


European Council: Facts and figures

The European Council brings together the Heads of State or Government of the 27 EU Member States in regular 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, activities, political composition 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 meeting.

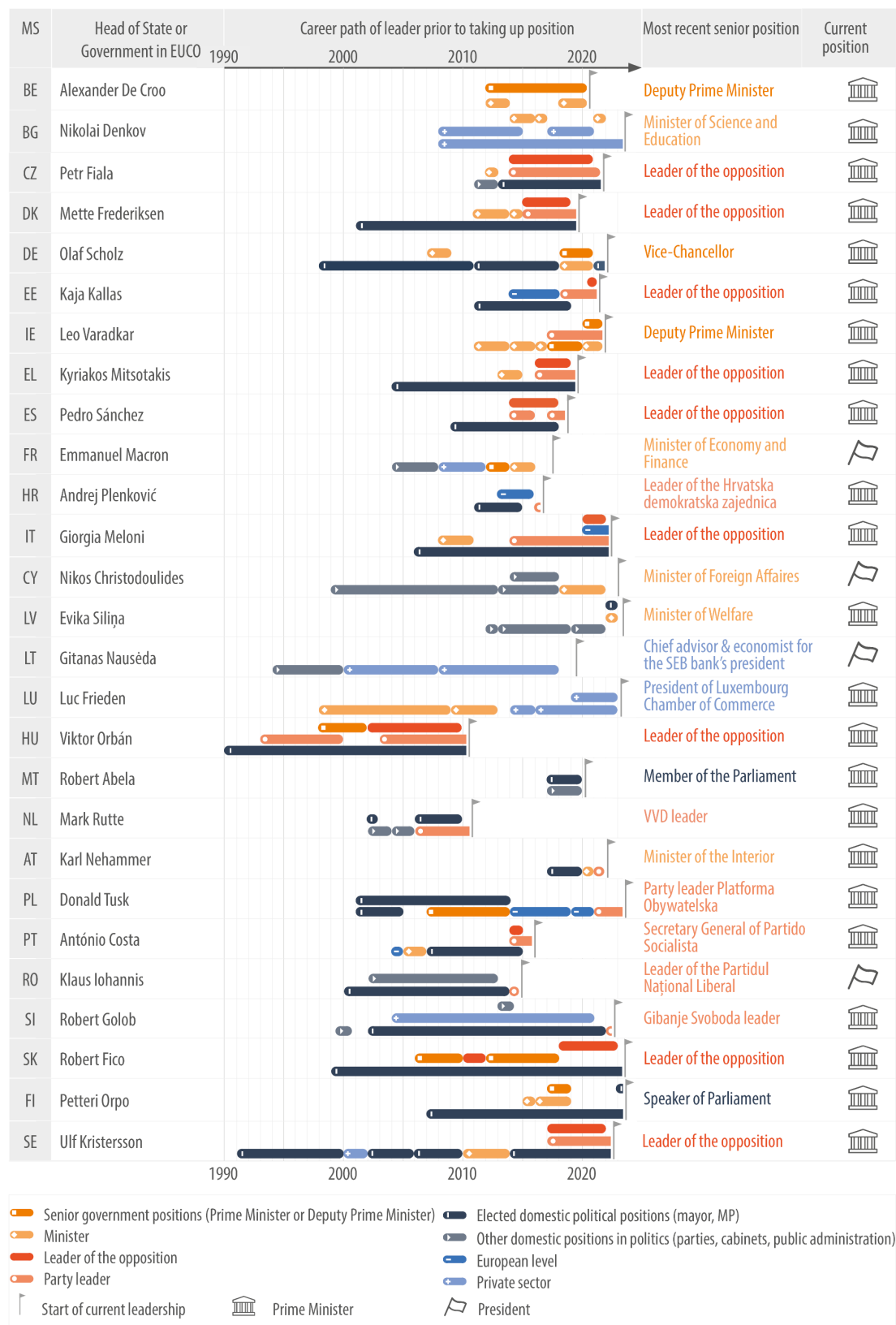
	Alexander De Croo		Nikolai Denkov		Petr Fiala	
Belgium (BE)	Prime Minister	2020	Bulgaria (BG)	Prime Minister	2023	Czechia (CZ)
	Mette Frederiksen		Olaf Scholz		Kaja Kallas	
Denmark (DK)	Prime Minister	2019	Germany (DE)	Prime Minister	2021	Estonia (EE)
	Leo Varadkar		Kyriakos Mitsotakis		Pedro Sánchez	
Ireland (IE)	Prime Minister	2022	Greece (EL)	Prime Minister	2019	Spain (ES)
	Emmanuel Macron		Andrej Plenković		Giorgia Meloni	
France (FR)	President	2017	Croatia (HR)	Prime Minister	2016	Italy (IT)
	Nikos Christodoulides		Evika Siliņa		Gitanas Nausėda	
Cyprus (CY)	President	2023	Latvia (LV)	Prime Minister	2023	Lithuania (LT)
	Luc Frieden		Viktor Orbán		Robert Abela	
Luxembourg (LU)	Prime Minister	2023	Hungary (HU)	Prime Minister	2010	Malta (MT)
	Mark Rutte		Karl Nehammer		Donald Tusk	
Netherlands (NL)	Prime Minister	2010	Austria (AT)	Chancellor	2021	Poland (PL)
	António Costa		Klaus Iohannis		Robert Golob	
Portugal (PT)	Prime Minister	2015	Romania (RO)	President	2014	Slovenia (SI)
	Robert Fico		Petteri Orpo		Ulf Kristersson	
Slovakia (SK)	Prime Minister	2023	Finland (FI)	Prime Minister	2023	Sweden (SE)
23  Heads of Government						
	Charles Michel		Ursula von der Leyen			
European Council - President			European Commission - President			
2019			2019			

The chart above shows the current members of the European Council and the year in which they joined the institution. The great majority of EU leaders (23) are Heads of Government, while a small number (4) hold the office of Head of State.¹ The representation of a Member State at European level is entirely defined at national level in accordance with national constitutional provisions.



Background of members of the European Council

EU leaders serving in the European Council do not, of course, begin their political career as a Head of State or Government. The chart below shows their most recent political office, as well as other positions held before becoming a member of the European Council. Having held a previous EU-level position as part of their career path has become less unusual for national leaders.



Types of political job previously held

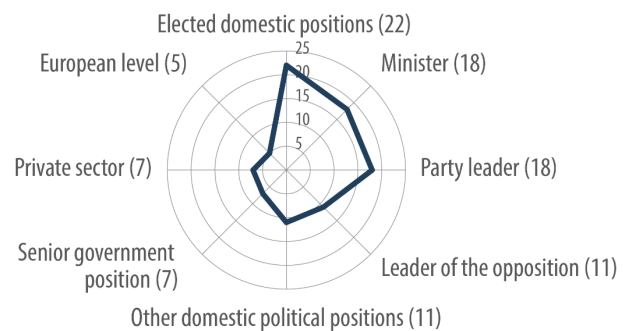
Looking at the different types of job that the current Heads of State or Government have held, both immediately prior to taking up their current office and more broadly in their careers, the graphics below show that most have been either leader of the opposition, party leader and/or a minister before 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 held positions at EU level before entering the European Council, with four of them having been a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). Seven EU leaders also held a previous position in the private sector.

