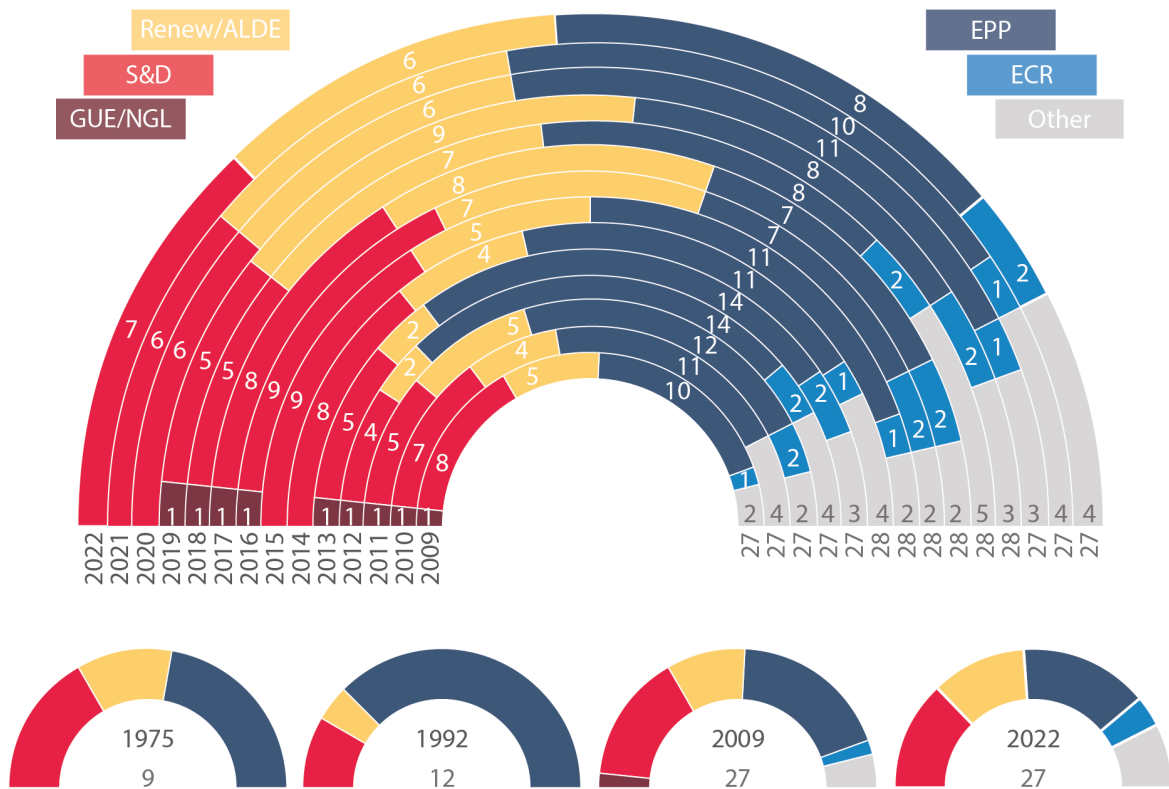
The chart to the right outlines the reporting regularity of European Council Presidents to the European Parliament after Euro Summit meetings.

