The European Council's role at the start of the new EU institutional cycle

The European Union's institutional cycle begins anew every five years with the elections to the European Parliament. This is a crucial moment, as it updates both the hardware (the institutional leadership) and the software (the political priorities) of the EU. The European Council, composed of the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States, plays a significant role in both processes. Not only is it directly or indirectly involved in the choice of who fills most of the top EU positions, it also establishes the EU's long-term political priorities through setting its Strategic Agenda.

This briefing outlines the EU's institutional cycle and highlights the European Council's role in this cycle in institutional terms. It also describes the processes involved in the allocation of EU top institutional jobs and the adoption of the EU's long-term priorities.

EU institutional cycle

The EU institutional cycle is a five-year period that corresponds to the term of the European Parliament as legislature and the term of the European Commission (see Figure 1). These two terms have been aligned since 1995, following a provision that came into force with the Maastricht Treaty. Prior to that, each College of Commissioners was appointed for a four-year term.

The institutional cycle commences and concludes with the elections to the European Parliament. Based on the election results, the European Council nominates a candidate as President of the European Commission, who is then elected by the European Parliament. Following that election, the entire College of Commissioners is then appointed in the autumn. The Presidents of the European Parliament and the European Council each serve a term of two-and-a-half years, with the latter having so far always been re-elected for a second and final term.

At the changeover that starts each new EU institutional cycle, two critical processes are crucial for the five-year political cycle: the selection of institutional office-holders and the definition of the European Union's long-term priorities, to be implemented throughout the institutional cycle. The European Council plays an important role in both processes.
Each new EU institutional cycle brings a new set of individuals to the helm of the EU institutions. The number of positions to be filled varies from one institutional cycle to another, as not all terms are aligned. However, the decisions on most of the high-level positions are generally taken within an overall package agreement.

Senior EU institutional jobs to be filled

In 2019, the package of appointments included four high-level EU positions: the presidents of the European Commission, the European Council and the European Central Bank (ECB), as well as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Commission Vice-President (HR/VP). In 2024, only three of these positions are in the package, as the President of the ECB, appointed for a seven-year term, is not yet up for (re-)election. Another high-level position – that of European Parliament President – is also to be filled at the beginning of the new institutional cycle. In this case, the European Council is not legally involved, however, the Parliament votes to elect its president in context taking into account the results of the elections to the European Parliament and the resulting strengths of the different European political families.
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Procedures for nominating and/or electing EU institutional leaders

The procedures set out in the Treaties for the appointment of the various high-level office-holders differ (see Table 1) depending on the position concerned. That said, the European Council plays an important role in all of these procedures.

Table 1 – Treaty-based roles of the European Council and the European Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Treaty article</th>
<th>European Council's role</th>
<th>European Parliament's role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President of the European Commission</td>
<td>17(7) TEU</td>
<td>Propose candidate</td>
<td>Elect candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President of the European Council</td>
<td>15(5) TEU</td>
<td>Elect</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy</td>
<td>18(1) TEU</td>
<td>Appoint (with the agreement of the Commission President-elect)</td>
<td>Part of the approval of the College of Commissioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President of the ECB</td>
<td>283 TFEU</td>
<td>Appoint (recommendation of the Council)</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only institutional leader directly elected by the European Council is its president. The full-time president is elected by a qualified majority vote for a 30-month term, renewable once. To date, each European Council President has also been elected by the Heads of State or Government of the euro-area Member States as President of the Euro Summit for the same term.

The candidate for President of the European Commission is proposed by the European Council, acting by qualified majority, and is elected by a majority of the component Members of the European Parliament (Article 17(7) TEU). In the past, EU Heads of State or Government could nominate anyone they wanted as an appointee (subject to Parliament’s approval), but the Treaty of Lisbon created a political link between the proposed candidate for President of the European Commission and the outcome of the elections to the European Parliament. Therefore, Article 17(7) now requires the
The European Council is expected to ‘take into account the elections to the European Parliament’ when proposing a candidate for President of the Commission.

The candidate chosen for the position of HR/VP is appointed by the European Council, but this choice needs to be formally agreed with the Commission President-elect.

**European Council process for agreeing on top jobs**

On 28 May 2019, EU leaders held an informal dinner – two days after the 23–26 May 2019 elections to the European Parliament – to discuss the results and the allocation of top EU institutional positions. Similarly, in 2024, the European Council will meet for an initial informal discussion on 17 June, one week after the 6–9 June elections to the European Parliament. EU leaders will review the election outcomes and begin discussing potential candidates for the three positions to be filled as part of the package.

The European Council aims to reach an agreement at its formal meeting of 27–28 June. Past experience shows that an additional meeting is often needed before agreement can be reached. Therefore, the possibility of needing an additional meeting in early July cannot be ruled out.

**Party political dimension of high-level appointments**

While factors such as gender and geographical balance are taken into consideration, the allocation of high-level EU positions by the European Council has a strong political party dimension (see EPRS briefing on European political parties and the European Council).

