

THE EUROPEAN
UNION
EXPLAINED

How the European Union works

Your guide
to the
EU institutions



European Union



THE EUROPEAN UNION EXPLAINED

*This publication is a part of a series that explains
what the EU does in different policy areas,
why the EU is involved and what the results are.*

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The European Union explained:

How the EU works

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Introducing the European Union

How it works, who does what

What this publication is about

This publication is a guide on how the European Union (EU) works. 'How the EU works' means how decisions are taken at EU level and who takes those decisions. At the heart of this decision-making process are the EU institutions — such as the Parliament, the Council and the European Commission — which you may have heard of, and there are others. To show how the EU works, this publication first explains how EU legislation is made. It then gives further insight into each of the EU institutions, as well as the agencies and bodies supporting them.

The European Union in brief

At the core of the EU are the Member States — the 28 states that belong to the Union — and their citizens. The unique feature of the EU is that, although these are all sovereign, independent states, they have pooled some of their 'sovereignty' in order to gain strength and the benefits of size. Pooling sovereignty means, in practice, that the Member States delegate some of their decision-making powers to the shared institutions they have created, so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level. The EU thus sits between the fully federal system found in the United States and the loose, intergovernmental cooperation system seen in the United Nations.

The EU has achieved much since it was created in 1950. It has built a single market for goods and services that spans 28 Member States with over 500 million citizens free to move and settle where they wish. It created the single currency — the euro — which is now a major world currency and which makes the single market more efficient. It is also the largest supplier of development and humanitarian aid programmes in the world. These are just a few of the achievements so far. Looking ahead, the EU is working to get Europe out of the economic crisis. It is at the forefront of the fight against climate change and its consequences; it helps neighbouring countries and continues ongoing negotiations on enlargements; and it is building a common foreign policy which will do much to extend

European values around the world. The success of these ambitions depends on the ability to take effective and timely decisions and to implement them well.

The EU treaties

The European Union is based on the rule of law. This means that every action taken by the EU is founded on treaties that have been approved voluntarily and democratically by all EU countries. The treaties are negotiated and agreed by all the EU Member States and then ratified by their parliaments or by referendum.

The treaties lay down the objectives of the European Union, the rules for EU institutions, how decisions are made and the relationship between the EU and its Member States. They have been amended each time new Member States have joined. From time to time, they have also been amended to reform the European Union's institutions and to give it new areas of responsibility.



On 9 May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman first publicly proposed the ideas that led to the European Union. So 9 May is celebrated as the EU's birthday.

The last amending treaty — the Lisbon Treaty — was signed in Lisbon on 13 December 2007, and came into force on 1 December 2009. Earlier treaties are now incorporated into the current consolidated version, which comprises the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) in the Economic and Monetary Union is an intergovernmental treaty which was signed by all EU Member States except the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom in 2012 and entered into force on 1 January 2013. It is not an EU treaty but an intergovernmental treaty, and the intention is to bring it into EU law. It obliges the countries to have firm rules to guarantee balanced public budgets and it strengthens the governance of the euro area.



© ImageGlobe

The work of the EU is based on the treaties agreed by all the member countries — the latest main update was signed in Lisbon in 2007.

A history of the EU treaties

When French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed integrating western Europe's coal and steel industries in 1950, his ideas were set out in the Treaty of Paris the following year, and the precursor to the EU — the European Coal and Steel Community — was born. Since then, the EU has regularly updated and added to the treaties to ensure effective policy and decision-making.

- ▶ *The Treaty of Paris, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, was signed in Paris on 18 April 1951 and entered into force in 1952. It expired in 2002.*
- ▶ *The Treaties of Rome, establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), were signed in Rome on 25 March 1957 and came into force in 1958.*
- ▶ *The Single European Act (SEA) was signed in February 1986 and came into force in 1987. It amended the EEC Treaty and paved the way for completing the single market.*
- ▶ *The Treaty on European Union (TEU) — the Maastricht Treaty — was signed in Maastricht on 7 February 1992 and came into force in 1993. It established the European Union, gave the Parliament more say in decision-making and added new policy areas of cooperation.*
- ▶ *The Treaty of Amsterdam was signed on 2 October 1997 and came into force in 1999. It amended previous treaties.*
- ▶ *The Treaty of Nice was signed on 26 February 2001 and entered into force in 2003. It streamlined the EU institutional system so that it could continue to work effectively after the new wave of Member States joined in 2004.*
- ▶ *The Treaty of Lisbon was signed on 13 December 2007 and came into force in 2009. It simplified working methods and voting rules, created a President of the European Council and introduced new structures with a view to making the EU a stronger actor on the global stage.*

Who takes the decisions?

Decision-making at EU level involves various European institutions, in particular:

- ▶ the **European Parliament**, which represents the EU's citizens and is directly elected by them;
- ▶ the **European Council**, which consists of the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States;
- ▶ the Council, which represents the governments of the EU Member States;
- ▶ the **European Commission**, which represents the interests of the EU as a whole.

The European Council defines the general political direction and priorities of the EU but it does not exercise legislative functions. Generally, it is the European Commission that proposes new laws and it is the European Parliament and Council that adopt them. The Member States and the Commission then implement them.

What types of legislation are there?

There are several types of legal acts which are applied in different ways.

- ▶ A **regulation** is a law that is applicable and binding in all Member States directly. It does not need to be passed into national law by the Member States although national laws may need to be changed to avoid conflicting with the regulation.

- ▶ A **directive** is a law that binds the Member States, or a group of Member States, to achieve a particular objective. Usually, directives must be transposed into national law to become effective. Significantly, a directive specifies the result to be achieved: it is up to the Member States individually to decide how this is done.
- ▶ A **decision** can be addressed to Member States, groups of people, or even individuals. It is binding in its entirety. Decisions are used, for example, to rule on proposed mergers between companies.
- ▶ **Recommendations** and **opinions** have no binding force.

How is legislation passed?

Every European law is based on a specific treaty article, referred to as the 'legal basis' of the legislation. This determines which legislative procedure must be followed. The treaty sets out the decision-making process, including Commission proposals, successive readings by the Council and Parliament, and the opinions of the advisory bodies. It also lays down when unanimity is required, and when a qualified majority is sufficient for the Council to adopt legislation.

