THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL
AND THE COUNCIL

The house of the member states
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THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL
The house of the member states
Reader’s guide

In less than 5 minutes, you can read how the European Council and the Council work.

Key ideas are marked in **bold text** and are explained in more detail in linked factsheets. You can read whatever factsheets you want, in any order you want. No factsheet takes longer than 5 minutes to read.

The factsheets have links to other explanations and galleries. Pick and choose what you want to look at.
INTRODUCTION

How national governments guide and decide what happens in Brussels – the tasks of the ‘European Council’ and the ‘Council’

*What is ‘Brussels’?*

It is the popular term for the EU – the European Union. Working together can solve problems that cannot be solved alone. It is also the best way to build a common future. When problems run across borders, solutions agreed together make more sense than different national solutions. This way of problem-solving helps keep peace in Europe.

European countries fought each other in two World Wars in the 20th century. From death, destruction, chaos and dictatorship, the Union provided a pathway to peace, stability, democracy and prosperity. For those reasons, the Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 for its work as a successful peace process for more than sixty years.

The Union has its origins in the 1950s when six countries, devastated by the war, committed to work together to build their joint future in a radically new way. The treaties, especially the Treaty of Rome (1957), set down the goals, the scope and the method of the cooperation. The method meant creating new European bodies (or ‘institutions’). Each body has a special task and membership. To solve any problem, or to launch any project, these bodies must all work closely together using their different powers.

‘Why does the Union need different bodies to function - is one not enough?’

Different bodies represent different views.

Firstly, in order to have citizens’ views, there is a European Parliament that is directly elected by citizens of all Union countries every 5 years.
On 26 June 2014, the European Council met in Ypres, Belgium, to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of World War I.

Secondly, in order to have the views of the governments, there are two bodies – the **European Council** and the **Council**. They meet and work in Brussels in what is, in effect, the ‘house of the member states’.

Thirdly, in order to have non-national, ‘European’ viewpoints, there is the **European Commission**.

The discussions within and between these four main bodies determine the shape of European projects. This booklet describes how national governments work within and through the European Council and the Council. On most issues the European Council and Council cannot act alone – they have to work together with the Commission and the European Parliament before anything is agreed.

‘**Why do national governments meet in two different bodies with almost the same name?**’

Firstly, the Union needs to identify and agree the big questions that need European solutions rather than national or local solutions. Setting the Union’s direction and priorities is the task of the presidents and prime ministers meeting in ‘summits’ called the European Council.

Secondly, to achieve these European solutions, the Union must agree laws and policies. National governments discuss and negotiate these laws and policies in the body called the Council. In practice, government ministers travel from their capitals to Brussels or Luxembourg for about 75 meetings annually to take decisions in the Council.
Meetings of the European Council are prepared and chaired by its president and take place with the president of the European Commission. Meetings of the European Council usually begin by leaders listening to the views of the president of the European Parliament on their agenda.

In the Council, on the other hand, most of the work is law-making and policy-making in order to reach the goals set by the leaders. Almost all Union laws are the result of a negotiation between three bodies. The starting point is always the wide European viewpoint, in the form of a Commission proposal.

This proposal is then negotiated and agreed by the ministers who represent the elected national governments – the Council – and the directly-elected representatives of the people – the European Parliament. Whatever law or policy is finally agreed is a balanced solution between the three bodies (Commission, Council and European Parliament), each of which sees every question from a different angle.
Each Union law or policy that is agreed is a step – large or small – towards the big goals agreed by the leaders in the European Council.

The ‘house of the member states’ is central to the Union. It sets the Union’s strategic agenda. And no Union laws are made without its active participation in negotiations leading to a vote and an agreement.
THE FACTSHEETS
FACTSHEET 1

THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

The leaders of the EU’s member states meet every 2-3 months in the European Council. It is often called a ‘summit meeting’. Most countries are represented by their prime minister. Some (such as France) are represented by their president because this is the rule in the national constitution.

A crowd of journalists gather to witness the arrival of leaders for summit meetings and record their comments. French President Emmanuel Macron at the October 2017 summit

The European Council has a full-time, Brussels-based, president elected by its members for a fixed term of 2½ years. The current president is Donald Tusk, former prime minister of Poland.

The president’s role is to decide what are the big questions to be tackled at each meeting and to bring everyone to an agreement.

President Donald Tusk at the press conference after the summit meeting on 23 June 2016, presenting the results of leaders’ discussions and answering questions from the media
How does the president decide the questions for each meeting?

Some of the European Council’s work is planned and some of it is unscheduled crisis management.

For the planned work, the European Council agreed in June 2014 on the big issues that the European Union should deal with until 2020. This short paper – the strategic agenda – highlights five main areas of work.

**STRATEGIC AGENDA FOR THE UNION IN TIMES OF CHANGE**

1. A Union of jobs, growth and competitiveness
2. A Union that empowers and protects all citizens
3. Towards an Energy Union with a forward-looking climate policy
4. A Union of freedom, security and justice
5. The Union as a strong global actor

*European Council conclusions, 26-27 June 2014*
The unscheduled work is the crisis management of unexpected events that are so serious, or require such difficult responses, that only the leaders of the member states can discuss the options and, hopefully, provide some of the answers.

During the term of President Herman Van Rompuy (Donald Tusk’s predecessor), there were many crises to manage – the level of debt in some countries destabilised the euro; the banking system needed support; the debt and banking crises led to high unemployment in certain countries; there were wars in Europe’s neighbourhood for which leaders needed to find a common approach.

During Donald Tusk’s first term, a refugee and migration crisis created a major problem. Terrorist attacks in several major European cities also needed to be discussed by the leaders. The UK population voted in a referendum to leave the Union. All of these events required calm, measured and determined responses.

So when the president draws up the agenda for the summits, it is generally a combination of planned and unexpected issues. In certain cases, he can call an unscheduled meeting to deal with just one single crisis issue.

**How does the president bring everyone to an agreement?**

Donald Tusk spends many weeks preparing each meeting by talking to the other leaders, often meeting them in their own capital. He needs to know the mind of every leader on all the major issues. Almost every agreement in the European Council must be unanimous.

The agreements on each issue are noted down in ‘European Council conclusions’. Having listened to each leader, the president sends them a first version of the conclusions several weeks before the summit meeting. This is discussed by the permanent representatives of the member states, who have instructions from their leaders. The head of the president’s private office takes part in these discussions. So does someone who represents the president of the Commission. Because these are difficult issues, there is almost never agreement at the first discussions.
A few days before the European Council meets, the president might revise the conclusions and make new suggestions in order to bring more leaders into the agreement. This version is discussed by ministers in the Council who give the reactions of their leaders a couple of days before the summit. This brings the conclusions closer to being unanimously agreed. But the really hard questions will remain for the leaders to thrash out face-to-face in the European Council.

By chairing the European Council skilfully, by making new suggestions and by appealing to the leaders to look for common ground, the president normally succeeds in finding solutions that all presidents and prime ministers, and the president of the Commission, can agree to.

Not every meeting delivers the definitive solution to every issue. On the most difficult problems, sometimes the leaders make only a small step forward. Then a new effort is made to take another step at another European Council meeting.

