

European Council: Facts and Figures

The European Council brings together the Heads of State or Government of the 28 EU Member States, and seeks to set the overall direction and priorities of the European Union. This Briefing provides some of the main facts and figures on different aspects of this key institution, detailing its membership, political make-up over time, historical development and roles, as well as the main topics on its agenda, and the number and format of its meetings.

Membership of the European Council

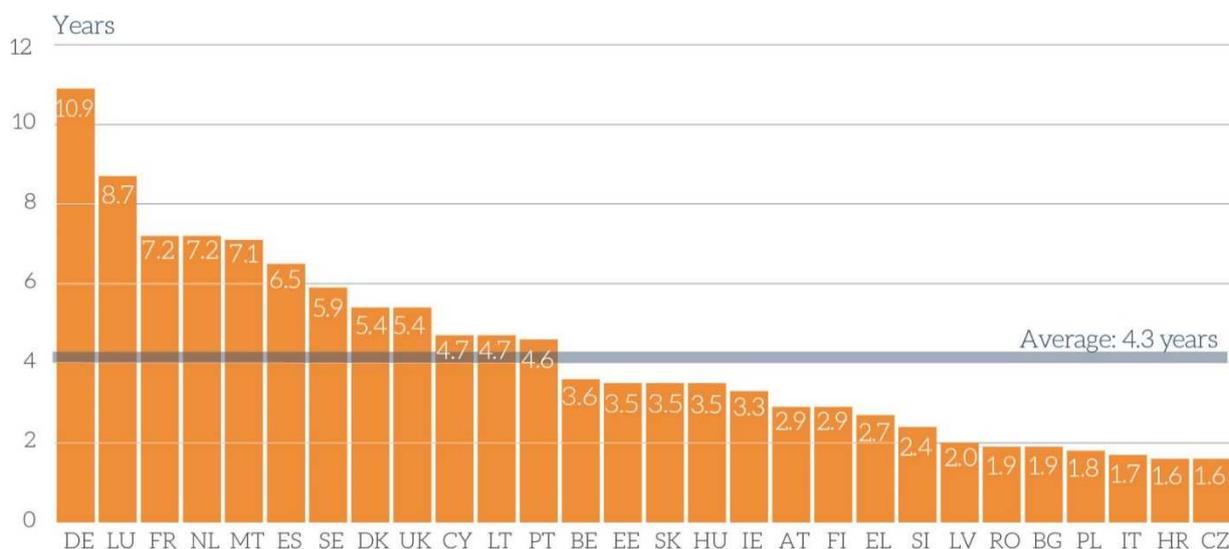
The European Council consists of the Heads of State or Government of the 28 EU Member States – the voting members of the institution – as well as the Presidents of the European Council and of the European Commission, who have no vote. Although not a member of the European Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP, currently Federica Mogherini) also takes part in its meetings. The President of the European Parliament 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 meeting.

24 Heads of Government												4 Heads of State	
 Belgium	 Bulgaria	 Czech Republic	 Denmark	 Germany	 Estonia	 Ireland							
Charles Michel	Boyko Borissov	Andrej Babiš	Lars L. Rasmussen	Angela Merkel	Jüri Ratas	Leo Varadkar							
Prime Minister 2014	Prime Minister 2014	Prime Minister 2017	Prime Minister 2015	Chancellor 2005	Prime Minister 2016	Prime Minister 2017							
 Greece	 Spain	 France	 Croatia	 Italy	 Cyprus	 Latvia							
Alexis Tsipras	Pedro Sánchez	Emmanuel Macron	Andrej Plenković	Giuseppe Conte	Nicos Anastasiades	Māris Kučinskis							
Prime Minister 2015	Prime Minister 2018	President 2017	Prime Minister 2016	Prime Minister 2018	President 2013	Prime Minister 2016							
 Lithuania	 Luxembourg	 Hungary	 Malta	 Netherlands	 Austria	 Poland							
Dalia Grybauskaitė	Xavier Bettel	Viktor Orbán	Joseph Muscat	Mark Rutte	Sebastian Kurz	Mateusz Morawiecki							
President 2009	Prime Minister 2013	Prime Minister 2010	Prime Minister 2013	Prime Minister 2010	Chancellor 2017	Prime Minister 2017							
 Portugal	 Romania	 Slovenia	 Slovakia	 Finland	 Sweden	 United Kingdom							
António Costa	Klaus Iohannis	Miro Cerar	Peter Pellegrini	Juha Sipilä	Stefan Löfven	Theresa May							
Prime Minister 2015	President 2014	Prime Minister 2014	Prime Minister 2018	Prime Minister 2015	Prime Minister 2014	Prime Minister 2016							
Donald Tusk European Council - President  2014						Jean-Claude Juncker European Commission - President  2014							