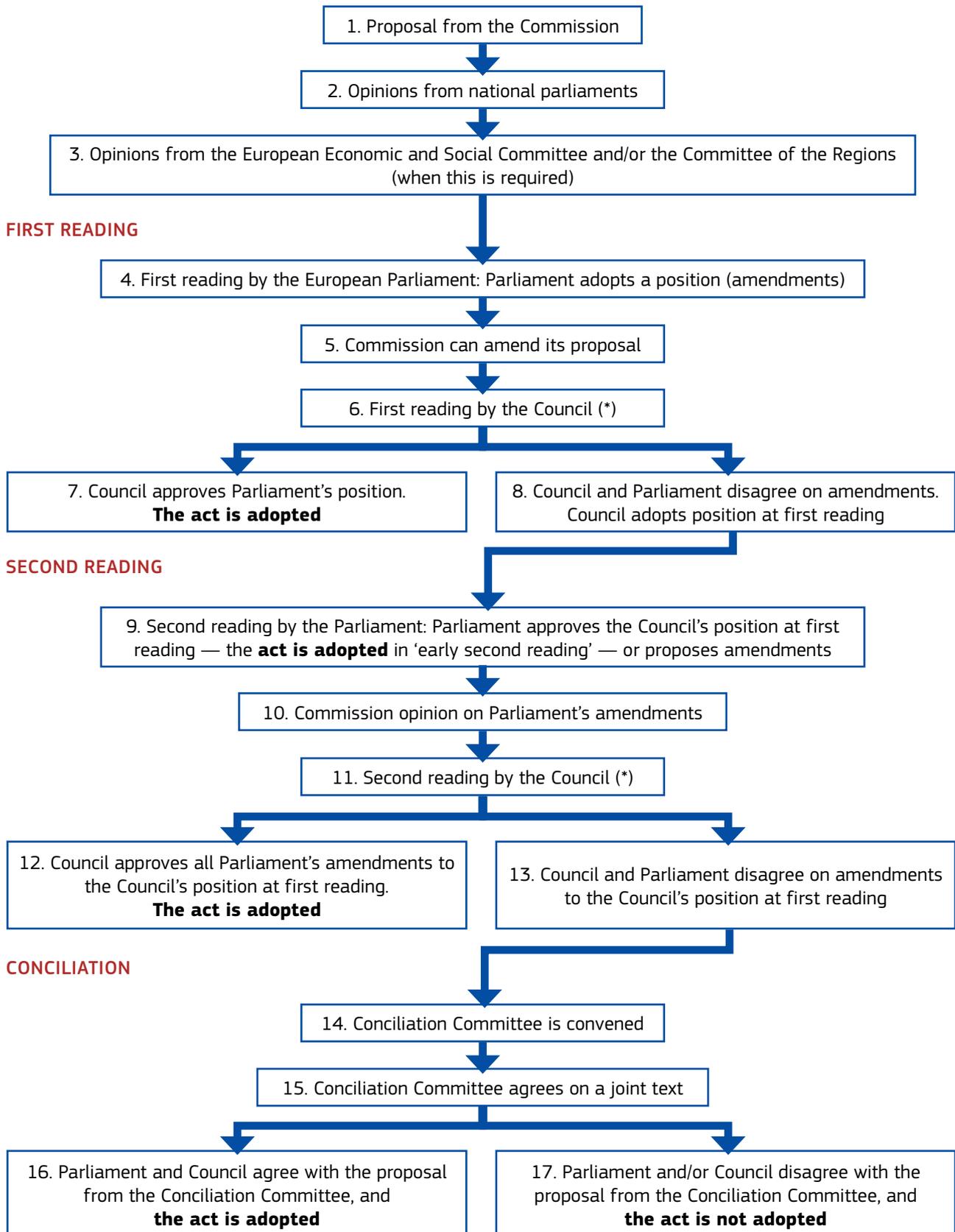
The great majority of EU legislation is adopted using the **ordinary legislative procedure**. In this procedure, the Parliament and the Council share legislative power.

The procedure begins with the Commission. When considering launching a proposal for action, the Commission often invites views on the topic from governments, business, civil society organisations and



The freedom for all citizens to travel, live and work in all the 28 EU countries is one of the main achievements of the European Union.

ORDINARY LEGISLATIVE PROCEDURE



(*) Council adopts its position by a qualified majority (the treaties provide for unanimity in a few exceptional areas). However, if the Council intends to deviate from the Commission's proposal/opinion it adopts its position by unanimity.

individuals. The opinions collected feed into a Commission proposal that is presented to the Council and the Parliament. The proposal may have been made at the invitation of the Council, the European Council, the Parliament or European citizens, or it may have been made on the Commission's own initiative.

The Council and the Parliament each read and discuss the proposal. If no agreement is reached at the second reading, the proposal is put before a 'conciliation committee' comprising equal numbers of Council and Parliament representatives. Commission representatives also attend the committee meetings and contribute to the discussions. Once the committee has reached an agreement, the agreed text is then sent to the Parliament and the Council for a third reading, so that it can finally be adopted as law. In most cases, the Parliament votes on proposals by simple majority and the Council by qualified majority voting, whereby at least half of the total number of EU Member States, representing about two thirds of the population, must vote in favour. In some cases, unanimous voting is required in the Council.

Special procedures

Special legislative procedures are available depending on the subject of the proposal. In the **consultation procedure**, the Council is required to consult the Parliament on a proposal from the Commission, but is not required to accept the Parliament's advice. This procedure is only applicable in a few areas, such as internal market exemptions and competition law. In the **consent procedure**, the Parliament may accept or reject a proposal, but may not propose amendments. This procedure can be used when the proposal concerns the approval of an international treaty that has been negotiated. In addition, there are limited cases where the Council and the Commission, or the Commission alone, can pass legislation.

Who is consulted, who can object?

In addition to the Commission–Council–Parliament triangle, there are a number of advisory bodies that must be consulted when proposed legislation involves their area of interest. Even if their advice is not taken, this contributes to the democratic oversight of EU legislation by ensuring that it is subject to the widest scrutiny.

These bodies are:

- ▶ the **European Economic and Social Committee**, which represents civil society groups such as employers, trades unions and social interest groups;

- ▶ the **Committee of the Regions**, which ensures that the voice of local and regional government is heard.

In addition, other institutions and bodies may be consulted when a proposal falls within their area of interest or expertise. For example, the European Central Bank would expect to be consulted on proposals concerning economic or financial matters.

National oversight

National parliaments receive draft legislative acts at the same time as the European Parliament and the Council. They can give their opinion to ensure that decisions are taken at the most appropriate level. EU actions are subject to the principle of **subsidiarity** — which means that, except in the areas where it has

Citizens' participation

By means of a European citizens' initiative, 1 million EU citizens from at least one quarter of the EU Member States may invite the Commission to bring forward a legislative proposal on a particular issue. The Commission will carefully examine all initiatives that fall within the framework of its powers and that have been supported by 1 million citizens. An audition of the initiatives is done in the Parliament. Such initiatives may therefore influence the work of the EU institutions, as well as the public debate.



Citizens can now propose new laws, by means of the European Citizens' Initiative.

exclusive powers, the Union only acts where action will be more effective at EU level than at national level. National parliaments therefore monitor the correct application of this principle in EU decision-making.