The European Council conclusions are made public on the internet in all Union languages right after the meeting.
FACTSHEET 2

THE COUNCIL

The Council is sometimes called ‘the Council of ministers’. This is the body where ministers from the elected national governments of the member states work together. The Commission also attends Council meetings.

The ministers’ job is to work towards Union-level solutions to shared problems, which take account of the particular interests of their individual countries. This often requires flexibility and compromise. Therefore, ministers must strike the right balance – a European solution with maximum advantages and minimum disadvantages for their own individual countries.

The main task of the Council is law-making – with the Commission and the European Parliament, it is one of the three interdependent players in the Union’s law-making process. The Council also makes policy that resolves issues or maps out tracks for the future by bringing the governments of member states onto a common path. The Council, with the European Parliament, adopts the Union’s annual budget, based on a seven-year financial plan that they adopt with guidance from the European Council.

The Council also has a big role in external relations where it defines and implements the EU’s foreign and security policy. For international agreements with non-EU countries or international organisations, the Council takes the final decision to conclude an agreement.

Almost all law-making needs a proposal from the Commission. Almost all Commission proposals need joint adoption by the Council and the European Parliament. As a result, for each proposal there are several lines of negotiation under way. Ministers must discuss their diverging views with each other in the Council. The Council must also (as a single body) negotiate with the Commission as well as with the European Parliament. When the Council and Parliament agree on the final text of a law based on the Commission proposal, it is adopted.

In most cases of law-making, the Council decides by majority voting. There are only a few cases where decisions must be unanimous. The voting system is based on a majority of member states and a majority of population. In theory, the Council can adopt once it is clear that the required majorities have been reached. In reality, the Council often continues to discuss and improve the draft laws until the biggest possible majority (or even unanimity) is reached. This can take weeks or months, or sometimes longer.
Before getting down to business, ministers have time for an informal discussion.

EU ministers met in Brussels on 22-23 May 2017 at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council. From left to right: Alice Bah Kuhnke, Swedish Minister for Culture and Democracy; Françoise Nyssen, French Minister for Culture; Owen Bonnici, Malta’s Minister for Justice; Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media

Every Council is attended by a minister from each of the member states. Countries that share the euro have taken an extra step towards working together. Their finance ministers meet in an informal ministerial body called the Eurogroup to discuss the issues that follow from this very close bond, such as the situations of their economies and budgets.

For the ministers who participate in the Council, this is not their only job – or even their main job. Their main job is back home in the national government and national parliament. Participating in the Council in Brussels or Luxembourg is something that they do, at most, for 2-3 days each month – in some cases, even less. Therefore, each government sends one of its highest diplomats to Brussels to represent it permanently – these are called the permanent representatives. They have the rank of senior ambassadors. They meet weekly in a committee called Coreper. Over several weeks of meetings, Coreper prepares each meeting of the Council.
The Council adopts laws and makes European policy for the wide range of subjects where national governments, in the treaties, gave the Union power to take action. Therefore, in practice, Council meetings are organised according to subject, so that the right ministers can come together. This means, there are Council meetings on finance, environment, energy, justice and so on, bringing together ministers with these responsibilities. The Council comes together in ten different thematic meetings known as ‘Council configurations’.

The Council meets 70-80 times a year. Most meetings last for one full day. Some meetings are half-day or two-day. The meetings are always in Brussels except for three months where, under a long-standing agreement, the meetings are held in Luxembourg.

The Council’s presidency changes every six months. Where the other Union bodies have a man or a woman as president, the Council has a member state as ‘president’.

The Council’s work is as open as possible. Agendas for Council meetings and many of the papers discussed by ministers and by permanent representatives can be downloaded freely from the Council’s website. When the Council is discussing the adoption of a law, the meeting is web-streamed.
WHO ATTENDS THE SUMMITS AND THE COUNCILS

Every year, there are at least four summits (European Council) and more if needed. On the other hand, the Council meets over 70 times a year, attended by ministers from the member states.

The summits are attended by a small group of men and women. These are the presidents or prime ministers of the member states, plus the president of the European Council (currently Donald Tusk) plus the president of the European Commission (currently Jean-Claude Juncker). It is very rare that a leader misses a meeting. If a leader is missing, his/her chair remains vacant – they are not replaced by a deputy or a minister or permanent representative.

In addition to the principal participants, a small number of others attends some or all of the meeting. The president of the European Parliament usually addresses the start of the meeting. When their subjects are being discussed, the Union’s foreign policy chief (currently Federica Mogherini) or the president of the European Central Bank (currently Mario Draghi), also attend and participate in discussions.

The secretary-general (currently Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen) – with 2-3 supporting staff – and the president’s head of private office are present throughout the meeting. The supporting staff include the legal counsellor. The president of the Commission is normally accompanied by the Commission’s secretary-general. To enable the leaders to speak their 23 different languages, there are interpretation teams for each language.

The summits are a frank discussion of major issues and new European projects between people who meet in this format every 2-3 months. If the issues cannot be solved in this format, there is no other, or higher, place to go. They hear the political messages of the president of the European Parliament and they rely on the analysis and advice of the president of the European Commission, but they are autonomous in building solutions to the challenges they face. They are guided by their president both during and between meetings – he has a key role in sketching the compromises. Few issues are resolved in one meeting. The leaders usually discuss an issue several times and build solutions step by step.
Council meetings are very different. There are 70-80 meetings a year. This means that some weeks have 2-3 Council meetings. Officially there are ten specialised formats, ranging from finance to environment. Each format brings together the national ministers from the member states who are responsible for the subject – such as finance or environment ministers.

Behind the ten official formats lie many more specialised subjects – probably twice that number, each with its own specialised ministers from the member states. For example, the transport, telecommunications and energy Council format is, in practice, divided in three parts, each of which is attended by the relevant ministers.

Not all Council formats meet with the same frequency. The finance Council meets almost monthly. The education ministers meet usually only every six months. This means that the finance ministers know each other much better than the education ministers.

It sometimes happens that ministers are not free to come from their capital to Brussels to attend the Council. In this case, they can be replaced by a deputy or by a permanent representative – the national chair is never empty.

The Council president is the minister from the member state that holds the six-monthly presidency and who is responsible for the subject under discussion. Every six months, 12-18 different ministers will chair 30-40 Council meetings. Some will chair around 6 meetings (like finance), others will chair perhaps only one (like education).

Each minister in the Council is supported by 3-4 collaborators. The principal collaborator is the permanent representative (or the deputy), accompanied by 2-3 others from the permanent representation or the national ministry. They sit with their minister in the meeting room.
The European Commission is represented by the commissioner responsible for the subject under discussion – the euro, environment, transport, social policy and so on.

The Council president is accompanied and supported by advisors from the permanent representation and from the Council secretariat who help with the organisation of the meeting and who advise on finding solutions.

Council meetings are also supported by 23 teams of interpreters so that ministers can discuss business in their own languages.

What the summits and the Council meetings have in common is that the participants come from national capitals to meet in the house of the member states to work out agreed solutions to Europe-wide challenges. The leaders set out the priorities and steer the strategy for the future. Their ministers follow up when they take part in Council meetings to make EU law, working hand-in-hand with the Commission and the European Parliament.
THE PRESIDENT AND THE PRESIDENCY

There is no ‘president of the European Union’. Union law and policy is made by different bodies working together. The different Union bodies each have a president. Their presidents lead them and work together.