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 (24) are heads of government, while a small number (4) hold the office of head of state. The representation of a given Member State is entirely a matter for its own government, based on national constitutional provisions.

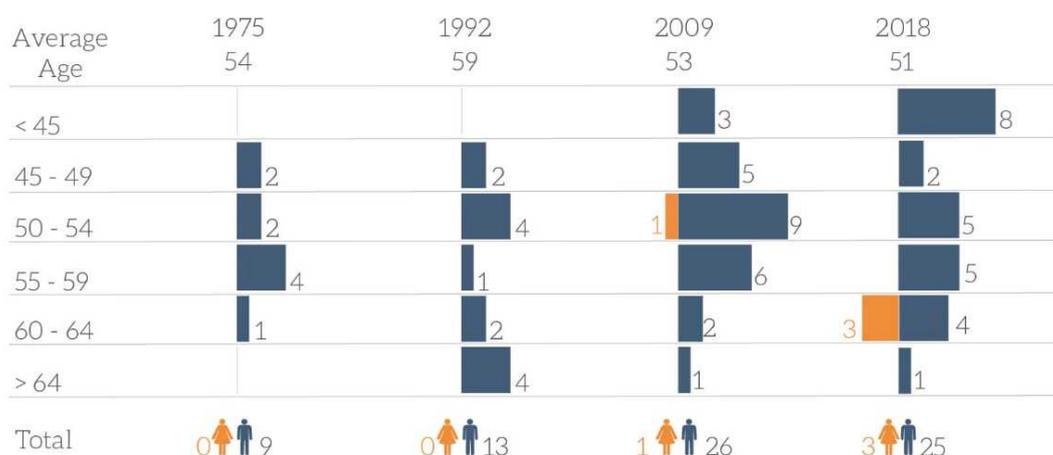
Average length of European Council membership

The chart below shows the average duration historically of European Council membership 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 some Member States' leaders have, on average, spent barely two years in the institution, others have spent four or five times as long.