What decisions are taken

The treaties list the policy areas in which the EU can take decisions. In some policy areas, the EU has **exclusive competence**, which means that decisions are taken at EU level by the Member States meeting in the Council and the European Parliament. These policy areas cover trade, customs, competition rules, monetary policy for the euro area, and the conservation of fish.

In other policy areas, the decision-making competences are shared between the Union and the Member States. This means that if legislation is passed at EU level, then these laws have priority. However, if no legislation is adopted at EU level, then the individual Member States may legislate at national level. Shared competence applies in many policy areas, such as the internal market, agriculture, the environment, consumer protection and transport.

In all other policy areas the decisions remain with the Member States. Thus, if a policy area is not cited in a treaty, the Commission cannot propose a law in that area. However, in some fields, such as the space sector, education, culture and tourism, the Union can support Member States' efforts. And in others, such as overseas aid and scientific research, the EU can carry out parallel activities, such as humanitarian aid programmes.

Economic coordination

All EU Member States are part of the economic and monetary union (EMU), meaning that they coordinate their economic policymaking and treat economic decisions as a matter of common concern. Within the EMU, no institution alone is responsible for overall economic policy. These responsibilities are divided between the Member States and the EU institutions.

Monetary policy — which deals with price stability and interest rates — is managed independently by the European Central Bank (ECB) in the euro area, i.e. in those Member States which use the euro as their currency. With Lithuania joining in January 2015, the euro area has 19 countries.

Fiscal policy — which concerns decisions about taxation, spending and borrowing — is the responsibility of the 28 Member State governments. So are the policies about labour and welfare. However, as fiscal decisions taken by one euro area Member State can have an impact throughout the euro area, these decisions must conform to rules set at EU level. Therefore, the coordination of sound public finances and structural policies is necessary for the EMU to function effectively and to ensure stability and growth. In particular, the economic crisis that began in 2008 highlighted the need to strengthen economic governance in the EU and in the euro area, by means of inter alia closer policy coordination, monitoring and supervision.

The Council monitors Member States' public finances and economic policies and can make recommendations to individual EU Member States based on proposals from the Commission. It may recommend adjustment measures and sanction euro area states that do not take corrective measures to reduce excessive deficit and debt levels.

The governance of the euro area and major economic policy reforms are also discussed in the euro summits, where Heads of State or Government of euro area members meet.

The EU and foreign relations

Relations with countries outside of the EU are under the responsibility of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who is appointed by the European Council, but also holds the post of European Commission Vice-President. At the level of Heads of State or Government, the Union is represented by the President of the European Council.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) serves as a foreign ministry and diplomatic service for the Union under the authority of the High Representative. It is composed of expert staff transferred from the Council, the Member States and the European Commission.

The Council develops and takes decisions in the field of the EU's foreign and security policy on the basis of guidelines set by the European Council. The Commission, on the other hand, is responsible for trade and funding for non-EU countries, such as humanitarian or development aid. The Commission also represents the Union in all areas of EU competence outside foreign and security policy.

The European Parliament

The voice of the people

Role: Directly elected legislative arm of the EU

Members: 751 Members of the European Parliament

Location: Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg

► <http://www.europarl.eu>

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected by EU citizens to represent their interests. Elections are held every 5 years and all EU citizens over 18 years old (16 in Austria) — some 380 million — are entitled to vote. The Parliament has 751 MEPs from all 28 Member States.

The official seat of the European Parliament is in Strasbourg (France), although the institution has three places of work: Strasbourg, Brussels (Belgium) and Luxembourg. The main meetings of the whole Parliament, known as ‘plenary sessions’, take place in Strasbourg 12 times per year. Additional plenary sessions are held in Brussels. Committee meetings are also held in Brussels.

Composition of the European Parliament

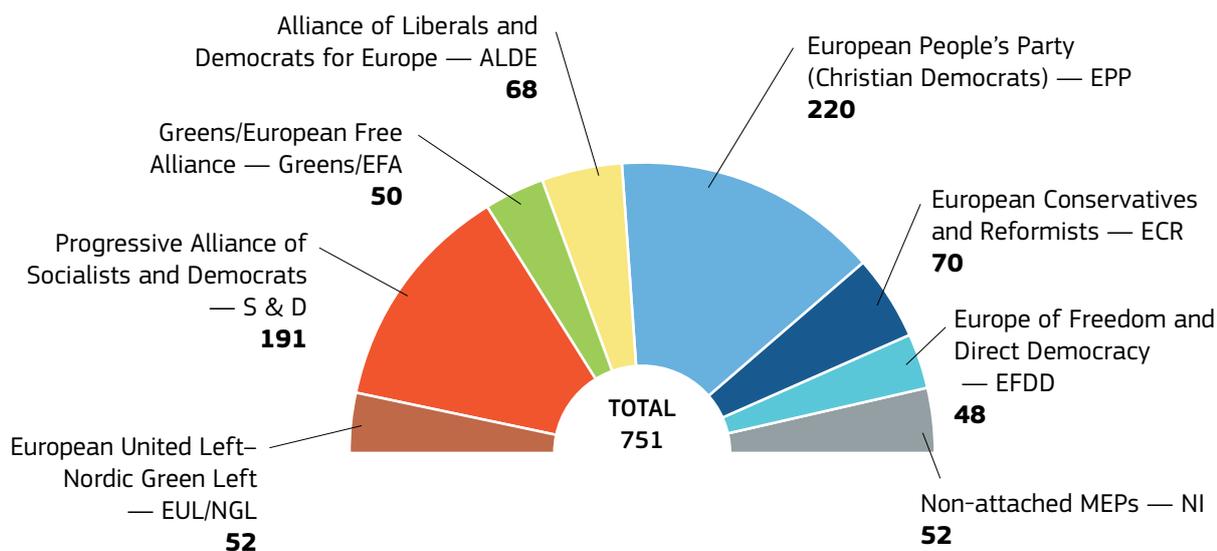
The seats in the European Parliament are allocated among the Member States on the basis of their share of the EU population.

Most MEPs are associated with a national political party in their home country. In the European Parliament the national parties group into EU-wide political groupings and most MEPs belong to one of these.