EU leaders' last position before becoming Head of State or Government



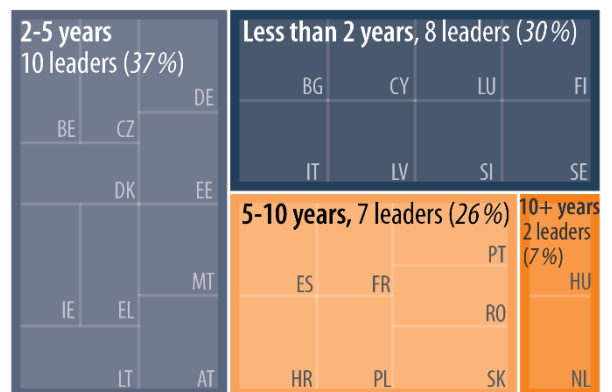
Variations in EU leaders' positions prior to becoming Head of State or Government



The breakdown of ministerial portfolios previously held by current Heads of State or Government suggests that the social and employment, followed by finance, ministries offer the best springboard to higher office. This concurs with previous high scores for these ministries. However, the number of EU leaders with prior responsibilities in social and employment has further increased, and now clearly stands above finance as the earlier portfolio most widely held by current members.

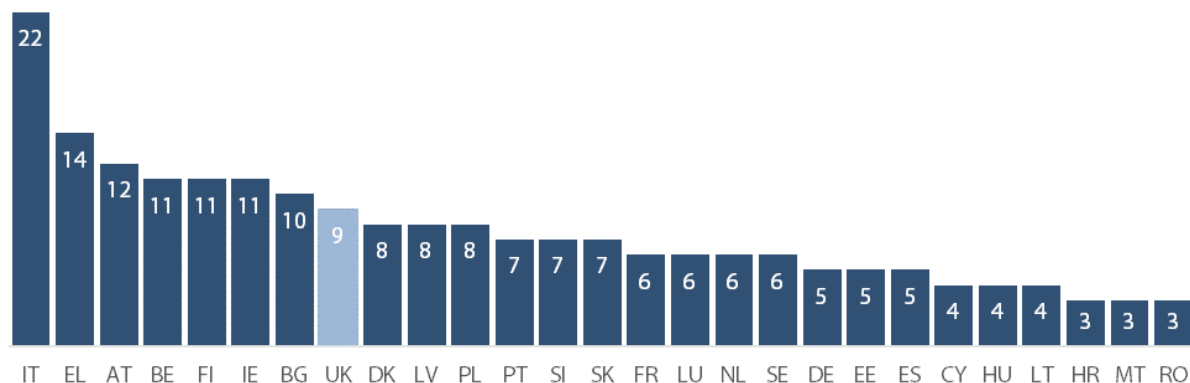
Experience in the European Council

The current EU Heads of State or Government have varying experience in the European Council. Many have only recently joined the institution – less than two years ago (8) or less than five years ago (10). At the same time, some seasoned leaders have over five years' experience (7), or even more than 10 years (2). The Prime Ministers of Poland, Slovakia and Ireland have recently returned to the European Council, where they had previously been members in previous governments or functions.



Number of different European Council members per country

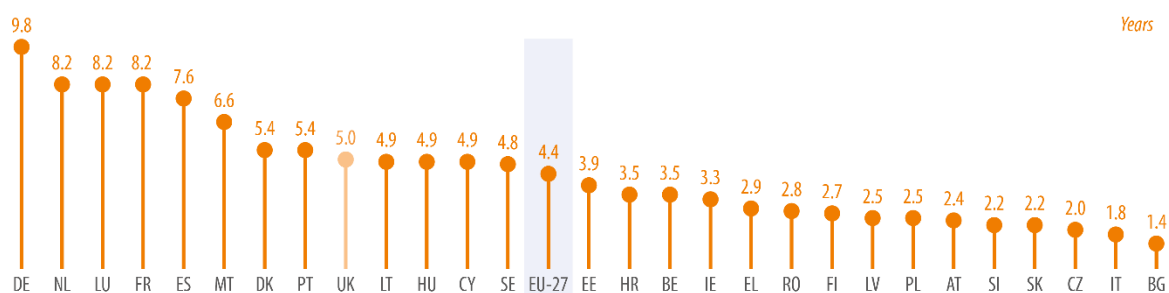
From its first meeting in 1975 up to March 2024, a total of 216 individuals have represented their Member State as Head of State or Government in the European Council. The chart below indicates the number of individual members having represented each country over time (starting from the date of accession for those Member States having joined after 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. Significant variations reflect the electoral cycle and frequency of changes in leadership in the respective Member State 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 EU Member States have spent close to two years in the European Council, other leaders have been members for four or five times as long. For example, the average tenure of German chancellors has been nearly 10 years, whereas Bulgarian and Italian prime ministers have served for an average of less than two years.

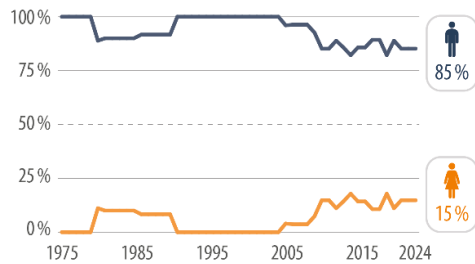


The average period spent as a member of the European Council is currently 4.4 years, with 15 Member States having an average below that figure. Of these 15, 9 are Member States that joined the EU in the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargement rounds.

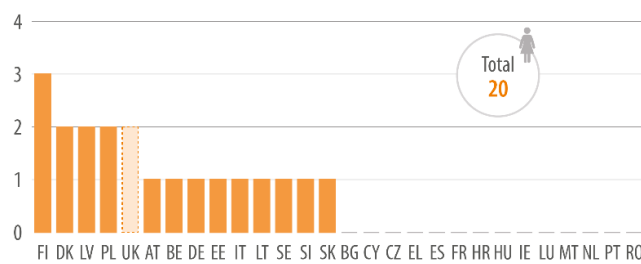
Gender of European Council members

As can be observed in the chart below, since its creation, the European Council has been a largely male-dominated forum. There were no female Heads of State or Government in the European Council until 1979. Female membership has increased in recent years, reaching its highest level to date in 2015, with five women among the Heads of State or Government. Including the President of the European Commission, five women are members of the European Council in March 2024.