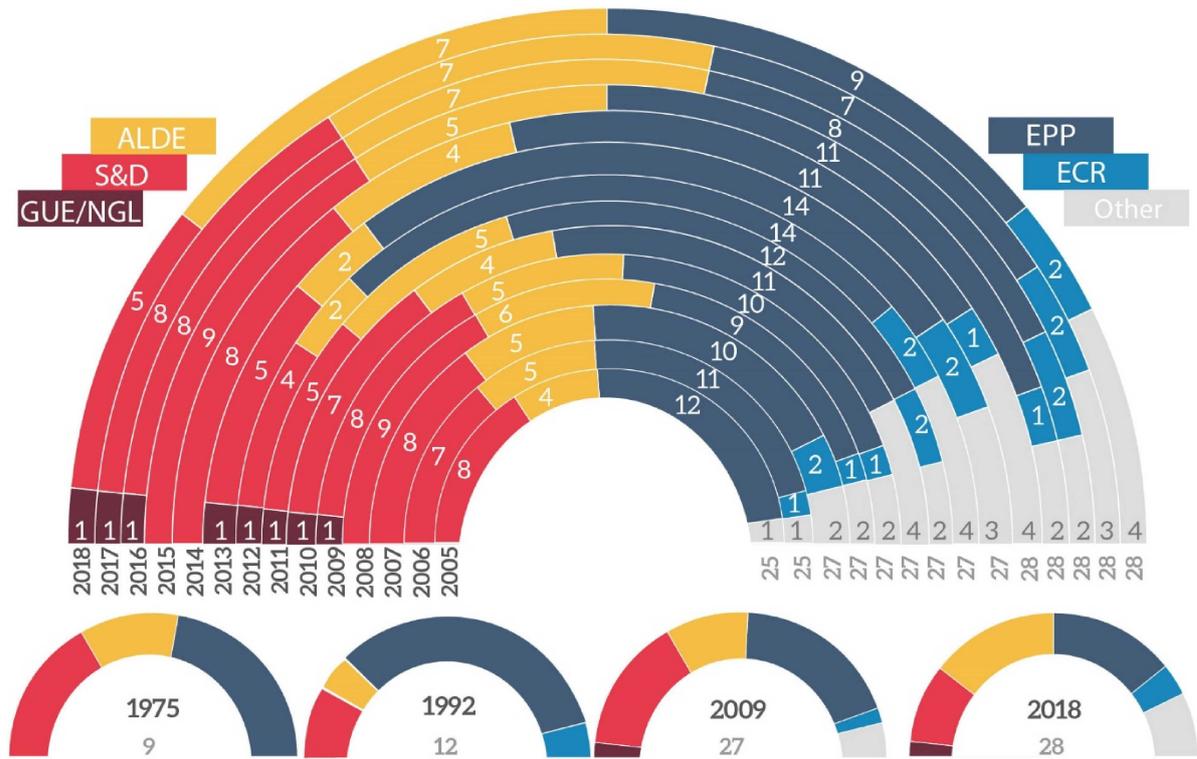


Gender and age of members of the European Council

As can be seen from the chart below, the European Council has, since its creation, been a largely male-dominated forum. Until 1979, there were no female Heads of State or Government in the European Council. Female membership has increased in recent years, to four in the past couple of years, although it has fallen back to three (or 10 %) at present. The average age of European Council members peaked in 1992 at 59 years old, but has fallen since, stabilising recently in the low 50s.



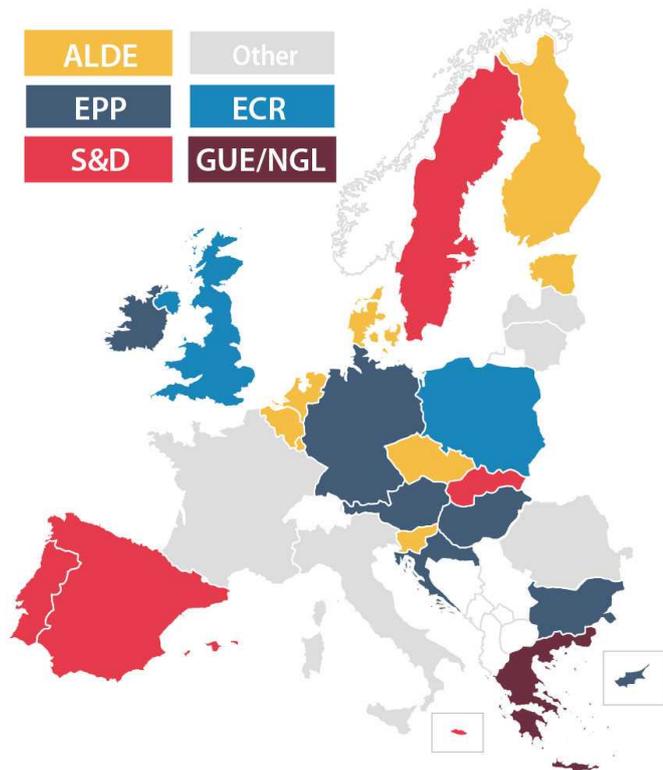
Political composition of the European Council over time



