THE EU’S STRATEGIC BODY

The European Council is the EU institution that defines the general direction and priorities of the European Union. It consists of the heads of state or government of the EU member states, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission. The European Council represents the highest level of political cooperation between the member states and meets at least once every 2-3 months in Brussels.

The European Council is not one of the EU’s legislative institutions, and therefore does not negotiate or adopt EU laws. Instead, it sets the EU’s policy agenda, generally by adopting ‘conclusions’ during European Council meetings. These identify issues of concern and actions to take. It is the Council of the EU, together with the European Parliament, that exercise the legislative functions of the EU, in most cases based on a proposal from the European Commission.

Most of the European Council’s work is planned. However, some of its work is unscheduled crisis management that requires a discussion between the EU’s heads of state or government. Discussions may cover such areas as the banking crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and fight against terrorism. As these issues can be very complex or sensitive, the leaders usually discuss an issue on several occasions and build solutions gradually.

Most decisions in the European Council are taken by consensus, although in some specific cases the leaders decide by qualified majority, for example, when they elect their President. Neither the European Council President nor the Commission President can vote.
The current European Council President is Donald Tusk, a former Polish Prime Minister. He has been in the post since 2014 and was re-elected in 2017 for a second, non-renewable 2½ year term. The President of the European Council prepares, chairs and leads the European Council meetings. His or her role furthermore is to seek general agreement among its members. The President also represents the EU on the world stage at international summits, usually alongside the President of the European Commission, and on issues related to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, alongside the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. He or she is supported by the permanent General Secretariat of the Council and by a small temporary team in his or her private office.

It was the Lisbon Treaty that created the position of a permanent and full-time President of the European Council in 2009. Concurrently, the European Council was converted into a formal European institution, more than three decades after its creation. This development highlights the increasing importance of the European Council over time. Its meetings attract a large amount of media attention, with more than 1 600 journalists coming regularly to Brussels to cover a European Council meeting.
THE EUROPA BUILDING

Since the beginning of 2017, the Europa building has been the main seat of the European Council, and also of the Council of the EU. This modern and sustainable building offers the space, security and technology needed to host European Council meetings, as well as multilateral summits and ministerial meetings.

Key facts about the Europa building

The façade symbolises the motto of the European Union, ‘united in diversity’, and is made up of recycled window frames from all over Europe. The frames are oak, the only tree that can be found in every part of Europe.

- **3 750 windows** approximately in the glass façade and **374 LED light tubes** illuminating the lantern.
- **16 meeting rooms**, including three rooms with at least 32 interpretation booths each.
- **250 offices**, used by EU member states, the President of the European Council and support staff.

The building is **environmentally friendly** and ensures an **efficient use of energy**. The roof is covered by solar panels, and rainwater is collected to supply sanitary facilities.
EUROPEAN COUNCIL, COUNCIL, COUNCIL OF EUROPE – CONFUSED?

Both the European Council and the Council of the EU – also known informally as the EU Council or, simply, the Council – represent the views of the governments of the EU member states. The European Council determines the EU’s general political direction and priorities, whereas the Council – in which national ministers from each EU member state meet – mostly adopts laws and coordinates policies. Almost all law-making requires a proposal from the Commission and almost all Commission proposals demand joint adoption by the Council and the European Parliament. Together with the Commission and the Parliament, the Council is therefore one of the three interdependent players in the Union’s law-making process.

The European Council and the Council should not be confused with the Council of Europe, an international organisation based in Strasbourg which protects human rights, democracy and the rule of law and promotes European culture. It is totally separate from the EU.