The European Council (the leaders) and the Council (the ministers) each have a president.

The president of the European Council is currently Donald Tusk. Previously, he was prime minister of Poland. He is a full-time president and he has his office in Brussels. He was elected to this position by the European Council in 2014 for a first term of office of two-and-a-half years, and re-elected in 2017. The rule in the treaty says that the president can have a maximum of two terms.

Donald Tusk is only the second full-time president of the European Council. His predecessor was Herman van Rompuy, former prime minister of Belgium, who was president for five years from 2009 to 2014. Before that, this heavy task was done by the leader of the state whose government held the presidency of the Council (see below), next to his/her national role.

To do his job, Donald Tusk is supported by the permanent Council secretariat. He also has a small temporary team of staff in his private office. Every president has such a team. They are his closest advisors – they organise his agenda and travels, they write his speeches, they represent him in discussions with the personal representatives of the other leaders.
His main task is to decide what should be discussed and ensure the good preparation of summit meetings. Each meeting takes weeks of preparation so that it can end with a good result. It is a good result when the leaders agree to a step forward on one of the big issues that can be solved only at their level. In recent years, the key questions for the Union have been terrorism, migration, the economic and euro crisis and Brexit.

It is rarely possible to solve a major problem or launch a new project in one meeting. Getting a shared understanding of an issue and finding the right solution usually requires step by step discussion by leaders, over a series of meetings. As well as organising meetings to tackle immediate problems, the president must also build up agreements on where the Union is going for the next five, ten or more, years. The president also represents the Union when he meets the leaders of other countries around the world.

The Council also has a president. Its president is not a man or a woman, but the government of a member state. As a result, it is usually called the Council presidency. The presidency’s term of office is six months. Here, there is no election – every state takes its turn. This means that every member state – however big or small – holds the presidency of the Council roughly every 14 years.

The presidency of the Council rotates among member states every 6 months

The Council brings together ministers from member states who deal with the same subject – energy, justice, environment, finance and so on. All together, there are ten groupings of subjects. When the Council meets to discuss one of these subjects, its president is the minister who is responsible for that subject in the state that holds the presidency. For example, between January and June 2017, meetings of the environment Council were chaired by the Maltese minister for the environment. Then, from July to December 2017, they were chaired by the Estonian minister for the environment.
Carmelo Abela, Minister for Home Affairs and National Security of Malta, chaired the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on 28 March 2017 in Brussels, where some of the issues discussed were the EU’s return policy, the implementation of a migration policy and criminal justice in cyberspace.

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The ministers who chair the Councils do not live in Brussels and this is not their main job. They live in their home country where they are usually members of the national parliament and members of the national government. During the six-month presidency, some Councils might meet six times (such as finance or agriculture), while others might meet only twice (such as energy or environment). In between Council meetings, the preparatory and follow-up work is done by Coreper. The ‘Council presidency’ is a member country. The ‘Council president’ is the woman or man from that state who chairs the meeting on one of the various subjects.

There are two exceptions. There is a permanent president for the Foreign Affairs Council that manages the Union’s external relations. She is currently Federica Mogherini, formerly foreign minister of Italy. She is Brussels-based. She, in fact, has three roles. She chairs the monthly meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council. She is vice-president of the Commission, responsible for external relations. She is EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. She is often called the Union’s ‘foreign policy chief’. Her term of office in all three jobs runs for the five years of the European Commission’s term.
EU Foreign Affairs ministers met on 15 May 2017 in Brussels. They took stock of the implementation of the EU Global Strategy in the area of security and defence, in particular the civilian aspects. The Council also discussed the situation in the Horn of Africa, a region facing destabilisation, in particular in Somalia and South Sudan.

The informal Eurogroup meetings, that bring together the finance ministers of the 19 countries that share the euro, also have a fixed president. He is currently Mário Centeno, minister of finance of Portugal. He was elected by members of the Eurogroup for two-and-a-half years.

The presidency of the Council is supported by the Council secretariat. They help each member state to prepare and plan its presidency. When ministers come to Brussels to chair meetings, they give her, or him, policy and legal advice and logistical support. The main task of the Council presidency is to call meetings, decide the agendas, structure the discussions, listen to ministers and work out compromises for solutions. The Council secretariat provides the advice, briefing, reports, logistics, interpretation and translation to make this possible.

The president of the European Council (Donald Tusk) and the Council presidency (the member states, in their turn) work very closely together. They are advised by the same secretary-general and supported logistically by the same Council secretariat. The European Council steers the work of all EU bodies, including the Council. In line with this, the president and the presidency work closely with the presidents of other bodies – the Commission and the European Parliament.
FACTSHEET 5

THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES AND COREPER

The government of each member state sends one of its most senior and experienced diplomats to represent it permanently in Brussels.

They are ‘permanent’ because they live and work 24/7 in Brussels, unlike their leaders and ministers who go to Brussels only for specific meetings.

They are ‘representative’ because they have full power to negotiate what their governments want and to accept or reject solutions.

They meet in a committee called Coreper – this comes from Comité des représentants permanents in French.

No question ever goes to ministers in the Council unless it is first discussed and prepared in Coreper. Coreper is central to the work of the Council. Its members are both ‘permanent’ and ‘representative’.

Their regular meetings are at least weekly. In the event of a crisis, they can come together within hours. Because they are ‘representative’ and because they have direct contact with their leaders, they can generally say exactly what their governments’ views are, including in a developing crisis. There are about 110 Coreper meetings annually.

However, most of their work is not in crisis mode. Generally, their work is preparing the 70-75 meetings of the Council that take place each year. There is also a Council meeting in advance of every summit.
There is a vast volume and range of subjects for which the Council makes laws or European policy. To cope with this, Coreper is divided into two parts. Coreper Part 2 (where the permanent representatives meet once a week) prepares the summits and the Councils that deal with economic and financial questions, justice and home affairs, foreign affairs and general affairs.

Coreper Part 1 (where the deputy permanent representatives meet twice a week) prepares the Councils that deal with all the other subjects. The list is long: agriculture, fisheries, environment, climate change, transport, telecommunications, energy, employment, social affairs, internal market, industry, research, space, education, youth, culture and sport.

### Coreper 1
(deputy permanent representatives)
prepares the Council

| Agriculture and fisheries | Economic and financial affairs |
| Competitiveness (industry, research) | Foreign affairs |
| Education, youth, culture and sport | General affairs |
| Employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs | Justice and home affairs |
| Environment | |
| Transport, telecommunications and energy | |

### Coreper 2
(permanent representatives)
prepares the Council

What does it mean to ‘prepare a Council meeting’?

Every Council agenda contains items to be discussed or decided. Coreper looks at these items several weeks before the Council meeting. When Coreper discusses these items for the first time, there is rarely agreement. This is because the interests of the member states are often very different. The permanent representatives (or their deputies), working with instructions from their ministers, look for a common ground where they can agree.