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

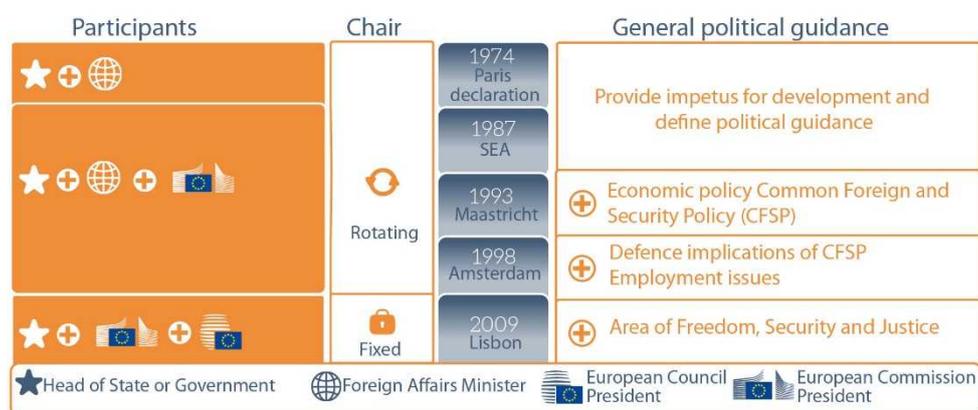
The charts above show the shifting balance of forces among Member States' representatives in the European Council over the years, on the basis of the various political families which are currently represented in the European Parliament. While Heads of State or Government almost all belonged to the same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

The map on the right shows the political affiliation of current EU Heads of State or Government (as of 1 July 2018), on the basis of where MEPs from their national party (if any) sit in the political groups in the European Parliament.



Role of the European Council

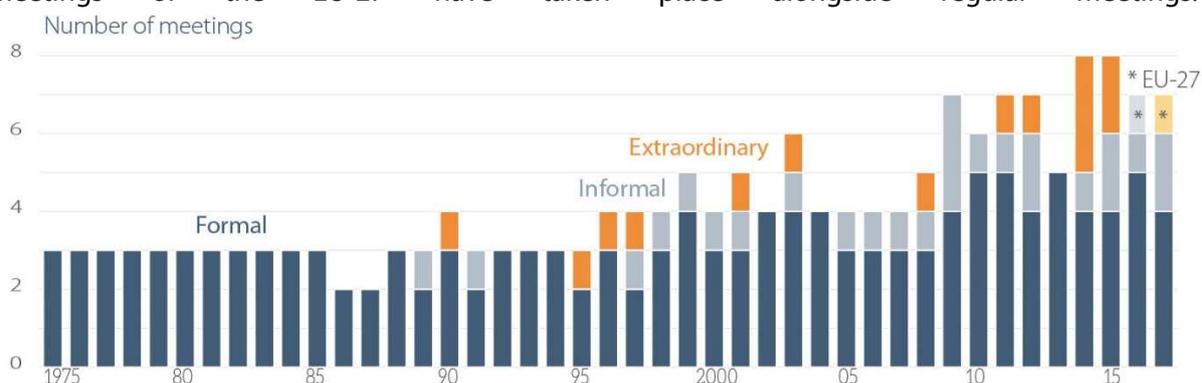
The role of the European Council, as defined in Article 15(1) TEU, is to ‘provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development’ and to define its ‘general political directions and priorities’. Although EU leaders have been meeting routinely in the European Council since 1975, that title did not appear in the Treaties until 1987. At that point, the European Commission President also officially became a member of the European Council. It was only with the adoption of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that the European Council and its role were for the first time broadly defined. The office of full-time President of the European Council was created in 2009 by the Lisbon Treaty, which also established the European Council as a formal EU institution. The Lisbon Treaty also ended the routine attendance of foreign affairs ministers, who up until then had been present to assist their 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, as well as how its role and areas of responsibility have expanded.