Euro Summit meetings and reports to the European Parliament





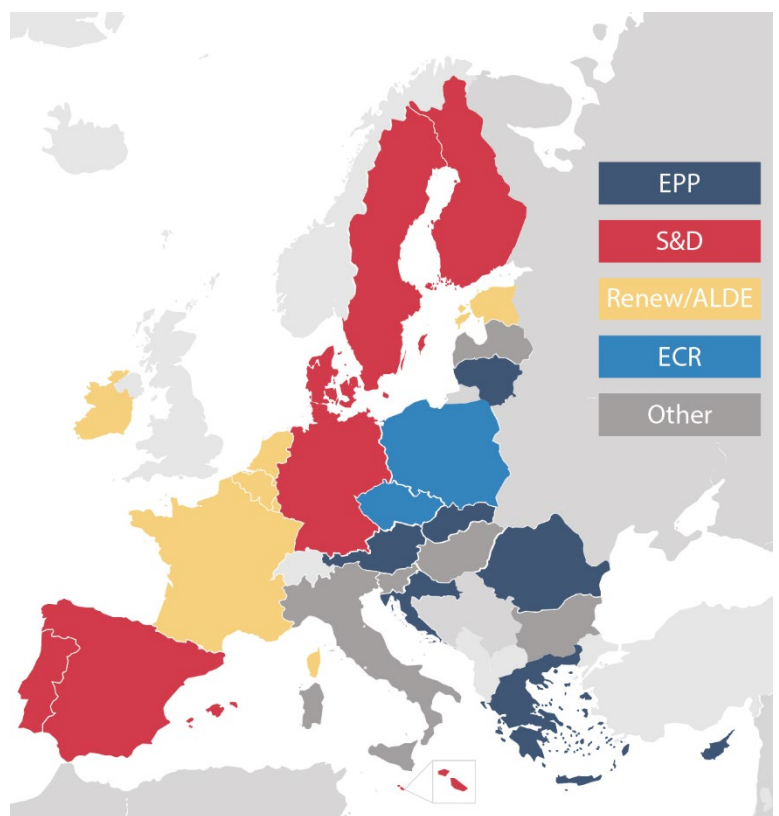
## Political composition of the European Council over time



NB: The charts above show the situation on 1 January of the year concerned.

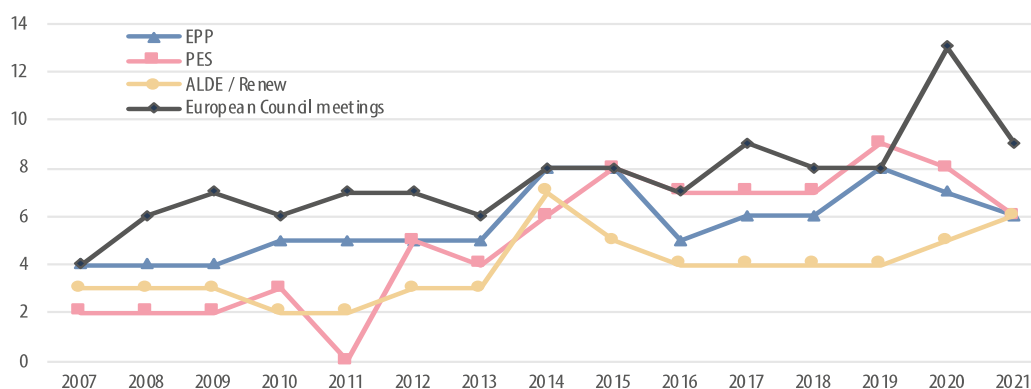
The charts above show the shifting balance of political forces among Member States' representatives in the European Council over the years, based on the various 'political families' which are currently represented in the European Parliament. While nearly all Heads of State or Government belonged to the same three political groups until the early 2000s, the diversity of affiliation has broadened in recent years, with six different political forces represented in the European Council at various times.

The map on the right shows the political affiliation of current EU Heads of State or Government (as of 1 June 2022), based on the political groups in the European Parliament to which MEPs from their national party (if any) belong.



## Political parties and the European Council

European political parties regularly hold meetings of their (European and national) leaders immediately before European Council meetings. Known as ‘pre-summits’, these serve multiple purposes for the parties, including the coordination of positions for the imminent European Council discussions, long-term strategising, communication, and socialising and networking, with the importance of each varying between the different parties and at different times. The chart below shows the number of European Council meetings each year since 2007 and the corresponding number of pre-summit meetings organised by the main European political parties.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The President of Cyprus is both the Head of State and the Head of Government.
- <sup>2</sup> Where the leaders met in different formats over the same one- or two-day period, such as in an informal dinner, a formal European Council and an Article 50 meeting, these are not counted as separate meetings in this graphic.

This is an update of a previous [EPRS Briefing](#) published in July 2018.

The paper is based on a dataset maintained by the European Council Oversight Unit of EPRS. The author acknowledges the assistance of Conor McGlynn and Emily Philips with data collection and analysis for this paper.

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