NUMBER OF MEPS PER MEMBER STATE IN 2014

Member State	Number of MEPs
Austria	18
Belgium	21
Bulgaria	17
Croatia	11
Cyprus	6
Czech Republic	21
Denmark	13
Estonia	6
Finland	13
France	74
Germany	96
Greece	21
Hungary	21
Ireland	11
Italy	73
Latvia	8
Lithuania	11
Luxembourg	6
Malta	6
Netherlands	26
Poland	51
Portugal	21
Romania	32
Slovakia	13
Slovenia	8
Spain	54
Sweden	20
United Kingdom	73
TOTAL	751

NUMBER OF MEPS IN EACH POLITICAL GROUP (OCTOBER 2014)



What the European Parliament does

The Parliament has three main roles:

1. It shares with the Council the power to legislate — to pass laws. The fact that it is a directly elected body helps guarantee the democratic legitimacy of European law.
2. It exercises democratic supervision over all EU institutions, and in particular the Commission. It has the power to approve or reject the nomination of the President of the Commission and Commissioners, and the right to censure the Commission as a whole.
3. It shares authority with the Council over the EU budget and can therefore influence EU spending. At the end of the budget procedure, it adopts or rejects the budget in its entirety.

These three roles are described in greater detail below.

1. THE POWER TO LEGISLATE

The most common procedure for adopting EU legislation is called the 'ordinary legislative procedure' — also known as the 'co-decision procedure'. This places the European Parliament and the Council on an equal footing, and the laws passed using this procedure are joint acts of the Council and the Parliament. It applies to the majority of EU legislation, covering a wide range of fields such as consumer rights, environmental protection and transport. Under the ordinary legislative procedure the Commission makes a proposal which must be adopted both by the Parliament and the Council. The Parliament's assent is required for all

international agreements in fields covered by the ordinary legislative procedure.

The Parliament must be consulted on a range of other proposals, and its approval is required for important political or institutional decisions, such as social security and protection acts, tax-related provisions in the area of energy and harmonisation of turnover taxes and indirect taxation. The Parliament also provides the impetus for new legislation by examining the Commission's annual work programme, considering what new laws would be appropriate and asking the Commission to put forward proposals.

2. THE POWER OF SUPERVISION

The Parliament exercises democratic supervision over the other European institutions. It does so in several ways. Firstly, when a new Commission is to be appointed, the Parliament holds auditions of all the prospective new members and the President of the Commission (nominated by the Member States). They cannot be appointed without the Parliament's approval.

Furthermore, the Commission is politically answerable to the Parliament, which can pass a 'motion of censure' calling for its mass resignation. More generally, the Parliament exercises control by regularly examining reports sent to it by the Commission and asking written and oral questions.

The Commissioners attend plenary sessions of the Parliament and meetings of the parliamentary committees. Similarly, the Parliament holds a regular dialogue with the President of the European Central Bank on monetary policy.



Martin Schulz was re-elected President of the European Parliament in 2014.

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The Parliament also monitors the work of the Council: MEPs regularly ask the Council written and oral questions, and the Council Presidency attends the plenary sessions and takes part in important debates. For some policy areas, which include common foreign and security policy, the Council alone is responsible for decision-making. But the Parliament nonetheless works closely with the Council in these areas.

The Parliament can also exercise democratic control by examining petitions from citizens and setting up special committees of inquiry.

Finally, the Parliament provides input to every EU summit (the European Council meetings). At the opening of each summit, the President of the Parliament is invited to express the Parliament's views and concerns about topical issues and the items on the European Council's agenda.

3. THE POWER OF THE PURSE

The EU's annual budget is decided jointly by the Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The Parliament debates it in two successive readings, and it does not come into force until it has been signed by the President of the Parliament.

Its Committee on Budgetary Control monitors how the budget is spent, and each year the Parliament decides whether to approve the Commission's handling of the budget for the previous financial year. This approval process is technically known as 'granting a discharge'.

How the Parliament works

The Parliament elects its own President for a 2½-year term. The President represents the Parliament to the other EU institutions as well as to the outside world, and is assisted by 14 Vice-Presidents. The President of the European Parliament, together with the President of the Council, signs all legislative acts once they are adopted.

The Parliament's work is divided into two main stages:

- ▶ Preparing for the plenary session: this is done by the MEPs in the 20 parliamentary committees that specialise in particular areas of EU activity, for example the ECON Committee for Economic and Monetary Affairs or the INTA Committee for International Trade. The issues for debate are also discussed by the political groups.
- ▶ The plenary session itself: plenary sessions, attended by all MEPs, are normally held in Strasbourg (1 week per month) and sometimes additional sessions are held in Brussels. At plenary sessions, the Parliament examines proposed legislation and votes on amendments before coming to a decision on the text as a whole. Other items on the agenda may include Council or Commission 'communications' or questions about what is going on in the EU or in the wider world.

As a rule the Parliament can only take decisions when at least one-third of the MEPs are present for a vote. It normally takes decisions by a majority of votes cast. In special cases, a decision requires that a majority of all the members vote in favour, for example when the Parliament elects the Commission President or votes in the second reading of an ordinary legislative procedure.

The European Council

Setting the strategy

Role: Defines political direction and priorities

Members: Heads of State or Government from each Member State, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission

Location: Brussels

► <http://www.european-council.europa.eu>

The European Council brings together the EU's top political leaders, i.e. Prime Ministers and Presidents along with its President and the President of the Commission. They meet at least four times a year to give the EU as a whole general political direction and priorities. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy also takes part in the work of the European Council.

What the European Council does

As a summit meeting of the Heads of State or Government of all the EU Member States, the European Council represents the highest level of political cooperation between the Member States. At their meetings, the leaders decide by consensus on the overall direction and priorities of the Union, and provide the necessary impetus for its development.

The European Council does not adopt legislation. At the end of each meeting it issues 'conclusions', which reflect the main messages resulting from the discussions and take stock of the decisions taken, also as regards their follow-up. The conclusions identify major issues to be dealt with by the Council, i.e. the meetings of ministers. They may also invite the European Commission to come forward with proposals addressing a particular challenge or opportunity facing the Union.

European Council meetings as a rule take place at least twice every 6 months. Additional (extraordinary or informal) meetings may be called to address urgent issues in need of decisions at the highest level, for example in economic affairs or foreign policy.

President of the European Council

The work of the European Council is coordinated by its President, who is responsible for convening and chairing European Council meetings and driving forward its work.

The European Council President also represents the Union to the outside world. Together with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, he or she represents Union interests in foreign affairs and security matters.

The President is elected by the European Council for a once-renewable term of 2½ years. The Presidency of the European Council is a full-time job; the President may not simultaneously hold a national office.

How the European Council takes its decisions

The European Council takes most of its decisions by consensus. In a number of cases, however, qualified majority applies, such as the election of its President, and the appointment of the Commission and of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

When the European Council decides by vote, only the Heads of State or Government may cast a vote.

Secretariat

The European Council is assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council.

Euro summit

Outside of the European Council, the Heads of State or Government of those states whose currency is the euro also meet at least twice a year, together with the President of the European Commission. The President of the European Central Bank is also invited to these euro summit meetings. The President of the European Parliament may also be invited.