Gender balance of European Council members



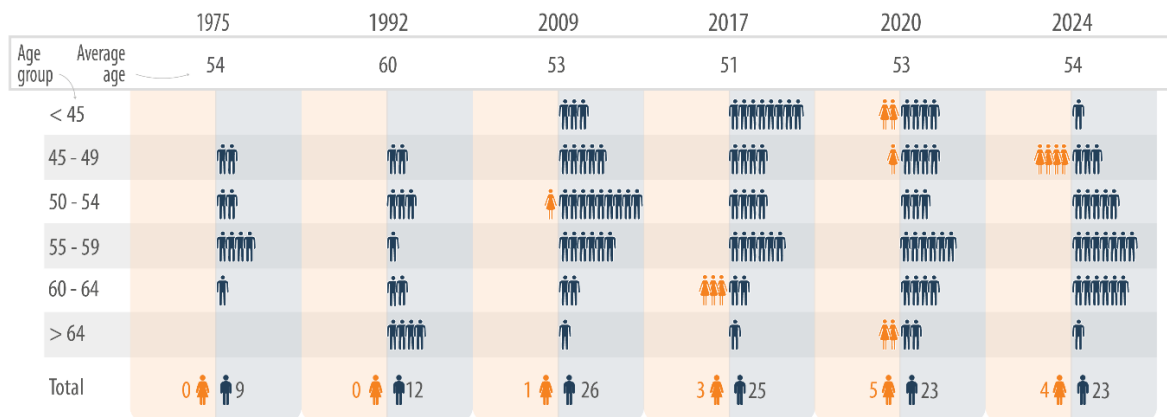
Women among European Council members, by Member State (1975-2024)



Note: Values in the line chart (on the left) represent European Council (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 on the right above shows that, as of March 2024, 14 Member States have fielded female leaders to sit on the European Council since its creation in 1975, with Finland having had three female leaders since its accession in 1994.

Age of European Council members



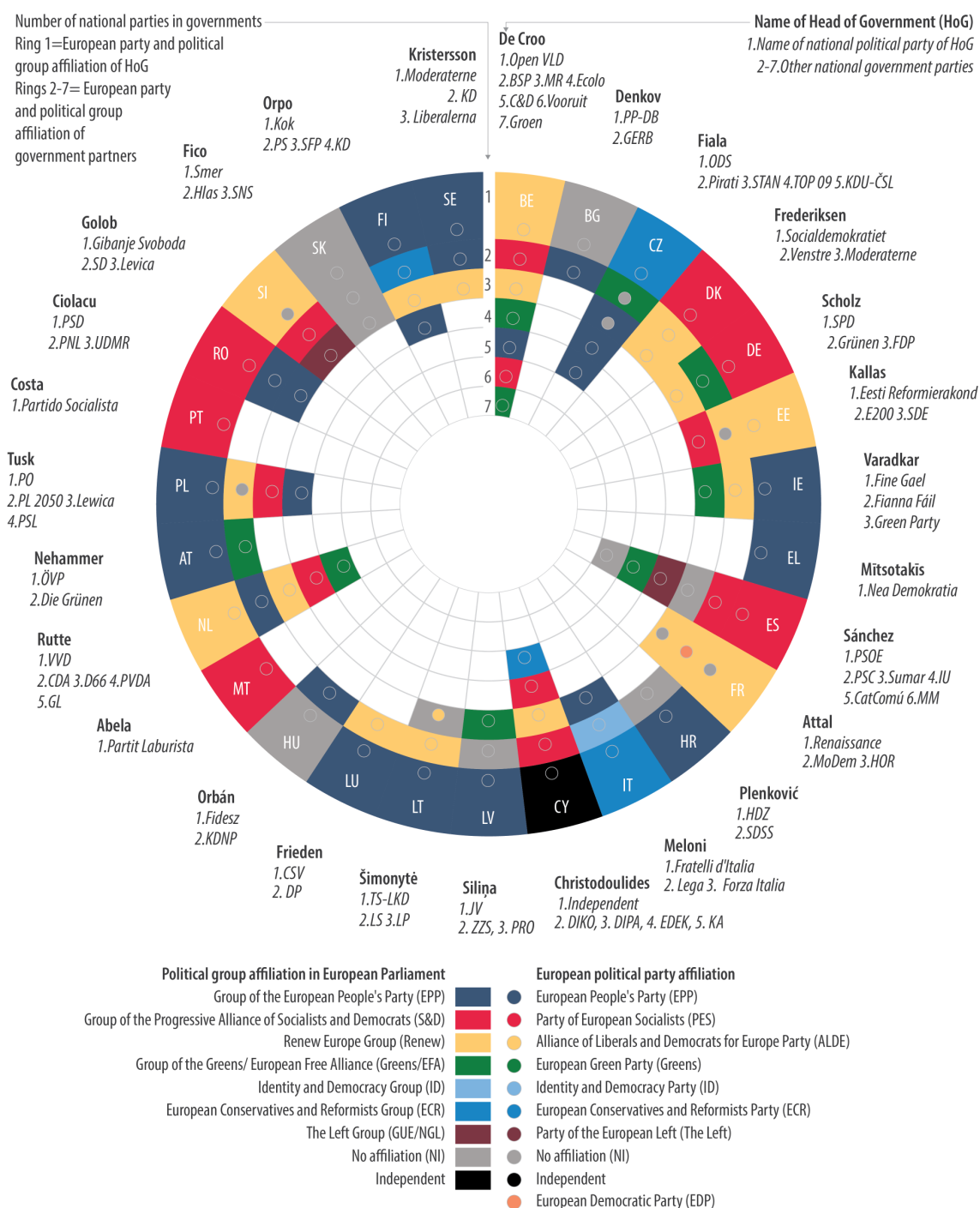
Notes: Values represent European Council (EUCO) leaders in office on 1 January each year, one person per year and per Member State.

The above chart shows that the average age of European Council members peaked at 60 years in 1992, but has since fallen, recently stabilising in the low 50s. Contrary to previous years, in January 2024, all female Heads of State or Government were aged under 50.

Coalition governments in the European Council

Coalition governments have increased in the EU, with a rising number of parties² in multi-party governments.³ 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 March 2024, 21 EU leaders in the European Council led a multi-party government in their respective Member State. These governments collectively included a total of 85 different national parties, a further increase on previous years. The chart below shows all national political parties belonging to Member State governments in March 2024 and their affiliation to European political parties and/or political groups in the European Parliament.