Most of the time it is, in theory, enough to find common ground that will get a majority of votes. In reality, Coreper (and, later, the Council) will keep looking for better solutions in order to have the biggest possible majority, or even consensus, to support the decision. In the end, the best available solution is adopted by voting.
If Coreper finds a solution that satisfies all the ministers, this goes to the Council to be approved without a discussion. In the Council’s jargon, these are called the ‘A items’ on the Council’s agenda. However, even if there is a majority to adopt a solution, any minister can ask for the item to be discussed in the Council so that she/he can argue to have their problem solved. If there is no majority, there will always be a discussion between ministers in order to find a solution. In the Council’s jargon, items that are for discussion are called ‘B items’.

The Council can rarely decide anything alone, especially in law-making. Here the Commission and the European Parliament also need to be in agreement with the Council. Therefore, a high-level Commission person is always present at the Coreper table and plays a crucial role in its work. Basically, the Commission person will explain and defend the Commission’s proposal and, perhaps, agree to some changes in order for everybody to move onto the common ground.

In order to get the European Parliament’s agreement, Coreper asks its president to meet the Parliament to explain the Council’s position and to hear what the Parliament wants. The president of Coreper plays a very important role as the go-between for the Council and the European Parliament.

The president of Coreper – like the presidency of the Council – changes every six months. He/she is always the permanent representative (or the deputy) of that state whose government holds the presidency of the Council. Because each Council meeting is chaired by a minister responsible for the subject (finance, environment and so on), at least ten different women or men chair Council meetings during the six-month period. However, only two women or men will chair Coreper in the six-month period – the permanent representative and the deputy.

Each permanent representative is supported by an office in Brussels staffed by experts from the member state – the permanent representation. These experts are specialists in all the fields where the Council takes decisions – from aviation to zoonoses (animal diseases). Before a proposed law or European policy is discussed by Coreper, it is first examined in expert working parties. About 180 of these exist in principle and they are made up by representatives from each member state. They meet regularly to discuss draft laws or policy proposals and they report their work to Coreper.
Work on a draft law in a working party can take several meetings, running from weeks to months. Like Coreper, the experts work with instructions from their ministers. If they come to agreement, this is adopted by Coreper without discussion. In the Council’s jargon, these agreements are called ‘I’ items. Like Coreper, these working parties are chaired by a person from the state whose government holds the presidency of the Council.
THE COUNCIL’S EXPERT WORKING PARTIES

The Council works at three different levels. At the top level, the ministers meet, discuss, make policy and adopt laws. Every ministerial meeting is prepared directly by Coreper – the Committee of the member states’ permanent representatives in Brussels. Before Coreper prepares a discussion or a decision by the ministers, one of the many working parties will discuss and work on the specific topic.

Coreper creates working parties for all the specialised subjects that need to be examined in technical detail before a decision can be taken by the Council. There are about 180 working parties, covering a wide range of subjects – such as taxation, international trade, aviation, asylum, consumer protection and so on. They hold about 3 600 meetings annually.

Each member state sends an expert to every working party meeting. The Commission also sends its expert. This is because it is the Commission that usually kick-starts every discussion and every proposal for a law, so it must explain and clarify its proposals.

Every working party has a president. In almost all cases, he or she is the expert from the state that holds the six-month presidency of the Council. The president sets the work programme and agenda, organises the discussions and draws the conclusions. The meetings take place in the Council buildings in Brussels – the ‘house of the member states’.

The experts who attend are officials of the governments of the member states. They usually work for government ministries, under the authority of their minister. Sometimes they work for specialised agencies that are outside the ministries, but still
under the authority of the government – for example, national food safety agencies. As well as having a general expertise (such as lawyers, economists or scientists), they usually have a specific expertise for the subject in the working party. This could be value added tax, animal welfare, climate change or cyber crime and so on.

The working parties meet only when called by the presidency, when there is a proposal to be examined before a decision by the Council. Coreper needs to know where the experts’ discussions stand before it can prepare a ministerial Council meeting.

Each working party usually examines a single subject, or a group of similar and related subjects. Meetings last one day, sometimes two. The meetings will be called until the Commission proposal has been fully examined and it becomes clear where there is agreement and where not.

For big subjects, the meetings can take place weekly. For others, it can be monthly – especially if the experts have research or enquiries to make. For some subjects, the discussions may only take 2-3 meetings, others may take 6-8 weeks. For complex subjects, it can take many more meetings to complete the examination of all the angles. For such a subject, the presidency usually sums up the discussions at the end of its six-month term of office, even if the work is not complete. Coreper, and sometimes ministers in the Council, want to know what progress is being made.

Such summary, the report of the working party to Coreper, is written by the Council secretariat. At every meeting, the president is advised and assisted by at least two partners from the secretariat. One is from the Council’s legal service. The other is from the Council’s department that provides the support for the ‘family’ of working parties – such as environment, justice, transport or economic and financial affairs, and so on.

The partners from the Council secretariat not only sit beside the president during the meeting, they also hold a preparatory meeting with her/him to discuss how to run the discussion. They support the president during the meeting, by offering advice, suggesting how to make compromises and noting down the views of the different member states.

When it comes to writing the report of the working party for Coreper, the secretariat will first analyse the discussions with the president so that they share the way the report should be framed. It is very important that the report is fair to all the member states’ experts’ views and that it can guide Coreper towards solutions.

It often happens that the experts’ discussions, based on their instructions from their political masters, lead directly to an agreement. In this case, the report goes to Coreper for approval without further discussion by permanent representatives. In the Council’s jargon, this is called a ‘I’ (‘Roman one’) item on the Coreper agenda.
Once a decision has been formally approved in this way by Coreper as a ‘i’ item, Coreper can send the decision to the Council for adoption without further discussion by ministers. In the jargon, this is called an ‘A item’ on the Council agenda. There is usually an explanatory note from the secretariat summarising how the agreement was reached.

For ‘A’ items, the votes are usually unanimous. But frequently member states agree to an adoption without discussion even when they are in a minority that votes against the decision. In such cases, they often make a statement explaining why they vote against. In any case, right up to the last minute before approval, a minister can ask for an ‘A’ item to be discussed.

Working parties therefore play a key role. They ensure that the Council’s laws and political decisions are based on a solid examination, by ministers’ experts, of the technical details.
The General Secretariat of the Council assists the European Council and the Council.

All the negotiators and decision-makers in the European Council and the Council are from member states. Presidents, prime ministers, ministers and their experts come from their capitals to Brussels to negotiate and make agreements. The permanent representatives of the member states who meet weekly in Coreper are posted to live in Brussels usually for 4-5 years, before returning home or moving on.

These negotiations are supported by an office called the Council secretariat. Its headquarters is the house of the member states in Brussels – in fact, in three adjoining buildings. The Council appoints a secretary-general to run this organisation.

The current secretary-general is Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen. He was chosen by the Council in June 2015 for a term of five years. He is highly experienced in Union business, especially in the European Council and Council. He previously worked as permanent representative and deputy permanent representative for Denmark in Brussels. He was president of Coreper during the Danish presidency of the Council in 2012.
The job of the secretary-general is to be
- the chief policy advisor to the president of the European Council (currently Donald Tusk) and to the Council presidency (that member states hold in six-month turns)
- the general manager of all the departments and services needed for the two bodies to work efficiently.