The meetings are an opportunity to discuss the governance of the euro area, as well as major economic policy reforms. The euro summit was formally established by the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) in the Economic and Monetary Union. The President of the euro summit is appointed by the Heads of State or Government of euro area members. The appointment takes place at the same time as that of the President of the European Council, and has the same duration. The two positions can be held by the same person.

In some cases, the leaders of the states which have ratified the TSCG but do not use the euro as their currency also take part in euro summit discussions. When these countries are not eligible to participate, the



© EU

Donald Tusk chairs the EU summits as President of the European Council as of 1 December 2014.

President of the euro summit keeps them and the other EU Member States closely informed of the preparation and outcome of the summits.

A confusion of Councils: which is which?

It is easy to become confused about which European body is which — especially when very different bodies have very similar names, such as the following three ‘Councils’.

► The European Council

This means the Heads of State or Government (i.e. Presidents and/or Prime Ministers) of all the EU Member States, together with its President and the President of the European Commission. It is the highest-level policymaking body in the European Union, which is why its meetings are often called ‘summits’.

► The Council

Also known as the Council of Ministers, this institution consists of government ministers from all the EU Member States. The Council meets regularly to take detailed decisions and to pass European laws.

► The Council of Europe

This is not an EU institution at all. It is an intergovernmental organisation which aims to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It was set up in 1949 and one of its early achievements was to draw up the European Convention on Human Rights. To enable citizens to exercise their rights under that Convention it set up the European Court of Human Rights. The Council of Europe now has 47 Member States, including all EU Member States, and its headquarters are in Strasbourg, France.

The Council

The voice of the Member States

Role: Deciding on policies and adopting legislation

Members: One minister from each Member State

Location: Brussels and Luxembourg

▶ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu>

In the Council, ministers of EU Member States meet to discuss EU matters, take decisions and pass laws. The ministers who attend these meetings have the authority to commit their government to the actions agreed in the Council meetings.

What the Council does

The Council is an essential EU decision-maker. Its work is carried out in Council meetings that are attended by one minister from each of the EU's national governments. The purpose of these gatherings is to: discuss, agree, amend and, finally, adopt legislation; coordinate the Member States' policies; or define the EU's foreign policy.

The EU countries have agreed on a 'Europe 2020' strategy on how to get out of the economic crisis with smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Council ministers take many decisions in order to implement this strategy.



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Which ministers attend which Council meeting depends on the subjects on the agenda — this is known as the 'configuration' of the Council. If, for example, the Council is to discuss environmental issues, the meeting will be attended by the environment minister from each EU Member State and is known as the Environment Council. The same is true for the Economic and Financial Affairs Council and the Competitiveness Council, and so on.

There are 10 different Council configurations:

Chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

▶ Foreign Affairs

Chaired by the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council:

▶ General Affairs

▶ Economic and Financial Affairs

▶ Justice and Home Affairs

▶ Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs

▶ Competitiveness (Internal Market, Industry, Research and Space)

▶ Transport, Telecommunications and Energy

▶ Agriculture and Fisheries

▶ Environment

▶ Education, Youth, Culture and Sport

COUNCIL PRESIDENCIES

Year	January–June	July–December
2014	Greece	Italy
2015	Latvia	Luxembourg
2016	Netherlands	Slovakia
2017	Malta	United Kingdom
2018	Estonia	Bulgaria
2019	Austria	Romania
2020	Finland	

The Presidency of the Council rotates between the Member States every 6 months. It is not the same as the President of the European Council. The responsibility of the government holding the Presidency is to organise and chair the different Council meetings. By way of exception, the Foreign Affairs Council is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who carries out foreign policy on behalf of the Council.

In the interest of continuity of Council business, the 6-monthly Presidencies work together closely in groups of three. These three-Presidency teams ('trios') draw up a joint programme of Council work over an 18-month period.

Each minister in the Council is empowered to commit his or her government. Moreover, each minister in the Council is answerable to the elected national authorities. This ensures the democratic legitimacy of the Council's decisions.

The Council has five key responsibilities:

1. to pass European laws — in most fields, it legislates jointly with the European Parliament;
2. to coordinate the Member States' policies, for example, in the economic field;
3. to develop the EU's common foreign and security policy, based on guidelines set by the European Council;
4. to conclude international agreements between the EU and one or more states or international organisations;
5. to adopt the EU's budget, jointly with the European Parliament.

The Council's work is described in greater detail below.

1. LEGISLATION

Much EU legislation is adopted jointly by the Council and the Parliament. As a general rule, the Council only acts on a proposal from the Commission, and the Commission normally has responsibility for ensuring that EU legislation, once adopted, is correctly applied.

2. COORDINATING THE POLICIES OF MEMBER STATES (AN EXAMPLE: ECONOMIC POLICY)

All EU Member States participate in economic and monetary union (EMU) even though not all belong to the euro area. Under EMU, EU economic policy is based on close coordination of national economic policies. This coordination is carried out by the economics and finance ministers who collectively form the Economic and Financial Affairs (Ecofin) Council.

3. COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY (CFSP)

The definition and implementation of the EU's foreign and security policy is the exclusive competence of the European Council and the Council acting unanimously. It is put into effect by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy together with the Member States, meeting in the Foreign Affairs Council.

4. CONCLUDING INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Each year, the Council concludes (i.e. officially signs) a number of agreements between the European Union and non-EU countries, as well as with international organisations. These agreements may cover broad areas such as trade, cooperation and development, or they may deal with specific subjects such as textiles, fisheries, science and technology, transport, etc. Such agreements are subject to the assent of the European Parliament in areas where it has co-decision powers.

5. APPROVING THE EU BUDGET

The EU's annual budget is decided jointly by the Council and the European Parliament. If the two institutions do not agree then conciliation procedures are followed until a budget is approved.

How the Council works

All Council discussions and votes on legislative acts take place in public. Such meetings can be watched live via the Council's website.

Overall consistency in the work of the different Council configurations is ensured by the General Affairs Council, which monitors the effective follow-up of European Council meetings. It is supported by the Permanent Representatives Committee ('Coreper' — from the French: 'Comité des Représentants Permanents').

Coreper is composed of the Member States governments' Permanent Representatives to the European Union. In Brussels, each EU Member State has a team ('Permanent Representation') that represents it and defends its national interests at EU level. The Head of each Representation is, in effect, his or her country's ambassador to the EU. These ambassadors meet weekly within the Coreper. They are assisted by a number of working groups made up of officials from the national administrations.

How does the Council vote?

Decisions in the Council are taken by vote. In most cases a decision requires a qualified majority. In some cases the treaties require a different procedure, for example a unanimous vote in the field of taxation. In order for a proposal to be decided by qualified majority, it must obtain a double majority of both Member States and population. The votes in favour must be at least:

- ▶ 55 % of the Member States, i.e. 16 of the 28 countries;
- ▶ Member States that represent 65 % of the EU's population. This means roughly 329 million out of the population of some 506 million.