Frequency of European Council meetings

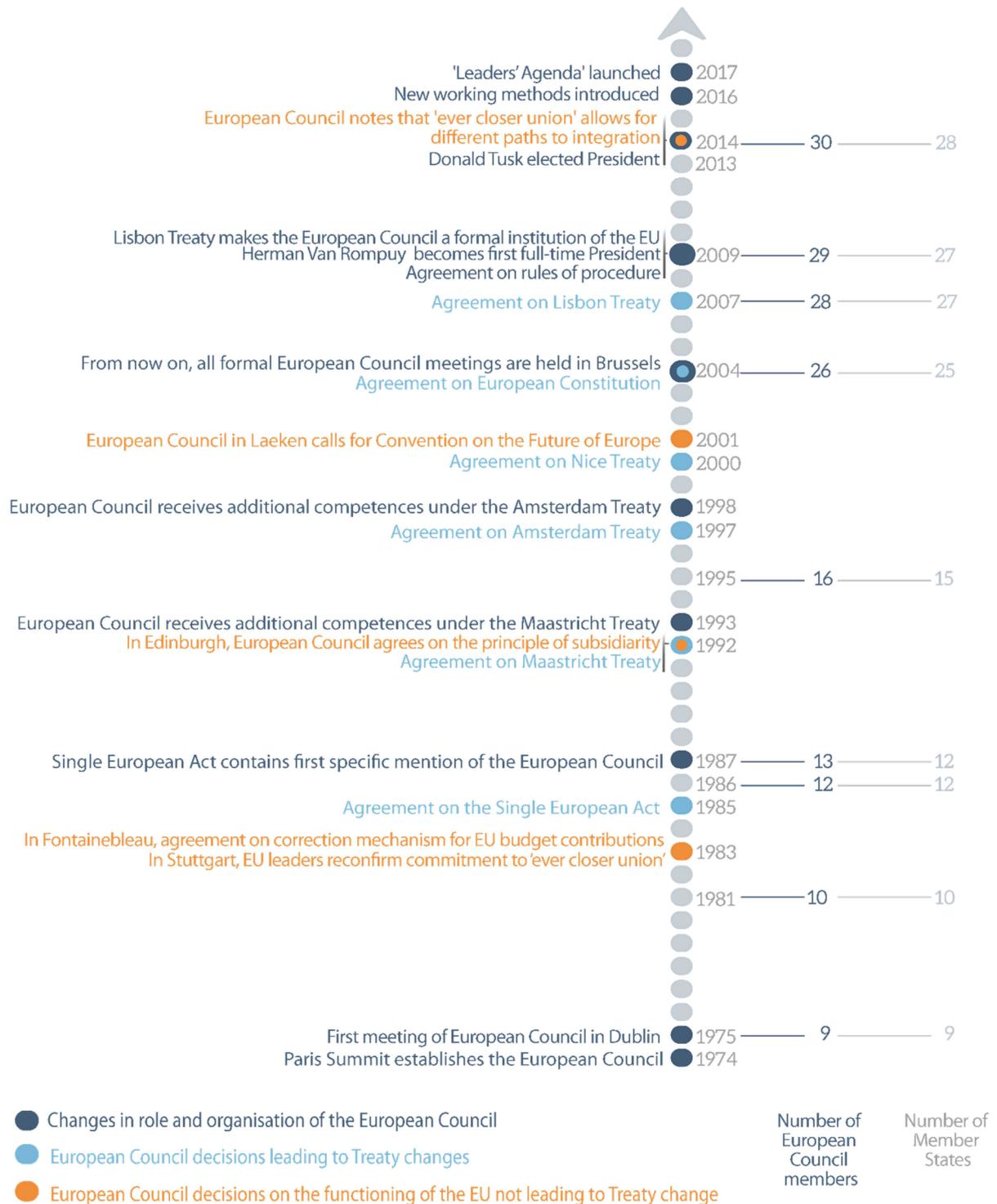
The Lisbon Treaty specifies that ‘the European Council shall meet twice every six months, convened by its President’. If required, the President can also convene special meetings. Before 2009, the meetings were chaired by the Head of State or Government holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU. While the number of meetings formally required was previously only two or three per year, in practice the European Council has met at least four times a year since 1996. The number of meetings grew from 2008, as a result of the financial crisis and subsequent eurozone debt crisis, reaching an all-time high of 11 meetings (seven of the European Council and four Euro Summits) in 2011. The graphic below shows all European Council meetings between 1975 and the end of 2017.