As chief policy advisor, the secretary-general has specialised policy teams to back him up. The teams roughly correspond to the Council’s ten subject groups – finance, justice, environment and so on. There is also a legal service that plays a central role in advising the leaders and the Council. The treaties set out clearly how law and policy are made. One of the main jobs of the secretary-general and the legal service is to make absolutely sure that all the rules are applied properly. Otherwise, a law or policy could be overturned as invalid by the European Court of Justice.

Communication and information are important tasks for the secretariat. It serves the leaders, the Council and their presidents with communication hardware and services. It builds openness and public accountability by keeping records, creating and publishing archives and by ensuring transparency and public access to documents.

Planning and organising is an important part of policy advice. The secretariat helps to schedule this work. It also makes sure that different policies, that are discussed in different Council subject groups, fit together – such as agriculture and environment, energy and climate change, immigration and relations with neighbouring countries. The secretariat is, among other things, a ‘negotiations manager’.
All secretaries-general and secretariat staff will, during their term of office or career, serve many six-month Council presidencies and probably a few presidents of the European Council. They are therefore very important for the smooth continuity between presidencies. They have memory and experience of what works, and what does not work. This means that presidents and presidencies turn to them for political and tactical advice on finding compromises in negotiations. The secretariat is also a problem-solver.

Every day of the week, there are around 20 meetings taking place in the Council buildings (annually, this adds up to about 5 800). At ministerial level, there could be a meeting of the Council for Economic and Financial Affairs. Down the corridor, the deputy permanent representatives could be meeting in Coreper. On the next floor, there could be meetings of the experts in the working parties on aviation, or fisheries, or public health, or terrorism and so on.

Every meeting has participants from all member states, the Council presidency and the Commission. Sometimes there are also participants from other bodies, such as the European Investment Bank or the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Each meeting has between 60 and 150 participants. The secretariat must provide the facilities for this.

Meeting facilities means not just rooms, but also simultaneous interpretation, documents (including translations), security and catering. Every day, about 1 500 people come from member states to this house of the member states in Brussels to negotiate. The secretariat supplies the logistics they need.

During summit and Council meetings interpreters provide simultaneous translation from and to the 23 working languages of the Union
An important part of the secretariat’s task is to help communication. Every ministerial meeting has full simultaneous interpretation and all documents translated in all 24 official languages. By agreement, Coreper and most working parties work in less than 24 languages.

The secretariat’s translation department and lawyer-linguist department (that checks the quality and clarity of draft laws), are the biggest single activity in the secretariat. Annually, they process more than 15,000 documents (totalling about 1 million pages). They account for about one third (over 1,000 employees) of the total secretariat staff. The speed and expertise of the service they provide to the leaders and the Council is unique in any international body.

The secretary-general leads an organisation of about 2,800 people. Staff are selected on their merits through open competitions organised by the Union’s recruitment office, called EPSO. They are not selected or nominated by the member states. They serve the leaders and the Council, not their state of origin. They come from all member states. The secretariat’s annual budget is about 550 million euro – that is about 0.4% of the Union’s budget.
HOW DECISIONS ARE TAKEN

When member states negotiated the treaties, they also agreed on the voting rules for decisions by both the leaders (European Council) and the ministers (Council).

The European Council mostly decides strategy and policy, while the Council mostly decides law.

When the European Council makes strategy and policy, it records this in so-called European Council conclusions. They are always agreed by the leaders by consensus. There are some specific cases where it decides by qualified majority – such as the election of its president.

When the Council makes law, the situation is different. Before looking at the details of the voting rules, it is important to know that the Council rarely decides alone. In almost all cases, it works in a process with the Commission and the European Parliament.

The Council can make law only when it has a proposal from the Commission. If the Commission sticks to its proposal, the Council can change it only if it has the unanimous agreement of all member states.

For most law-making, the Council and the European Parliament are ‘co-legislators’. They are absolutely equal in their powers. This is called the ‘ordinary legislative procedure’ or ‘codecision’. When the Council votes, it must remember that it will need to find an agreement with Parliament in the end. The Parliament must have the same regard for the Council.

The Council’s voting rules are set out in the treaties.

There are three voting systems.
A qualified majority is reached when 55% of member states representing 65% of the EU population are in favour of the negotiated text.

These figures are put into a calculator that anyone can download as an app to their smartphone or tablet. This is the same app that everyone uses in the Council to check if the 65% population rule is reached for a decision to be taken. Put the other way, a decision can be blocked by any four states representing at least 35% of the Union’s population. States can also abstain in a vote. This has the same effect as voting against because it requires positive votes to achieve the ‘double majority’.

The voting app makes it possible to calculate when a qualified majority for the adoption of a law is reached.
The second system applies to law-making in a limited number of fields, where the treaties say that the Council must adopt unanimously. In other words, every member state has a veto. This applies, for example, to admission of new member states to the Union and to taxation.

The third system applies to non-law-making decisions. For example, this could be a house-keeping decision for the Council to meet exceptionally outside its agreed meeting places in Brussels and Luxembourg. In these cases, the decision is taken by a simple majority – a minimum of 15 states in favour.

There are a number of other features of the voting system. For example, the Council’s internal rules say that a majority of member states have to participate in a vote for it to be valid. That is currently at least 15 members.

Voting is a political and a legal act. It is done only at the level of ministers in the Council. Coreper does not usually vote formally, but the permanent representatives sometimes signal in advance how their ministers intend to vote in the Council. This ‘indicative vote’ is useful for the Council presidency in judging if a decision is ready for adoption. Working parties do not vote. All Council votes on law-making are automatically made public.

The Council cannot vote on a Commission proposal until at least eight weeks after it has been sent to the national parliaments of the member states. This is to give national parliaments the time to examine the proposal. In certain cases, a group of about one third of national parliaments can ask the Commission to review its proposal.

These clear rules might give the impression that the Council always takes decisions as quickly as possible or as soon as the presidency sees that there is a qualified majority. In reality, there is a tradition in the Council of taking decisions based on the broadest possible level of support. Even if it looks like a decision can be taken by qualified majority, presidencies and member states will usually continue discussions in order to find compromises that will solve as many of the problems as possible for those members in the minority.
HOW THE UNION MAKES LAWS (AND WHY)

The Union has aims for its citizens. The fundamental aims are written in the treaties that the member states negotiated and agreed when they decided to work together. The more medium-term goals are agreed unanimously by the leaders of the members who meet in the European Council. The last major goal-setting agreement was in June 2014. The European Council adopted a strategic agenda for the coming years.

To reach these aims, the Union agrees laws and policies. Member states agreed in the treaties that these laws will apply on their territory – to governments, individuals, businesses and other organisations. The member states also agreed, in the treaties, the fields where the Union would make law. Although the fields are wide, they do not cover everything. The Union can only make law where its member states have agreed it can.

The members also agreed the process for the laws to be made. And they reserved a prominent place for themselves in the law-making process – this place is the Council. The members decided that the Commission would make proposals for laws and that they themselves, in the Council, would negotiate and adopt these laws jointly with the European Parliament.

They also decided, in the treaties, that they would create an independent European Court of Justice to rule on disputes about the Union’s laws.

In the media, the Union’s laws are sometimes simply called ‘EU rules’. The treaties describe different kinds of laws, but they are mostly called, in legal language, ‘regulations’ and ‘directives’. Regulations apply directly and immediately in all member states. Directives are laws that national governments and parliaments must pass into national law before they come into effect.