In addition, to block a decision from being taken there must be at least four countries voting against, representing more than 35 % of the population.

These rules mean that all decisions taken by the Council have broad support across Europe, but also that small minorities cannot block decisions from being taken. Before November 2014, a different system was used, whereby each country had a certain number of votes.

POPULATION USED FOR VOTES IN THE COUNCIL (2014)

Member State	Population (× 1 000)	Percentage of the total population of the Union
Germany	80 523.7	15.93
France	65 633.2	12.98
United Kingdom	63 730.1	12.61
Italy	59 685.2	11.81
Spain	46 704.3	9.24
Poland	38 533.3	7.62
Romania	20 057.5	3.97
Netherlands	16 779.6	3.32
Belgium	11 161.6	2.21
Greece	11 062.5	2.19
Czech Republic	10 516.1	2.08
Portugal	10 487.3	2.07
Hungary	9 908.8	1.96
Sweden	9 555.9	1.89
Austria	8 451.9	1.67
Bulgaria	7 284.6	1.44
Denmark	5 602.6	1.11
Finland	5 426.7	1.07
Slovakia	5 410.8	1.07
Ireland	4 591.1	0.91
Croatia	4 262.1	0.84
Lithuania	2 971.9	0.59
Slovenia	2 058.8	0.41
Latvia	2 023.8	0.40
Estonia	1 324.8	0.26
Cyprus	865.9	0.17
Luxembourg	537.0	0.11
Malta	421.4	0.08
Total	505 572.5	100
Threshold for qualified majority	328 622.1	65 %

General Secretariat of the Council

The General Secretariat of the Council assists both the European Council and its President, and the Council and its rotating Presidencies. It is headed by a Secretary-General appointed by the Council.

The Eurogroup

All Member States participate in Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), meaning they coordinate their economic policymaking and treat economic decisions as a matter of common concern to all. However, not all Member States have joined the euro area and adopted the single currency — the euro. Some have chosen not to join at present, while others are still preparing their economies to meet the criteria for euro area membership. Euro area Member States need to cooperate closely, and are also subject to the single monetary policy run by the European Central Bank.

Therefore, the euro area Member States require a forum to discuss and decide on policies for the euro area. This cannot be the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (Ecofin) as this comprises all Member States.

The solution is the Eurogroup, which consists of the ministers of economy and finance of the euro area members.

The Eurogroup acts to promote economic growth and financial stability in the euro area by coordinating economic policies. As only Ecofin can formally take decisions on economic matters, the Eurogroup meets informally on the day before Ecofin meetings, roughly once a month. The next day, the agreements reached in the informal Eurogroup gathering are formally decided upon in the Ecofin meeting by the Eurogroup members.



© Associated Press/Reporters

New EU rules on economic and financial governance help to clean up and strengthen the banking sector.

What is 'enhanced cooperation'?

If some Member States want to cooperate more closely in policy areas that are not the exclusive competence of the EU but they are unable to get the agreement of all the other Member States, then the 'enhanced cooperation' mechanism allows them to work together. It permits at least nine Member States to use the EU institutions to achieve closer cooperation. However, there are conditions: this cooperation must further the objectives of the Union and it must be open to all other Member States if they wish to join.

The procedure is being used by a number of countries for divorce law, enabling them to find a common solution for couples from different EU countries wishing to divorce within the EU. It is also in place for a unitary patenting system that involves most — but not all — EU Member States.

Only Ecofin ministers representing euro area members vote on Eurogroup matters. The European Commission and the President of the European Central Bank also attend Eurogroup meetings.

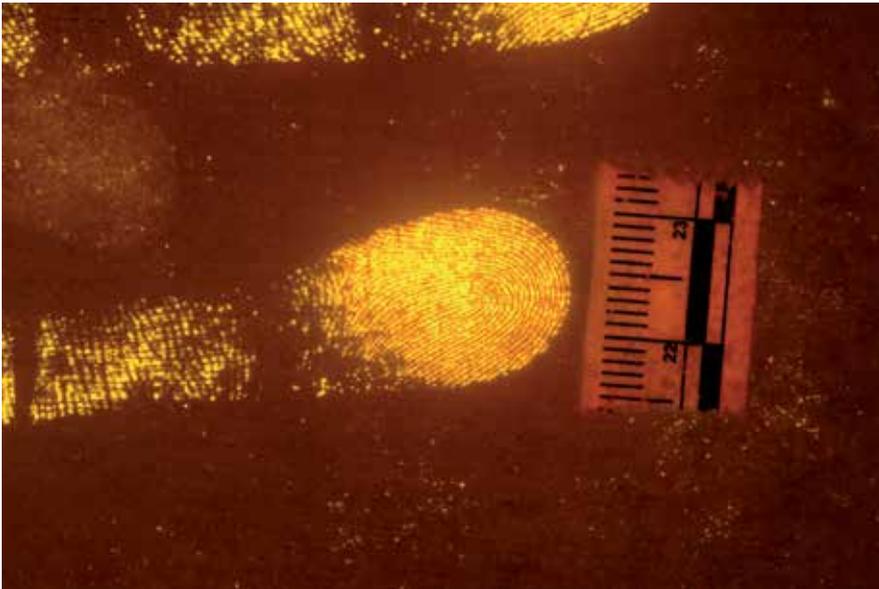
The members of the Eurogroup elect a President for a term of 2½ years. The General Secretariat of the Council provides administrative support for Eurogroup meetings.

The common foreign and security policy

The European Union is progressively developing a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) which is subject to different procedures when compared to other policy areas. The CFSP is defined and implemented by the European Council and the Council working together. The Union's wider international objectives are to advance democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedom, and respect for human dignity and the principles of equality and solidarity. To achieve these objectives the EU develops relations and partnerships with other countries and organisations around the world.

Responsibilities for the CFSP are as follows:

- ▶ The European Council, chaired by the President, defines the common foreign and security policy taking into account the strategic interests of the Union, including matters with defence implications.



The EU countries' law enforcers must work together to fight international crime.

- ▶ The Council, in particular the Foreign Affairs Council, then takes the decisions needed to define and implement the CFSP following the European Council guidelines. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy chairs the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council.
- ▶ The High Representative, together with the Member States, then puts the CFSP into effect, ensuring its implementation is consistent and effective. To do this, he or she can call on national and Union resources.

The **European External Action Service (EEAS)** serves as a foreign ministry and diplomatic service for the Union. The High Representative is head of the service, which is composed of expert staff transferred from the Council, the Member States and the European Commission. The EU has delegations in the majority of countries around the world and they are part of the EEAS. They work closely on CFSP matters alongside national embassies of EU Member States.

