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The choice of the President of the European Council: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The European Council consists of the Heads of State or Government of the 28 EU Member States, as well as the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission. It became a formal Union institution, with a full-time President, under the Treaty of Lisbon. Although it does not exercise legislative functions, the European Council's role – to 'provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development' and to define its 'general political directions and priorities' – has developed rapidly over the past seven years. The office and personality of the European Council President, whose role is to create trust and foster the right atmosphere to take common decisions, play a pivotal part in helping the European Council to manage crises.¹ Experts conclude that without the permanent Presidency, the European Council and the EU as a whole would have fared a lot worse during times of crisis.²

1. When was the office of permanent European Council President created?

The Lisbon Treaty introduced the office of a full-time President of the European Council in 2009. It replaced the previous rotating presidency of the European Council, held by the Head of State or Government of the member state holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers), which still continues for most Council formations.³ It was created, [among other reasons](#), to bring more continuity and coherence to the work of the European Council of Heads of State and Government.

2. What is the role of the European Council President?

The [role of the President](#) is set out in [Article 15\(6\) of the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#), which specifies that the President of the European Council:

- 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 on the basis of 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 of the meetings of the European Council.

¹ Suzana Elena Anghel, Ralf Drachenberg, Stanislas de Finance, [European Council and Crisis Management](#), In-Depth Analysis, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), February 2016

² Desmond Dinan (2013) 'EU Governance and Institutions: Stresses Above and Below the Waterline' *Journal of Common Market Studies* Volume 51 Annual Review pp. 89–102.

³ For a detailed explanation of the differences between the European Council Presidency and the presidency of the rotating Council of the European Union see the [the Consilium website](#).

The President of the European Council also 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.

Herman Van Rompuy, the first President of the European Council, has [described](#) his role as follows: 'the European Council is generally considered to be the highest political authority in the Union but the job description and formal competences of its President are rather vague, even meagre. A lot therefore depends on what you do with it or make of it! I can put it differently: everything what was not foreseen formally, had to be created informally'.

3. How long is the term of office?

Article 15(5) TEU states that the term of office of the European Council President is two and a half years. The same person can be re-elected once. Prior to 31 May 2017, EU Heads of State or Government will decide whether or not to appoint Donald Tusk for a second term as European Council President, or choose someone to replace him. In both cases the (re-)election process is the same.

4. Who can replace the European Council President if necessary?

The European Council President does not have a Vice-President to provide support or to take over if necessary. In case of illness or death, or if the European Council President's term is ended due to impediment or serious misconduct in accordance with Article 15(5) TEU, the member of the European Council representing the Member State holding the rotating Council Presidency replaces the European Council President until the election of his or her successor (Article 2(4) [European Council Rules of Procedure](#)).

5. Who proposes the candidate(s) for the office of European Council President?

Neither the Treaty nor the European Council's Rules of Procedure specify who is officially in charge of steering the nomination process and proposing the names of possible candidates. For the election and re-election of Herman Van Rompuy, it was the leader of the Member State holding the rotating Council Presidency (the Swedish and Danish Prime Ministers, respectively) who collected proposals and sounded out the views of the other EU leaders. When considering his successor, the President himself was crucial in the selection process and proposed Donald Tusk as candidate, after seeking out the opinion of the EU Heads of State or Government.⁴

6. How does the election process work?

The election of the European Council President is decided by qualified majority voting (Article 15(5) TEU). Using the same procedure, the European Council can also terminate his or her term of office in the case of an impediment or serious misconduct. In practice, the European Council Presidents to date have been chosen by consensus rather than by vote.

The election of the European Council President, in contrast to that of the Commission President and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, does not need approval by the European Parliament.