Proposals for laws come from the Commission. In proposing a law, the Commission must make several prior checks. Firstly, does the Union have the power in the treaties to make a law in this field? Every law must have a legal basis. The European Court of Justice can strike out laws that do not have a legal basis. Secondly, the Commission will also check that its proposal will move forward the Union’s priorities.

The Commission’s five-year work programme is built directly on the leaders’ strategic agenda. The Commission does several other checks to ensure that it is putting the law-making machine into action in the most efficient way to tackle the Union’s most important challenges.

The Commission’s proposal is sent to the Council and the European Parliament. In most cases, they are absolutely equal partners in the negotiation and in the final decision – this is called the ‘ordinary legislative procedure’. One body represents the Union’s electorate directly; the other represents the national governments that each member state has elected.
The Council and the Parliament will rarely have exactly the same attitude to a Commission proposal because they represent different power bases and perspectives.

The Council will study the proposal at three levels. First, the proposal is examined by experts coming from the member states who meet in working parties. These experts, who take their instructions from their ministers and their permanent representatives, discuss the proposal in detail. At the second level, the permanent representatives, meeting in their committee (Coreper), examine open issues which the working parties could not solve. Finally, at the highest level, the proposal will be examined by ministers in the Council that is responsible for the subject - such as energy, fisheries, finance or justice. Ministers negotiate to settle the last outstanding issues or formally adopt the agreements reached by the permanent representatives.
Before the Council meets the European Parliament to negotiate, it must first decide its own position – what does it support and oppose in the Commission proposal? The experts in the working parties study the technical, financial and legal aspects, and report to Coreper. The Council side will then agree its position on the proposal. This is called the ‘mandate’ for the Council’s discussion with the European Parliament. The mandate must be supported by a qualified majority of member states, as calculated under the Council’s voting system.

Following its own rules and practices, the European Parliament will also adopt its own mandate for the negotiation with the Council.

In the next stage, the Council’s and the European Parliament’s representatives meet to examine and compare their lists of points that they support or oppose in the proposal. Since these are two large bodies, representing all national governments and over 750 European parliamentarians, they each nominate negotiators to represent them.

It is usually wise for the negotiators to meet informally, in Brussels or Strasbourg, to explain their mandates to each other. For the Council, the negotiator is always the presidency of the Council. Depending on the proposal, it can be the president of Coreper (who lives in Brussels) or the president of the Council (who usually lives in her/his home country). In explaining their mandates, the Council’s and Parliament’s negotiators also explore solutions for the points where they disagree.

Each negotiator reports back to his/her home base (Council and Parliament) on the points of agreement and disagreement. For the discussions to progress towards agreement, both sides have to get revised mandates. The Council presidency gets its updated mandate from Coreper or the ministers in the Council. After weeks or months of discussions and revised mandates from the sides of the Council and the Parliament, the negotiators usually find a draft solution.

On the Council side, the draft solution is usually checked by permanent representatives in Coreper, who get instructions from their governments to accept or reject it. If the outcome is positive, the text of the solution is put into correct legal form and translated into all languages of the Union by the joint work of the Council secretariat and the European Parliament secretariat. This draft legal text is put to the vote in the plenary session of the European Parliament and in a ministerial meeting of the Council. This is how a Commission proposal becomes a Union law, adopted by the Council and the Parliament.

When the Council makes law, most of its agendas and reports are open and publicly available and its ministerial debates are web-streamed.
The EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a dynamic policy which has been successively reformed to adapt to new challenges. The CAP ensures viable and safe food production and a fair standard of living for European farmers while taking into account animal welfare and social and environmental concerns. The CAP also supports young farmers and farmers in areas with natural constraints such as mountain areas.

HOW THE UNION DECIDES POLICY (AND WHY)

The Union has aims. It pursues its aims by making laws and by deciding policies. The Union makes laws for those subjects where the treaties give it the power to do so – these are clearly set out, and are limited, in the treaties. A Union policy, on the other hand, can mean different things.

In the first case, a Union policy can be a set of laws founded on a set of guiding principles. The leaders (European Council) or the ministers (Council), separately or together, act as authors of guiding principles on a wide range of issues. The Council then acts as the law-maker. When guiding principles are agreed, they are usually noted down as conclusions of the European Council or the Council. Laws are binding; conclusions are for guidance.

Two examples help show how this works:

The common agriculture policy was one of the first common Union policies. It was built up progressively from the aims of the treaties, from guiding principles and with laws. It has changed radically over the years. Today’s common agricultural policy is very different from what it was ten years ago and radically different from twenty years ago. The Council discussed the changes that it wanted in the guiding principles, then it adopted new laws.
In the first decades of the Union, the guiding principles for the common agriculture policy were mainly to increase production and increase farmers’ incomes. Today, the guiding principles are mainly to produce what the market wants and to do this in a way that consumers expect, by environmentally-friendly production and by meeting high standards for animal welfare and food safety. Over many years, these new guiding principles were developed in Council conclusions and were the basis for major reforms. Thanks to this reformed policy, the Union is more than self-sufficient in high-quality food that is produced in environmentally-sustainable conditions. The policy is also the basis for one of the Union’s most important export sectors, employing millions of people in food and farm businesses.

The common energy policy is a more recent Union policy – now called ‘Energy Union’.

The Union’s energy situation is the opposite to the agriculture and food situation. The Union is highly dependent on energy imports. Some member states are more exposed and vulnerable than others. Energy cannot move around the Union from one member state to another so easily to respond to demand. This is partly for infrastructural reasons, but partly because we do not have a totally open internal energy market. Our internal energy borders do not protect anyone – they make us more vulnerable, more exposed to supply threats and price uncertainty. Some types of energy contribute to climate change and endanger the planet. Using energy more efficiently and using renewable energy are challenges on such a big scale that all states must work together to succeed.

• When the European Council discussed the five biggest challenges facing the Union in the coming years, it concluded in its strategic agenda that energy and climate change are among them. The leaders agreed policy guidelines in European Council conclusions.
• The European Commission responded with a proposed strategy for an Energy Union. This was discussed by both the leaders in the European Council and by the energy and environment ministers in the Council. Both agreed policy guidelines in their conclusions.
• In the light of these guidelines, the Commission proposed laws to the Council and the European Parliament. Many have already been agreed and adopted. There are already positive results. But the work goes on.
• There is therefore a common energy policy, or an Energy Union, under construction. It consists of policy guidelines from the European Council and the Council and also laws adopted by the Council and the European Parliament.
### Policy making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>The European Council adopts the EU’s <strong>strategic agenda</strong>, including as a priority the Energy Union, also covering climate.</td>
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<td>October 2014</td>
<td>The European Council adopts its 2030 <strong>climate and energy policy framework</strong>, setting targets for:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• less greenhouse gas emissions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• more renewables in the energy system</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• more energy efficiency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• a complete internal energy market</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• more energy security.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2015</td>
<td>The Commission presents its <strong>Energy Union Strategy</strong> with a road map for building the Energy Union.</td>
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<td>March 2015</td>
<td>The European Council agrees to establish an <strong>Energy Union</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td>The Council adopts <strong>conclusions</strong> on two overarching aspects of the Energy Union: empowering consumers and attracting investments.</td>
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### Law making