Matters of importance to the CFSP can be raised with the Council by any Member State or the High Representative acting alone or with the Commission. Given the often urgent nature of some CFSP issues, there are mechanisms in place to ensure decisions can be taken quickly. Generally speaking, decisions in this area are taken unanimously.

As well as driving forward the CFSP, the High Representative also represents the Union's foreign and security policy worldwide, conducting political dialogue

with non-EU countries and partners and expressing the EU's position in international organisations and meetings. At the level of Heads of State or Government, the Union is represented by the President of the European Council.

One aspect of the CFSP is security and defence questions, where the EU is developing a common security and defence policy (CSDP). This policy is designed to enable EU Member States to undertake crisis management operations. These are humanitarian and peace-making or peacekeeping missions, which can either be of a military or civilian nature. The Member States voluntarily make some of their forces available to the EU for such operations. This is always coordinated with NATO, whose command structures are sometimes used for practical tasks in EU missions. A number of permanent EU bodies coordinate this work.

- ▶ The **Political and Security Committee (PSC)** monitors the international situation and examines the EU's options for response during a crisis situation abroad.
- ▶ The **European Union Military Committee (EUMC)** consists of the chiefs of defence from all EU countries and directs EU military activities and provides advice on military matters.
- ▶ The **European Union Military Staff (EUMS)** is composed of military experts who work at a permanent military headquarters in Brussels and assist the EUMC.

The European Commission

Promoting the common interest

Role: Executive arm of the EU that proposes laws, polices agreements and promotes the Union

Members: A college of Commissioners, one from each Member State

Location: Brussels

► <http://ec.europa.eu>

The Commission is the politically independent institution that represents and upholds the interests of the EU as a whole. In many areas it is the driving force within the EU's institutional system: it proposes legislation, policies and programmes of action and is responsible for implementing the decisions of the European Parliament and the Council. It also represents the Union to the outside world with the exception of the common foreign and security policy.

What is the Commission?

The term 'Commission' is used in two senses. Firstly, it refers to the 'Members of the Commission' — i.e. the team of men and women appointed by the Member States and the Parliament to run the institution and take its decisions. Secondly, the term 'Commission' refers to the institution itself and to its staff.

Informally, the Members of the Commission are known as 'Commissioners'. They have all held political positions and many have been government ministers, but as members of the Commission they are committed to acting in the interests of the Union as a whole and not taking instructions from national governments.

The Commission remains politically answerable to the Parliament, which has the power to dismiss it by adopting a motion of censure. The Commission attends all the sessions of the Parliament, where it must clarify and justify its policies. It also replies regularly to written and oral questions posed by Members of Parliament.



Jean-Claude Juncker heads the EU executive body as President of the European Commission.

© EU

The day-to-day work of the Commission is done by its administrative officials, experts, translators, interpreters and secretarial staff. Commission officials — like the staff of other EU bodies — are recruited via the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) (<http://europa.eu/epso>). They are citizens from every EU Member State, selected by means of open competitive examinations. There are approximately 33 000 people working for the Commission. That may sound a lot, but in fact it is fewer than the number of staff employed by most medium-sized city councils in Europe.

Appointing the Commission

A new Commission is appointed every 5 years, within 6 months of the elections to the European Parliament. The procedure is as follows.

- ▶ *The Member State governments propose a new Commission President, who must be elected by the European Parliament.*
- ▶ *The proposed Commission President, in discussion with the Member State governments, chooses the other members of the Commission.*
- ▶ *The new Parliament then interviews all proposed members and gives its opinion on the entire 'College'. If approved, the new Commission can officially start its work.*

The Commission has several Vice-Presidents, one of whom is also the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and thus has a foot in both the Council and the Commission camps.

What the Commission does

The European Commission has four main roles:

1. to propose legislation to the Parliament and the Council;
2. to manage and implement EU policies and the budget;
3. to enforce European law (jointly with the Court of Justice);
4. to represent the Union around the world.

1. PROPOSING NEW LEGISLATION

Under the EU Treaty, the Commission has the **'right of initiative'**. In other words, the Commission alone is responsible for drawing up proposals for new European legislation, which it presents to the Parliament and the Council. These proposals must aim to defend the interests of the Union and its citizens, not those of specific countries or industries.

Before making any proposals, the Commission must be aware of new situations and problems developing in Europe and must consider whether EU legislation is the best way to deal with them. That is why the Commission is in constant touch with a wide range of interest groups and with two advisory bodies — the European Economic and Social Committee (made up of employers' and trade union representatives) and the Committee of the Regions (made up of representatives of local and regional authorities). It also seeks the opinions of national parliaments, governments and the public at large.

The Commission will propose action at EU level only if it considers that a problem cannot be solved more efficiently by national, regional or local action. This principle of dealing with things at the lowest possible level is called the 'subsidiarity principle'.

If, however, the Commission concludes that EU legislation is needed, then it drafts a proposal that it believes will deal with the problem effectively and satisfy the widest possible range of interests. In order to get the technical details correct, the Commission consults the experts who make up its various committees and expert groups.



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Innovation and research is one of the ways to achieve new jobs and growth in Europe.

Building the European research area

Through its Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, the Commission develops EU policies in the field of research and technological development and contributes to the international competitiveness of European industry. The EU research programme Horizon 2020 injects tens of billions of euro into multidisciplinary cooperative scientific research across the EU.

2. IMPLEMENTING EU POLICIES AND THE BUDGET

As the European Union's executive body, the Commission is responsible for managing and implementing the EU budget and the policies and programmes adopted by the Parliament and the Council. Most of the actual work and spending is done by national and local authorities but the Commission is responsible for supervising it.

The Commission handles the budget under the watchful eye of the European Court of Auditors. Both institutions aim to ensure good financial management. Only if it is satisfied with the Court of Auditors' annual report does the European Parliament grant the Commission discharge for implementing the budget.

3. ENFORCING EUROPEAN LAW

The Commission acts as **'guardian of the treaties'**. This means that, together with the Court of Justice, it is responsible for making sure EU law is properly applied in all the Member States. If it finds that any EU Member State is not applying a Union law, and therefore not meeting its legal obligations, the Commission takes steps to put the situation right.

First, it launches a legal process called the 'infringement procedure'. This involves sending the government an official letter explaining why the Commission considers this Member State is infringing EU law, and setting it a deadline for sending the Commission a detailed reply. If this procedure fails to correct matters, the Commission then refers the issue to the Court of Justice, which has the power to impose penalties. The Court's judgments are binding on the Member States and the EU institutions.



Federica Mogherini is the EU's foreign policy chief and coordinates the EU's actions towards the rest of the world.