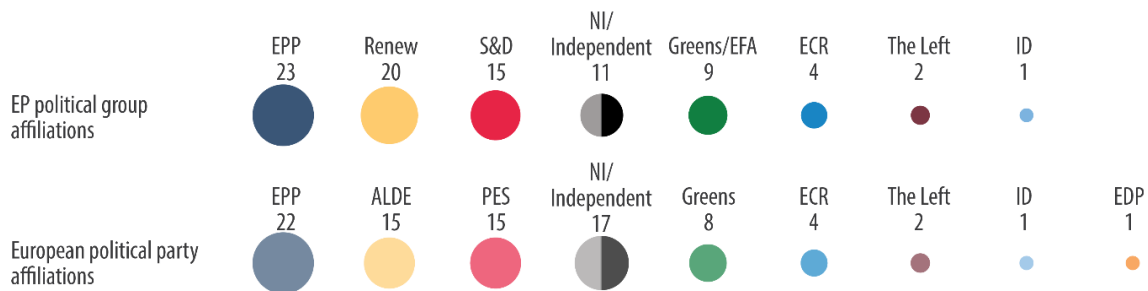
Coalition governments in the European Council



European political families in national governments

The graph below shows the total number of political parties in EU governments affiliated to the different European political parties and/or the political groups in the European Parliament. The data illustrate that the affiliates of European political parties and political groups in the European Parliament participate in many more Member State governments than those in which they hold the office of prime minister. While some European political families have no affiliated European Council member, they can nevertheless have a significant number of affiliates in national governments.

Total number of political group and party affiliations in EU governments

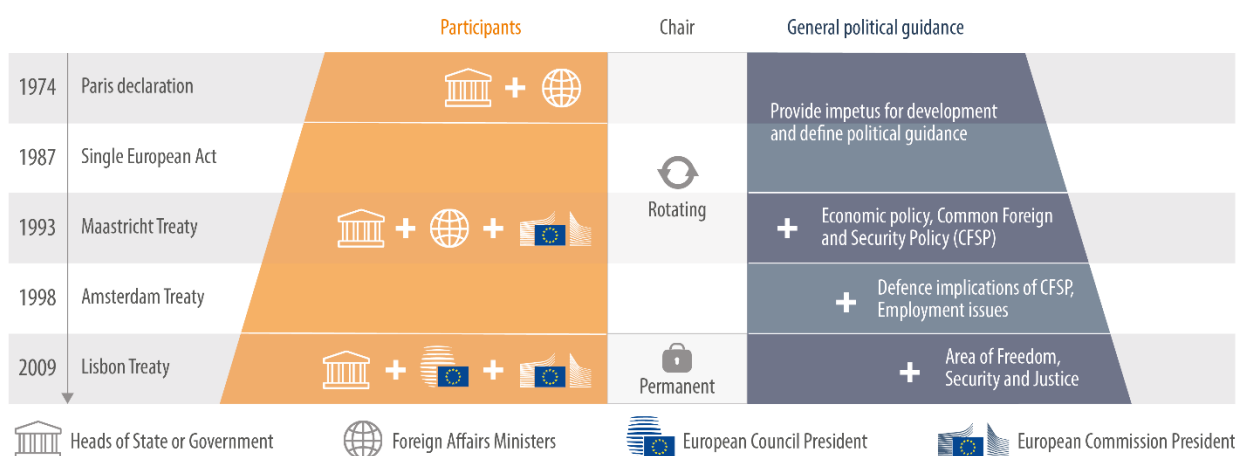


Role of the European Council

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 met 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 broadly defined for the first time. The office of full-time President was created in 2009 with 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.

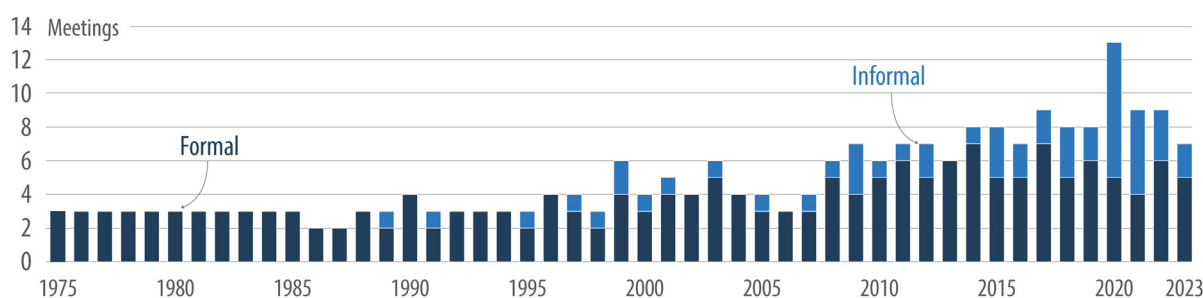
The graphic below shows how both the membership and organisation of the European Council meetings have developed through successive Treaty changes, and how the institution's role and areas of responsibility have expanded.



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 previously only two or three meetings were formally required per year, since 1996, the European Council has nearly always met at least four times a year in practice. From 2008, the number of meetings grew as a result of the global financial crisis and the euro-area debt crisis, the migration crisis, and most recently, the coronavirus pandemic, reaching an all-time high of 13 meetings in 2020. Despite the launch of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the number of European Council meetings remained stable, and even reached its lowest number since 2016 in 2023.

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 the extent that, when meeting over two days in Brussels, EU Heads of State or Government actually participate in several types of meeting – some of which also have a different level of formality or membership (for example, informal dinners or Euro Summits). Since 2020, the Heads of State or Government have also met by video-conference as a result of COVID-19. All of the European Council formats can 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 2023.



Total meetings from 1975 to 2024 and 'top 10' attendees

By early March 2024, the European Council had met 239 times since its creation.⁴ The first chart below shows the 10 longest-serving Heads of State or Government. The second chart shows the 10 leaders who attended the most European Council meetings. The difference in the ranking of the two charts is linked to the fact that there have been more meetings in recent years. Besides Jean-Claude Juncker, Angela Merkel and Dalia Grybauskaitė, who were members in the 2000s, the others became members of the European Council in the 2010s.