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>The Commission presents 3 proposals for law that the Council examines and adopts together with the European Parliament.</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>Under ‘<strong>energy security</strong>’ the Council adopts a decision on individual member states’ energy <strong>agreements</strong> with non-EU countries that will create transparency in gas pricing and improve security of gas supply.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2017</td>
<td>Under ‘<strong>energy efficiency</strong>’ the Council adopts a regulation on energy labelling. Energy labels push industry to produce, and help consumers to choose more efficient household products.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2017</td>
<td>Under ‘energy security’, the Council adopts a <strong>regulation</strong> for measures that ensure continued energy supply to citizens in case of a gas crisis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>The Commission presents its clean energy package that translates the EU targets on renewables and energy efficiency into law. It also includes proposals on <strong>electricity market design</strong>, one of the priorities of completing the internal energy market. It will improve infrastructure, enable better intra-EU trade in electricity and easier switch between energy sources, so that citizens can enjoy cheaper energy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2017</td>
<td>Under ‘<strong>energy efficiency</strong>’ the Council adopts an update of two directives targeting the cheapest energy source: the energy not consumed. The directives support building renovation and energy savings in all fields.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Work in progress on renewables, electricity market design and a governance system. Governance aims to follow if the EU targets are on track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Negotiations with the European Parliament on the clean energy package.</td>
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*Policy making and law making illustrated through energy policy development*
The main pillars of the policy are:

- energy security and solidarity (meaning a greater diversity of fuels, suppliers and supply routes)
- an open internal market (meaning a reduction of legal borders between energy markets and an increase in physical interconnectors for gas and electricity)
- more energy efficiency, to moderate demand for energy (in particular, a target to increase efficiency by 27% between 2014 and 2030)
- decreasing greenhouse gas emissions in the Union by increasing the share of energy from renewable sources (reducing greenhouse gases by 40% between 1990 and 2030, increasing energy from renewables to 27% of consumption by 2030)
- major investments in research and innovation, so that the Union becomes a leader with smart energy-management devices in our homes, clean transport, clean fossil fuels and safe and sustainable nuclear energy.

In other cases, a Union policy can be guiding principles or agreed aims, but without binding laws. Every month, the Council makes decisions on a wide range of subjects in ‘conclusions’. The subjects can be very specific (such as unfair trading practices by supermarkets that damage farmers’ incomes) or more general (such as wildlife trafficking or global efforts to combat AIDS).

These Council conclusions show that even where there is a limited legal basis in the treaties, member states’ ministers regularly work jointly on a problem when they meet in the Council. They are often willing also to discuss and agree a common, non-binding approach to the problem, in the form of conclusions.

In another case, Council conclusions are very frequently used to set down the position of the Union and member states in external relations. The Foreign Affairs Council meets monthly under the chairmanship of its permanent president, the high representative, and discusses the political and security situation around the world. It agrees conclusions on regions, on specific countries or on cross-cutting issues (such as human rights or chemical weapons).

Depending on the case, the member states set out their aims, principles or plans of action in their conclusions or declarations. These conclusions guide the actions of the Union’s governments when they take their own foreign policy actions.
Every project needs a budget. If it is a big project, it needs not just an annual budget but a **multi-year financial** plan. Everything in Brussels is discussed and agreed by the Union’s main actors – the Commission, the European Parliament and the member states in the **European Council** and the **Council**. The Union’s budget is no exception.

The Union has a seven-year financial plan from 2014 to 2020. The purpose of the plan is to set an overall financial limit for the seven annual budgets in this period and then direct the funds to the Union’s priorities. The current plan limits total payments over seven years to €910 billion. This is about 1% of the total value of the economies of the member states.

The Union’s public spending is about 2.5% of the total public spending by the member states. About 90% of the Union’s budget is spent directly by the governments of the member states on approved projects and programmes. The Commission manages the flows and is legally accountable for proper management of the funds.

The plan is divided into seven sections – five are policy goals (the other two are housekeeping sections). Each of the seven sections has its own limit – to ensure that the overall limit is kept. The policy goals are:

- **47% for growth**
  - actions for job creation (money for research, innovation, education, trans-European networks for energy, telecommunications and transport)
  - solidarity between people and regions (money for investment in poorer regions so that they can catch up)
• 39% for using our natural resources for sustainable growth (money for agriculture, fisheries and environment)
• 1.6% for security for the Union’s citizens (money for border protection, public health, consumer protection, migration and asylum)
• 6% for external actions (money for development and humanitarian aid and other foreign policy action).

The remaining 6% is housekeeping – mostly the cost of running the Union’s bodies (buildings, staff, equipment). The Council secretariat uses 8% of this housekeeping amount to support the European Council and Council. In a seven-year plan, it also makes sense to have some reserves for flexibility and emergencies. These have been
used, for example, for natural disasters in the Union (such as flood or earthquake emergencies) or for action on unexpected migration (such as creating a border protection service).

The discussions about the financial plan are as intensive as the discussions about the Union’s priorities. Without the financial plan, the Union’s goals and priorities cannot be achieved.

The Commission made a proposal to the Council for the current plan in 2011. The member states in the Council scrutinised the plan, working at the usual three levels (experts from capitals in working parties, permanent representatives in Coreper and ministers in the Council). But because of the strategic importance of the plan, the member states’ leaders in the European Council debated and decided on the big numbers – such as the overall amount and the sub-amounts for the seven sections. With these guidelines from the leaders, the Council then adopted the plan.

The voting rule for the plan is unanimity – this means that unless every member state gives its agreement, there is no plan. The European Parliament must also give its consent – that means a majority of its 751 members must vote in favour. At the crux of these negotiations in June 2013, the presidents of the European Council, the Commission and the European Parliament negotiated face-to-face over many weeks.

It took over two years to negotiate the current plan, from the Commission’s proposal to the European Council’s guidance, to the adoption of the various laws by the Council and the European Parliament. The main outcome was:

- the total size of the 2014-2020 plan was reduced compared with 2007-2013 by about 3.5%. This was the first time that a new plan has been less than its predecessor;
- with this reduced financial envelope, more money was channelled into projects to generate growth and jobs (research, innovation, infrastructure and networks); but there was less money for other projects (especially for agriculture and for investment in poorer regions);
- money for security was increased; this was increased again in 2016 and 2017 using the flexibility and emergency reserves, in the light of the migration crisis. There was also more money for external actions.
National governments get their revenue from taxes. The Union does not collect tax but gets its revenue from its member states as follows (2015 figures):

- 70% from a share (about 0.7%) of member states economic wealth (called Gross National Income)
- 13% from duties charged on goods imported from non-Union countries and from levies on sugar production
- 12% from taking a share of member states' VAT collections
- 5% from different sources (including income tax on the salaries of Union employees and payments by non-Union countries for joining Union programmes).

Each annual budget is a step in the implementation of the seven-year plan. The Commission makes a draft budget. The Council adopts a position on the draft. The European Parliament makes amendments to the Council's position. The Council and European Parliament then meet to negotiate a compromise.