Since 2016, the Heads of State and Government have also met in an 'EU-27' format without the United Kingdom – at first informally, prior to the UK's formal notification of withdrawal from the EU under Article 50 TEU in March 2017; thereafter, several formal 'European Council (Article 50)' meetings of the EU-27 have taken place alongside regular 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 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.

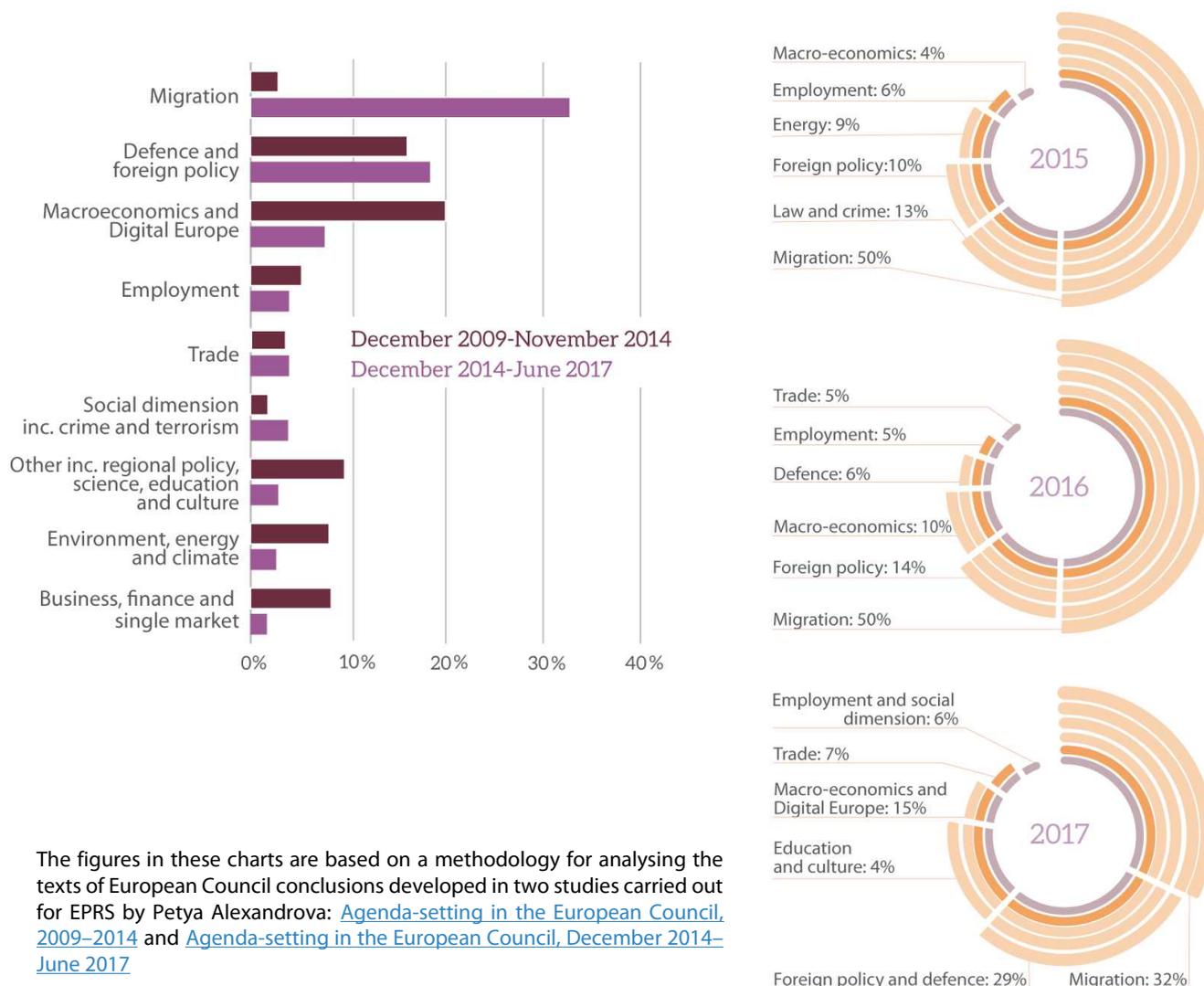


Main topics discussed by the European Council

European Council conclusions are the main instrument through which the institution gives general political directions for the European Union and expresses priorities on different policy issues. As shown in the chart below, between December 2009 and December 2014, under the presidency of Herman Van Rompuy, the most prominent topics in the institution's conclusions were macro-economics, business and finance – covering notably eurozone issues, the single market, competition policy, small and medium-sized enterprises, and banking and financial services regulation – as well as foreign policy issues. The high degree of attention to the former was clearly a result of the global financial and economic crisis.

Similarly, due to the unprecedented flows into the EU, migration was the most prominent topic in the period from December 2014 to June 2017, during Donald Tusk's first mandate as President of the European Council. Other topics which featured prominently in the conclusions were foreign policy, macro-economics and terrorism – here split between 'law and crime' for discussions on internal security issues, and 'foreign policy' for discussion of broader international terrorism.

The bar chart below shows the main topics discussed in the two mandates of Herman Van Rompuy and during Donald Tusk's first mandate, based on the proportion of the conclusions devoted to each issue. The spiral charts (below right) show in more detail the topics discussed in each of the last three calendar years.



The figures in these charts are based on a methodology for analysing the texts of European Council conclusions developed in two studies carried out for EPRS by Petya Alexandrova: [Agenda-setting in the European Council, 2009–2014](#) and [Agenda-setting in the European Council, December 2014–June 2017](#)

President of the European Council