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

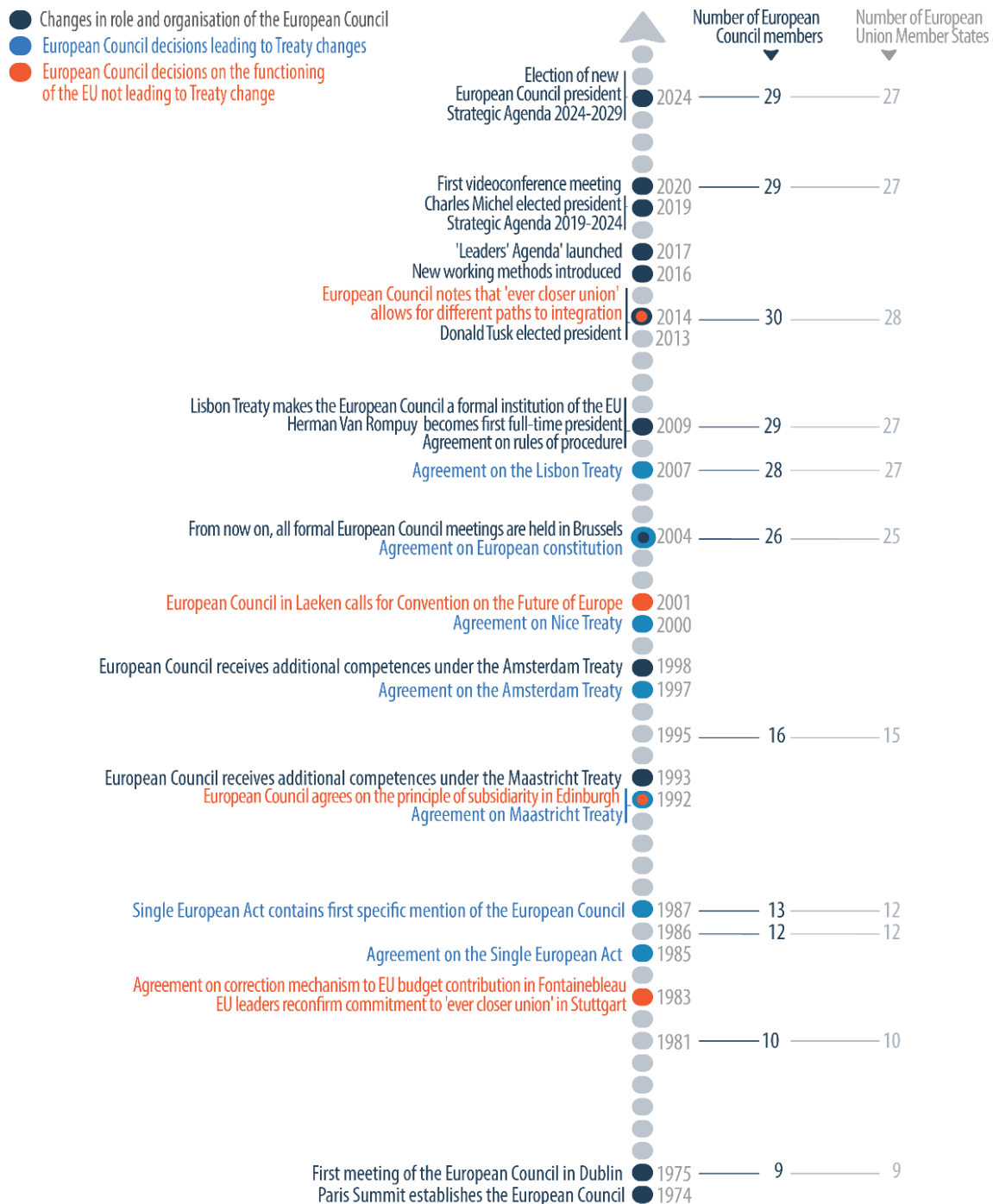
		Days	European party
LU	Jean-Claude Juncker	6 893	EPP
DE	Helmut Kohl	5 870	EPP
DE	Angela Merkel	5 860	EPP
FR	François Mitterand	5 109	PES
HU	Viktor Orbán	5 024	Non-affiliated
NL	Mark Rutte	4 886	ALDE
BE	Wilfried Martens	4 467	EPP
FR	Jacques Chirac	4 382	EPP
NL	Ruud Lubbers	4 309	EPP
UK	Margaret Thatcher	4 226	Non-affiliated

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

		Meetings	European party
DE	Angela Merkel	117	EPP
HU	Viktor Orbán	111	Non-affiliated
NL	Mark Rutte	109	ALDE
LU	Jean-Claude Juncker	92	EPP
LU	Xavier Bettel	86	ALDE
CY	Nikos Anastasiades	85	EPP
RO	Klaus Iohannis	79	EPP
LT	Dalia Grybauskaitė	76	Non-affiliated
PT	António Costa	72	EPP
HR	Andrej Plenković	66	EPP

Historical evolution of the European Council

Although EU Heads of State or Government had met occasionally for ad hoc European summits from 1961, 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 rise 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.

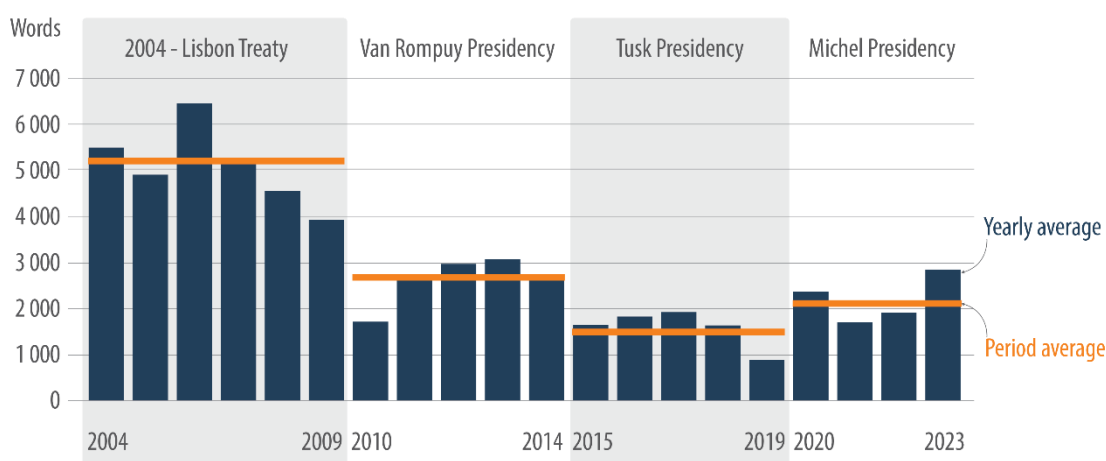


European Council conclusions

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. These conclusions are the main instrument through which the institution gives general political directions for the European Union and expresses priorities on policy issues. The conclusions can set policy objectives, request that other EU institutions and actors 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 the European Union and European Parliament) to speed up their deliberations), or comment on developments concerning ongoing (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 have, on average, become briefer over the last 12 years than in the period before the European Council became a distinct EU institution and the post of full-time president was created. Herman 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 years before the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in 2009. Donald Tusk further reduced the conclusions by half compared to the average of the previous five years. During Charles Michel's term, the average length of the conclusions has increased, 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