⁴ [Eurocomment Special Briefing 2014/2.](#)

7. Who have been the office holders to date?

Table 1: European Council Presidents since the Treaty of Lisbon

European Council President	Decision taken on his appointment	Took office	End of (current) mandate	Prior position	Country	Political party
Herman Van Rompuy	19/11/2009 ⁵ 1/3/2012	1/12/2009 1/6/2012	31/5/ 2012 30/11/ 2014	Prime Minister	Belgium	EPP
Donald Tusk	30/8/ 2014 ⁶	1/12/2014	31/5/ 2017	Prime Minister	Poland	EPP

8. What are the criteria for choosing the European Council President?

When choosing the future European Council President, EU leaders take into account other factors besides the candidates' professional experience and performance to date. In particular, attention may be paid to reflecting a certain balance between political forces in the Union, countries and gender.⁷

This is partially reflected and formalised by a [Declaration \(No 6\)](#) on Article 15(5) and (6), Article 17(6) and (7) and Article 18 of the Treaty on European Union, which states that 'in choosing the persons called upon to hold the offices of President of the European Council, President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, due account is to be taken of the need to respect the geographical and demographic diversity of the Union and its Member States'.

When first nominating a new President, the European Council on both occasions simultaneously announced the appointment of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

9. What factors determine whether a European Council President is re-elected?

When a European Council President stands for re-election, his or her prospects depend on a variety of factors, including how successful or unsuccessful their first term in office has been⁸; how many admirers or critics they may have in the European Council⁹; the extent of political support in their home country¹⁰; and if there are any strong or obvious alternative candidates.¹¹

10. Can the European Council President hold other offices?

While the Treaty clearly states that the European Council President 'shall not hold a national office' (Article 15(6) TEU), it does not specify that it is forbidden to hold another European office. In fact, both Herman Van Rompuy and Donald Tusk also served as President of the Euro Summit while being European Council President.

⁵ The official [European Council Decision on the exercise of the Presidency of the Council](#) was dated 1 December 2009, the date the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force. For a detailed account of the discussions see [Eurocomment Vol. 7 No. 3/4 2009](#).

⁶ For a detailed account of the discussions see [Eurocomment Special Briefing 2014/2](#).

⁷ [Eurocomment Vol. 7 No. 3/4 2009](#) and [Eurocomment Special Briefing 2014/1](#).

⁸ For an auto-evaluation by Donald Tusk, see ['The European Council: December 2014 to April 2016'](#).

⁹ Desmond Dinan (2013) 'EU Governance and Institutions: Stresses Above and Below the Waterline' *Journal of Common Market Studies* Volume 51 Annual Review pp. 89–102.

¹⁰ See [article](#), 'Polish clash: Should Tusk stay or go?', Politico, Europe edition, updated 5 May 2016

¹¹ Annamária Tóth, ['Herman Van Rompuy: How to be friends with everyone without being liked by anyone'](#), Nouvelle Europe [online], 7 March 2012, consulted 30 May 2016.

[The Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union](#) (TSCG) specifies that 'the President of the Euro Summit shall be appointed by the Heads of State or Government of the Contracting Parties whose currency is the euro by simple majority at the same time as the European Council elects its President and for the same term of office' (Article 12 TSCG). It does not specify that the President of the Euro Summit must come from a country which is part of the euro area. Donald Tusk (Poland) does not come from a country which is currently part of the euro area.

As argued by academics¹² and mentioned in the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee's draft [report on improving the functioning of the European Union, building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty](#), (Rapporteurs: Mercedes Bresso (S&D, Italy), Elmar Brok (EPP, Germany)), the Treaties leave open the possibility for the offices of European Council President and the European Commission President to be held by the same person.

Further reading

Frederic Eggermont, 'The changing role of the European Council in the institutional framework of the European Union, published by Intersentia METRO, 2012.

Joséphine Rebecca Vanden Broucke, Eva-Maria Poptcheva and Stanislas de Finance, [The European Council and its President](#), Briefing, EPRS, January 2015.

Uwe Puetter, 'The European Council and the Council: New intergovernmentalism and institutional change', published by Oxford University Press, 2014.

Wolfgang Wessels, 'The European Council', published by Palgrave, 2016.

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www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet) – www.eptthinktank.eu (blog) – www.eprs.sso.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

¹² F. Eggermont, 'The changing role of the European Council in the institutional framework of the European Union'.