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty established the office of full-time, permanent 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. The full-time President is chosen for a 30-month term, renewable once, by qualified majority vote. 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 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 on the basis of the General Affairs Council's work;
- 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.



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 a written report is made. The President may also report on informal European Council meetings, but this practice is not systematic. As the graphic below shows, in the early years of the full-time President, a report was made to the Parliament after each formal and informal meeting, but since 2014 this has not always been the case.



NB: The graphic above only includes reports in person (to plenary or to an open meeting of the Conference of Presidents) and not written reports.

Euro Summits

Euro Summits are informal 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. At Euro Summits, euro-area leaders discuss issues such as economic governance and policies to promote economic convergence. 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 and economic 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). This 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 Euro Summit has its own President, who is appointed by the euro-area Heads of State or Government by simple majority. The 30-month term runs concurrently with that of the President of the European Council. Both Euro Summit Presidents to date, Herman Van Rompuy and Donald Tusk, have simultaneously been President of the European Council, although this is not a formal requirement. The TSCG requires the Euro Summit President to present a report to the European Parliament after each meeting. The graphic below shows that this requirement has not always been fulfilled in recent years, as with European Council meeting reports.



DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

To contact the European Council Oversight Unit, please e-mail: EPRS-EuropeanCouncilOversight@ep.europa.eu

The author acknowledges the assistance of Conor McGlynn with data collection and analysis for this paper.

Manuscript completed in July 2018. Brussels © European Union, 2018.

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2018.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