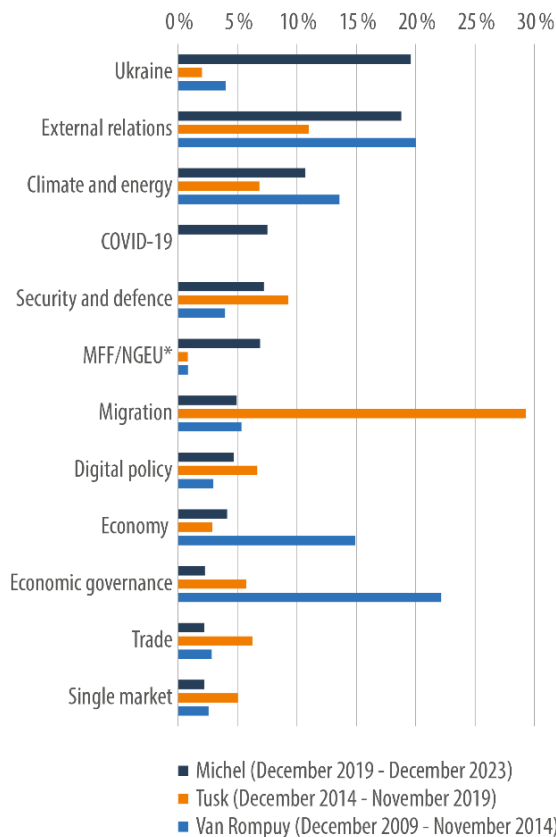
The chart on the next page shows the main topics discussed during the Van Rompuy, Tusk and Michel presidencies, based on the proportion of the conclusions devoted to each issue. The spiral charts show the topics discussed in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

Between December 2009 and December 2014, during the Van Rompuy presidency, the most prominent topics featuring in European Council conclusions were economic governance, external relations, and economy. The high degree of attention paid to economic issues was clearly a result of the global financial crisis.

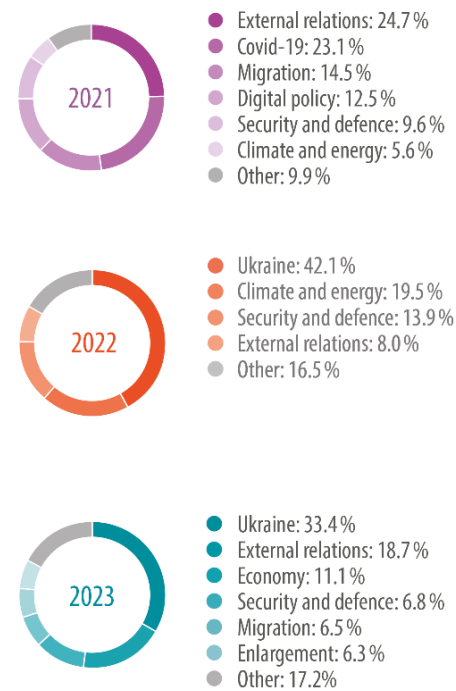
Due to the unprecedented migrant flows into the EU from 2015, migration was the most prominent topic during Donald Tusk's mandate as President of the European Council (December 2014 to November 2019). Other topics which featured prominently in the conclusions during his tenure were external relations,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

During Charles Michel's term to date, the EU has faced two main crises: the coronavirus pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine. In this period, the most salient topics were Ukraine, external relations, climate and energy, the coronavirus pandemic and security and defence.

Main topics in conclusions of the European Council, per presidency



Main topics in conclusions of the European Council, between 2021 and 2023

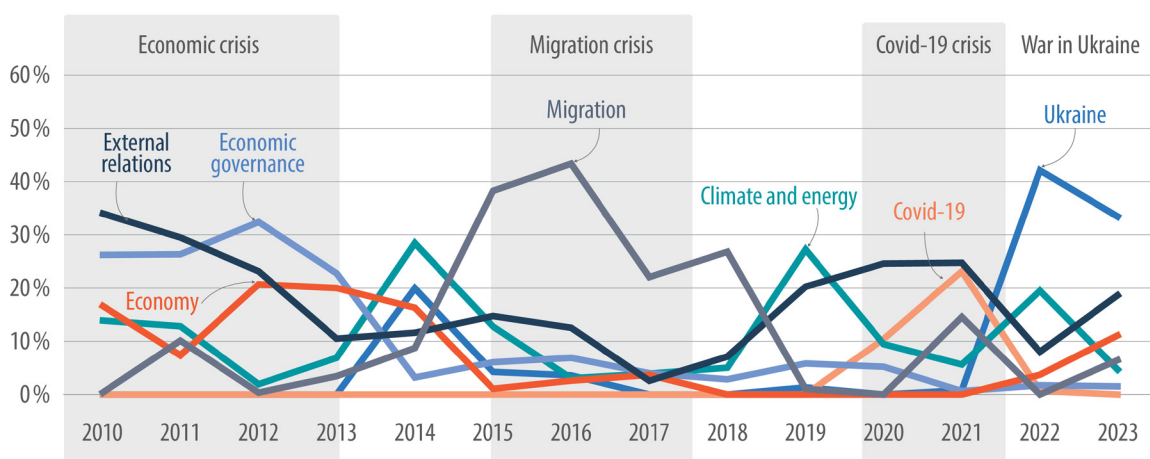


Notes: MFF/NGEU=Multiannual Financial Framework/ NextGenerationEU

The above chart shows topics covered by a minimum of 5% of European Council 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, 2010-2023



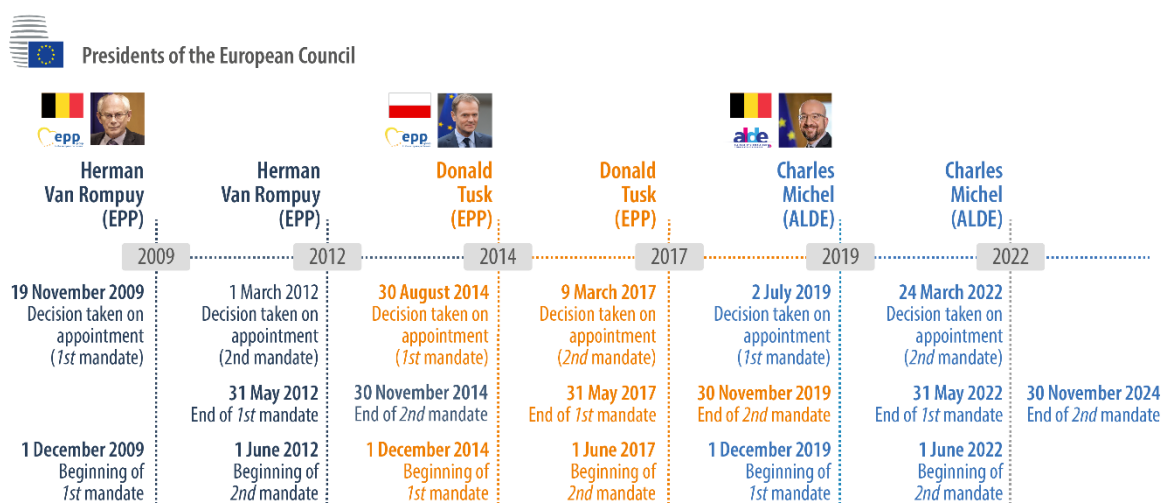
President of the European Council

The Lisbon Treaty established the office of full-time President of the European Council. Prior to 2009, 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 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 she or he:

- chairs the European Council and drives its work forward;
- ensures the preparation and continuity of the European Council's work, 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.