**Figure 2 – Political balance at previous appointments of EU institutional leaders**

In 2009 and 2014, all of the major jobs went to members of either the European People’s Party (EPP) or the Party of European Socialists (PES), as together they had a majority in both the European Council and the European Parliament (see Figure 2). The EPP was by far the strongest party in the European Council, allowing it to claim successfully the presidencies of both the Commission and the European Council (see Figure 1 above).

In July 2019, the numerical strength of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) – along with partners such as the French President’s La République en Marche (now Renaissance) – reached a peak within the European Council. Eight of the 27 EU Heads of State or Government belonged to this political family. At the same time, the European Parliament elections saw a strong performance by the corresponding political parties which then formed the Renew Europe political group in the Parliament, resulting in the election of Belgian liberal Charles Michel as European Council President.

Since 2019, the political balance in the European Council has changed. The 2024 elections to the European Parliament have also shifted the political landscape, with Renew Europe in particular losing...
strength. This means that the distribution of top EU jobs among the main political families may differ slightly from that seen in 2019.

**Long-term political priorities of the EU: Strategic Agenda**

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'.

The European Council sets the long-term political priorities for the EU shortly after the European elections in a document covering a five-year period, known as the Strategic Agenda. The Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029 will be the third of its kind, following those for 2014-2019 and 2019-2024.

These priorities for the five-year institutional cycle influence the subsequent priorities of the new Commission President and feed into the Commission's annual work programmes. Therefore, the guidelines outlined in the Strategic Agenda are likely to be reflected in the legislative proposals put forward by the Commission, and consequently, in the daily work of the Parliament and the Council.

**Key priorities established by the 2019–2024 Strategic Agenda**

The current Strategic Agenda is clustered around four priorities:

- protecting citizens and freedoms (migration, fighting terrorism);
- developing a strong and vibrant economic base;
- building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe;
- promoting European interests and values on the global stage.

EPRS research has shown that the European Council's focus, as expressed in its conclusions, has fluctuated significantly among these priorities over time (for more details, please refer to the briefing on The Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Council). Additionally, the European Council has addressed other priorities in its conclusions in response to the various crises that the EU has had to confront during the 2019–2024 institutional cycle, notably Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis.

**European Council process for agreeing political priorities**

In 2019, EU leaders began discussing political priorities quite late, launching the process at their informal meeting of 9 May in Sibiu, and adopting the 2019–2024 Strategic Agenda at their regular meeting of 20 June 2019. However, this time around, the process of setting the priorities for the next institutional cycle started much earlier. In June 2023, European Council President Charles Michel invited EU leaders to start reflecting on these priorities before incorporating them into the 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda. The first step in the reflection process was a discussion at an informal European Council meeting in Granada, Spain, on 5–6 October 2023. The second step involved a series of meetings, each with a small number of EU leaders representing a mix of geographical regions, political party affiliations and diverse opinions. Four meetings took place in late 2023: on 13 November in Berlin, 14 November in Copenhagen, 16 November in Zagreb, and 29 November in Paris. A second series of small group meetings took place on 2 April in Vilnius, 3 April in Bucharest, 11 April in Warsaw, and 12 April in Vienna. EU leaders are set to adopt the Strategic Agenda during the European Council meeting of 27–28 June 2024.

**Key priorities expected in the 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda**

According to Charles Michel, discussions on the 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda are centred around the goal of transforming 'Europe into a strong, resilient and more prosperous union'. The current working draft of the Strategic Agenda is based on three main broad priorities:

- 'a strong and secure Europe', which includes the EU's international role, security and defence, migration, and enlargement;
'a prosperous and competitive Europe', addressing a number of topics related to the economy and the double transition (energy and digital), such as competitiveness, innovation, digitalisation, energy, climate change, food security and social policy; 'a free and democratic Europe', focused on the rule of law, the protection of democracy and fundamental values.

These key priorities, particularly those mentioned under 'a strong and secure Europe', also reflect issues such as the war in Ukraine, migration and the international situation, which have been major concerns for EU citizens in recent years, as shown in Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2023 and 2024. The priorities set in previous strategic agendas have aligned with the concerns of EU citizens, as indicated by Eurobarometer surveys.

The draft 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda shares similarities with the 2019–2024 Strategic Agenda, but also differs from it (For a comparison between the 2014–2019 and the 2019–2024 Strategic Agendas see the EPRS study on Origins of the 2019–24 EU Strategic Agenda: The Future of Europe debate and the Sibiu European Council). Whilst the issue of migration is salient in both agendas, the 2024–2029 draft places a stronger emphasis on security, defence and enlargement. Additionally, the rule of law is given more prominence in the 2024–2029 agenda, compared to the current one, where it is hardly mentioned at all. EPRS will conduct a more detailed analysis once the European Council adopts the final Strategic Agenda.

MAIN REFERENCES
Drachenberg R., Outcome of the special European Council meeting of 30 June–2 July, EPRS, 2019.
Drachenberg R., European political parties and the European Council, EPRS April 2022.

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