This annual budget translates the seven-year plan into annual action. It also allows the Union to use the reserves and flexibility to respond to new situations. For example, the security share of the 2017 budget was almost doubled to 3% of the total in order to provide money for border protection and the welfare, training and other needs that result from the refugee and immigration crisis.
EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Alongside for instance the USA and China, the Union is a major actor in world affairs. It is one of the world’s biggest exporters and importers of goods and services. The Union and its member states provide over half of the world’s development aid and humanitarian aid. It promotes peaceful resolution of conflicts, not just by diplomacy but also by sending people and equipment into conflict areas to prevent confrontation or to keep the peace.

The Union participates actively in the work of almost all international organisations. The Union is active especially in its own Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, but also on every continent. The Union’s activities are driven by its values and its interests. These include free and fair trade, human rights and sustainable development.

External relations is a very wide area, covering foreign affairs, security policy, defence policy, trade, development and humanitarian aid. Under the treaties, member states keep a great deal of national autonomy in external relations. But in certain areas, such as international trade, the Union’s policy is led by the Commission and largely replaces national trade policy. In many other areas, such as development aid, the Union’s aim is to combine its own actions with member states’ policies and ensure that they all work in harmony.

The Union’s general priorities in external relations come from the member states’ leaders in the European Council. These were set out in just 300 words in the June 2014 strategic agenda. Every summit discusses some aspect of external relations and the outcome is summarised in ‘conclusions’.

President Donald Tusk and the High Representative Federica Mogherini at the EU-China summit that took place on 1-2 June 2017 in Brussels
As president of the European Council, Donald Tusk represents the EU in foreign affairs and security policy. Depending on the subject, he works closely with the president of the Commission or the Union’s ‘chief’ for external relations. Her official title is ‘high representative’ and this post is currently held by Federica Mogherini, former foreign minister of Italy. She was nominated to her post for five years by the leaders. She attends the European Council where she gives her analysis, makes her proposals and receives their guidance for her future actions.

The high representative chairs the Foreign Affairs Council that meets monthly, attended by the foreign ministers of the member states. The Foreign Affairs Council is the only Council to have a president for five years – all the others have a president for six months. The leaders’ priorities are developed in the Foreign Affairs Council. If law is needed, the Commission makes a proposal for the Council to decide (sometimes jointly with the European Parliament). The high representative is also vice-president of the Commission and has her voice in the making of the proposal.

The high representative is also head of the Union’s diplomatic service – the European External Action Service (EEAS). This has its headquarters in Brussels, alongside the Council and the Commission. It also has a network of about 140 delegations around the world. About one third of the staff are diplomats from the foreign services of the member states. They work in the EEAS on temporary assignments. The other staff came from the Council secretariat, the Commission, and the European Parliament.

The Foreign Affairs Council makes policy more often than law. It does this by Council conclusions and by declarations. The proposals for these are tabled by Federica Mogherini as president of the Council. These proposals are debated, amended and agreed by the foreign ministers.

A guiding principle in the Union’s external relations is support for peaceful and orderly relations between countries. This can be in broad organisations like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the World Health Organisation (WHO). Or it can be in single-issue bodies like the UN Convention on Climate Change or the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

The Foreign Affairs Council directs negotiations and gives its approval for the Union’s international agreements. These can be with non-Union countries or with international bodies (such as the UN).

Many of these agreements are about trade – the Union has over 40 trade agreements with countries and regions across the globe and is negotiating several others. The Council gives a mandate to the Commission which negotiates for the whole Union.
At the end of the negotiation, the Council **votes** to sign and conclude the agreement. All international agreements, except in foreign and security policy, need the consent of the European Parliament.

The Foreign Affairs Council can also decide to launch field operations in different parts of the world. In 2017, there were about 15 operations under way, with about 5 000 staff. These operations can be for peace-keeping, conflict prevention, supporting the rule of law, preventing piracy and human trafficking or supporting UN arms embargoes.

Depending on the human expertise or the equipment needed, the operations can consist of military, police, judges or civilians. In these cases, the operation is done by the professional staff from the member states using their own equipment (helicopters, ships and so on).
Most of the operations are in the European neighbourhood or in Africa. As the Union itself does not have military or police forces, or a permanent budget provision for such operations, a special budget is agreed by the Foreign Affairs Council for each individual operation. Sometimes non-Union countries contribute staff or equipment to these operations (for example, Norway, Iceland or New Zealand).

There is not always a clear dividing line between external relations and internal policy. This is the case, for example, with terrorism, energy or migration. On all these issues, the leaders in the European Council, chaired by President Donald Tusk, keep the overview and give the strategic direction. At the next stage, depending on the issue and following what is agreed in the treaties, it is the Council, the high representative, the Commission or the member states that lead in organising the combined action.
FOLLOWING THE WORK OF THE COUNCIL

The work of the European Council and the Council is easy to follow.

For users of social media, all the main players are active:

- the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has a Twitter, Facebook and Flickr account;
- the Council and European Council can be followed on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and elsewhere;
- the country that holds the six-monthly presidency of the Council has a dedicated Twitter account: Estonia (from July 2017), Bulgaria (from January 2018), Austria (from July 2018), Romania (from January 2019), Finland (from July 2019);
- Federica Mogherini (who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council) is active on Twitter.

In addition to social media channels, the Council secretariat maintains an informative and accessible website. It features the latest news coming from the Council and European Council, as well as background information on policies and working methods. The website is also the place to find press releases, and to subscribe to regular email and sms updates. The secretariat’s photo and video archive is there as well.
For people interested in following the progress of, for example, a law that is being negotiated, they can do this on the Council’s website. All the official documents used in a negotiation are automatically put in a public register that anyone can access through this website.

Most documents are available with a click. Some documents are shown only by their title and reference number – they can be requested. The Council has only limited grounds to refuse access; these are set down in an EU law adopted by the Council and the European Parliament.

To follow the progress of a law under discussion, it is also important to consult the websites of the Commission (that proposes laws) and the European Parliament (that is the joint legislator with the Council for most laws) in order to see the full picture.

To follow the work of the Council, several useful tools are available.

- Every Commission proposal has a reference number (the ‘interinstitutional reference’) that is used also by the Council and the European Parliament. Using this reference number, you can get a list of all the official documents that have been produced in the Council for discussions on this proposal. You find the reference number by first searching for the subject in the Council’s public register of documents.
- The agendas of all meetings at all three levels of the Council (ministers, Coreper and working parties) are in the public register. These show when, and at what level, the proposal is being discussed.
- The agendas list the documents that are being discussed. It is possible to download many of these documents directly or, if not, they can be requested.

When ministers in the Council discuss a draft law or make a decision about it, they must work in public. This means that part of their meetings are streamed live online, via the Council’s website. These public sessions are announced ahead of time; a schedule can be found on the website. These web streams are a good opportunity to see ministers from EU member states in action.

To sum up: for headlines and alerts, it is good to follow the European Council, the Council and their presidencies on social media or feeds, or to subscribe to sms and email messages via the Council website. The website is also a great resource for background information.

To explore an on-going debate in greater detail, it is possible to access meeting agendas and official meeting documents in the Council’s free public register. To investigate a negotiation that is concluded, the same register is very useful, as well as an extensive archive of press releases, photos and videos offered on the Council website.
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