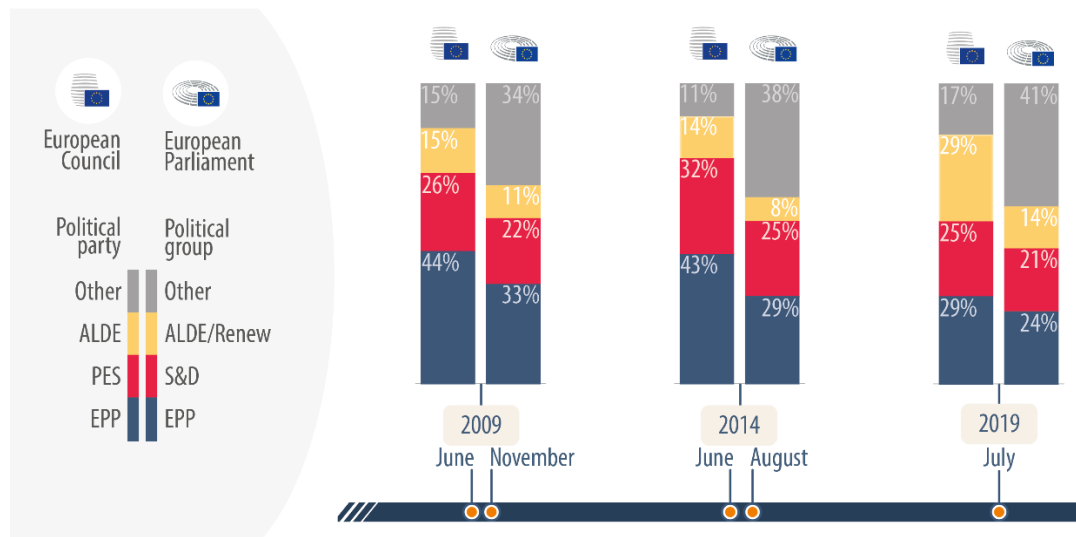
Since 1 December 2019, [Charles Michel](#) is the third person to hold the office of President of the European Council. Based on previous experience, a new office-holder is expected to be appointed in June/July 2024, and take office on 1 December 2024.



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 European political parties, and to the party political balance in the European Council and the European Parliament at the time.

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

The chart below outlines the political weight the main [European political families held in the European Council](#) and in the European Parliament in 2009, 2014 and 2019. The party political balance is then often reflected in the choice of EU institution leaders, confirming that the choice of the EU's institutional leadership is also related to the candidate's affiliation to the European political parties.

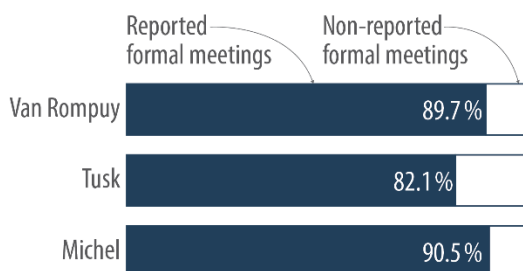


Reporting to the European Parliament

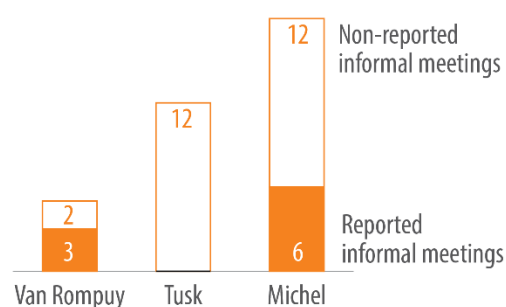
While not directly accountable to the European Parliament, the President of the European Council is required to present a report to the Parliament after each meeting of the institution. This obligation was established by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, with the duty originally performed by the Head of State 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. These plenary debates are important because they are the only EU-level forum where the European Council's results are examined and scrutinised, and where there is an attempt to hold the institution to account.

The President may also report on informal European Council meetings, but this practice is neither required nor systematic. As the graphics below show, reporting frequency has varied between the different full-time presidents of the European Council, with some only reporting on formal meetings and others also doing so after some informal meetings.⁵

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



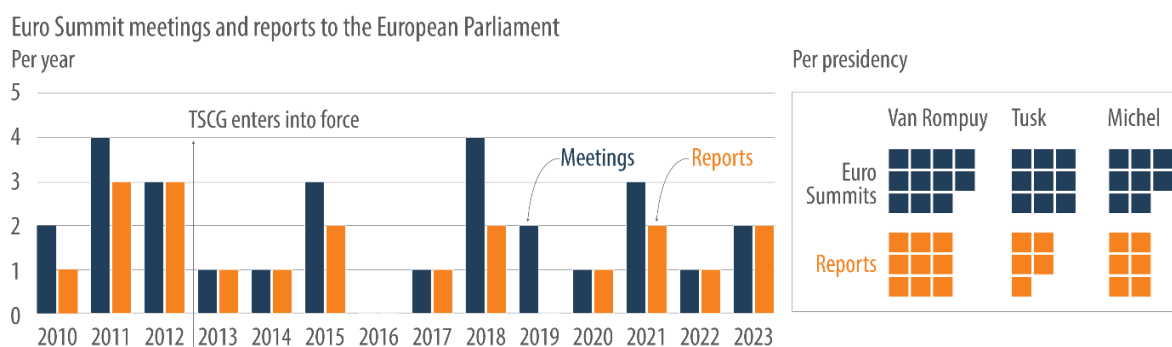
European Council presidents' reports for informal meetings, number of meetings



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. They 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.

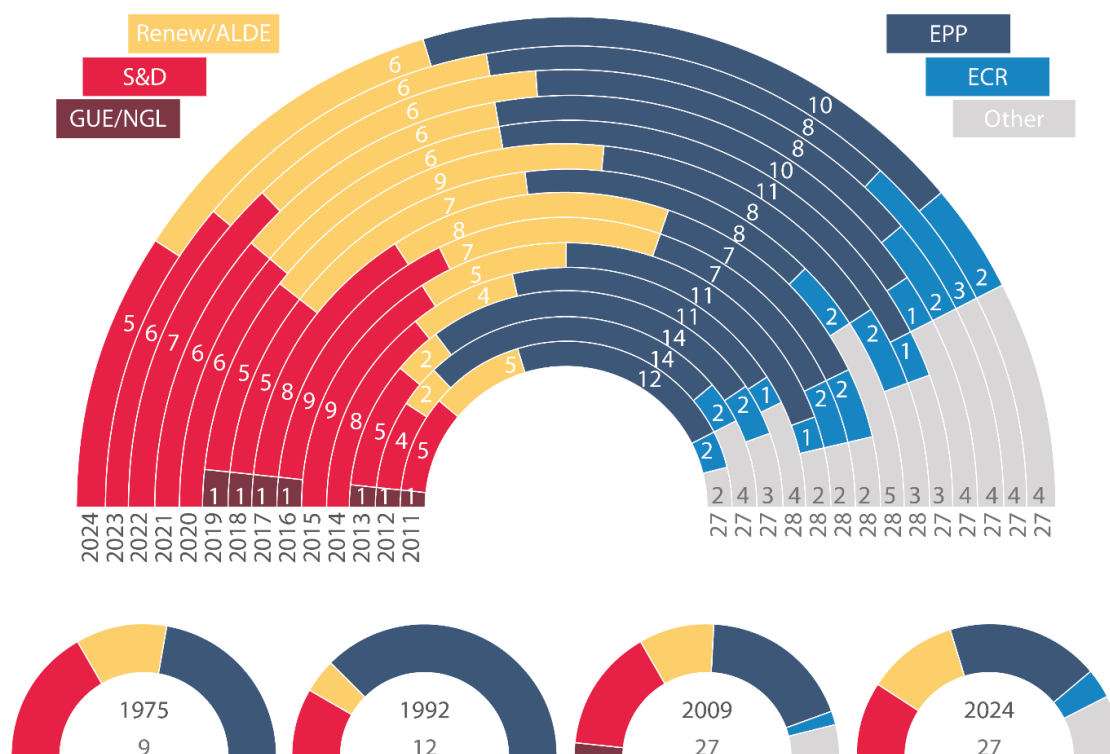


The TSCG requires the Euro Summit President to present a report to the European Parliament after each meeting. The graphic shows, however, that – as with European Council meeting reports – this requirement has not always been fulfilled in recent years.

The chart to the right outlines the regularity of European Council Presidents' reporting to the European Parliament after the 28 Euro Summit meetings held up to February 2024.

While during the Van Rompuy and Tusk presidencies, inclusive Euro Summits (i.e. meetings with all Member States, and not only with those who have adopted the euro as their currency) were rather the exception. In the five years of the Michel presidency, nearly all Euro Summits took place in an inclusive format.

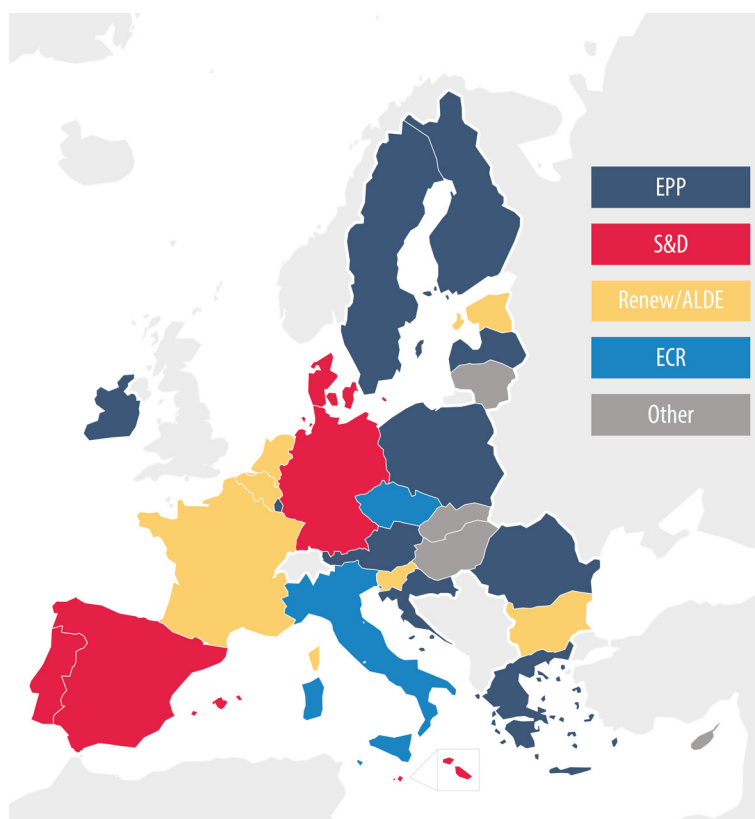
Political composition of the European Council over time



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

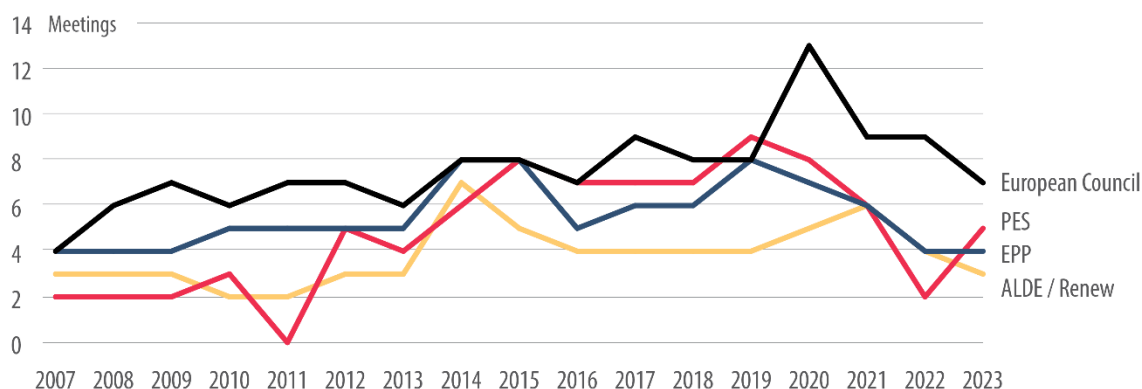
The charts above show the shifting balance of political forces among Member States' representatives in the European Council over the years, based on the various 'political families' which are currently represented in the European Parliament. While nearly all Heads of State or Government belonged to the 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 EU Heads of State or Government in early March 2024, based on the political groups in the European Parliament to which Members 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, setting long-term strategies, communication, 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 held each year since 2007, and the corresponding number of pre-summit meetings organised by the main European political parties. While the number of these pre-summits increased on average over time, they declined recently in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, and have not reached previous levels since then.



ENDNOTES

- 1 The President of Cyprus is both the Head of State and the Head of Government.
- 2 Some government parties are actually 'platforms' or alliances – themselves based on multiple political parties.
- 3 Not all multi-party national governments are based on a formal coalition agreement.
- 4 Where the leaders met in different formats over the same one- or two-day period, such as at an informal dinner, a formal European Council and an Article 50 meeting, these are not counted as separate meetings in this graphic.
- 5 The graphics only include reports in person (to plenary or to an open meeting of the Conference of Presidents) and not written reports.

This is an update of a previous [EPRS Briefing](#) published in September 2022.

The paper is based on a dataset maintained by the European Council Oversight Unit in EPRS.

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