4. REPRESENTING THE EU ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

The **High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy** is a Vice-President of the Commission and has responsibility for external affairs. In matters concerning foreign affairs and security, the High Representative works with the Council. However, in other areas of external action the Commission plays the leading role — in particular in the areas of trade policy and humanitarian aid. In these areas, the European Commission acts as an important spokesperson for the European Union on the international stage. It enables the 28 Member States to speak with one voice in international forums such as the World Trade Organisation.

Reaching out to those in need

The Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department of the European Commission (ECHO) was established in 1992. Humanitarian action now occupies a key position in the European Union's external activities — indeed, the EU is the world's main player in this field.

Some 125 million people are helped each year through EU humanitarian aid funding. This aid is delivered via 200 partners such as aid charities and UN agencies. Assistance is based on the humanitarian principles of non-discrimination and impartiality.

How the Commission works

It is up to the Commission President to decide which Commissioner will be responsible for which policy area, and to reshuffle these responsibilities (if necessary) during the Commission's term of office. The President is also entitled to demand a Commissioner's resignation. The team of 28 Commissioners (also known as 'the College') meets once a week, usually on Wednesdays in Brussels. Each item on the agenda is presented by the Commissioner responsible for that policy area, and the College takes a collective decision on it.

The Commission's staff is organised into departments, known as directorates-general (DGs) and services (such as the Legal Service). Each DG is responsible for a particular policy area — for example, DG Trade and DG Competition — and is headed by a director-general who is answerable to one of the Commissioners.

Eurostat: collecting Europe's data

Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union and part of the Commission. Its task is to provide the EU with statistics at European level that enable comparisons to be made between countries and regions. This is a key task. Democratic societies do not function properly without a solid basis of reliable and objective statistics.

Eurostat statistics can answer many questions: Is unemployment up or down? Are there more CO₂ emissions compared to 10 years ago? How many women go out to work? How is your country's economy performing compared to that of other EU Member States?

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>

It is the DGs that actually devise and draft the Commission's legislative proposals, but these proposals only become official when 'adopted' by the College at its weekly meeting. The procedure is roughly as follows.

Suppose, for example, that the Commission sees a need for EU legislation to prevent pollution of Europe's rivers. The Directorate-General for the Environment will draw up a proposal, based on extensive consultations with all interested parties, such as European industry and farmers, with environment ministries in the Member States and with environmental organisations. Many proposals are also open to public consultation, enabling individuals to provide views in a personal capacity, or on behalf of an organisation.

The proposed legislation will then be discussed with all relevant Commission departments and amended if necessary. It will then be checked by the Legal Service.

Once the proposal is complete, the Secretary-General will put it on the agenda for a forthcoming Commission meeting. At this meeting, the Environment Commissioner will explain to his or her colleagues why this legislation is being proposed, and they will then discuss it. If there is agreement, the College will adopt the proposal and the document will be sent to the Council and the European Parliament for their consideration.

However, if there is disagreement among the Commissioners, the President may ask them to vote on it. If the majority are in favour, the proposal will be adopted. Thereafter it will have the support of all the Commission members.

The national parliaments

Enforcing subsidiarity

Role: To participate alongside the European institutions in the work of the Union

Members: Members of national parliaments

Location: All EU Member States

The EU institutions are encouraging the national parliaments to become more involved in the activities of the European Union. Since 2006, the Commission has been transmitting to national parliaments all new legislative proposals, and has replied to their opinions. With the Lisbon Treaty from 2009, the rights and duties of national parliaments within the EU are clearly set. National parliaments can express their views on draft legislative acts as well as on other matters which may be of particular interest to them.

EU actions are subject to the principle of **subsidiarity**. This means that the Union only acts where action will be more effective at EU level than at national level. Where the treaties have given exclusive powers to the EU, this is considered to be the case, but otherwise it is a judgement that is made for each new law. Correct application of this principle in EU decision-making is monitored by national parliaments.

To enable parliaments to carry out subsidiarity checks, the Commission sends draft legislation to national parliaments at the same time as it forwards it to the Union legislator (i.e. the European Parliament and the Council).

Any national parliament may then give a **reasoned opinion** if it considers that the proposal in question does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity. Depending on the number of reasoned opinions issued by national parliaments, the Commission may have to re-examine its proposal and decide whether to maintain, adjust or withdraw it. This is referred to as the yellow and orange card procedure. In the case of the ordinary legislative procedure, if a majority of national parliaments give a reasoned opinion, and provided that the Commission decides to maintain its proposal, it will have to explain its reasons, and it will be for the European Parliament and the Council to decide whether or not to continue the legislative procedure.

National parliaments are also directly involved with the implementation of EU legislation. EU directives are addressed to the Member States. They must make them part of national law, which is mostly decided by national parliaments. The directives lay down certain end results that must be achieved in every Member State by a specified date. National authorities have to adapt their laws to meet these goals, but are free to decide how to do so. Directives are used to bring different national laws into line with each other, and are particularly common in matters affecting the operation of the single market (e.g. product safety standards).

The Court of Justice

Upholding EU law

Role:	To give legal judgments on cases brought before it
Court of Justice:	One Judge from each EU country; nine Advocates General
General Court:	One Judge from each EU country
Civil Service Tribunal:	Seven Judges
Location:	Luxembourg
	▶ http://curia.europa.eu

The Court of Justice of the European Union (the Court) ensures that EU legislation is interpreted and applied in the same way in each Member State — in other words, that it is always identical for all parties and in all circumstances. To this end, the Court checks the legality of the actions of the EU institutions, ensures the Member States comply with their obligations and interprets EU law at the request of national courts.

The Court has the power to settle legal disputes between Member States, EU institutions, businesses and individuals. To cope with the many thousands of cases it receives, it is divided into two main bodies: the Court of Justice, which deals with requests for preliminary rulings from national courts, certain actions for annulment and appeals, and the General Court, which rules on all actions for annulment brought by private individuals and companies and some such actions brought by Member States.

A specialised tribunal, the Civil Service Tribunal, also adjudicates in disputes between the EU and its civil servants.

What the Court does

The Court gives rulings on cases brought before it. The four most common types of case are listed below.

1. THE PRELIMINARY RULING

The courts in each EU Member State are responsible for ensuring that EU law is properly applied in that country. If a national court is in any doubt about the interpretation or validity of an EU law it may, and sometimes must, ask the Court of Justice for advice. This advice is given in the form of a binding 'preliminary ruling'. This ruling is an important channel for citizens, through their national courts, to establish how far EU laws affect them.



Air hostesses have benefited several times from rulings on equal pay and equal rights from the Court of Justice of the European Union.

2. INFRINGEMENT PROCEEDINGS

The Commission, or (in some rare cases) a Member State, can initiate these proceedings if it has reason to believe that a certain Member State is failing to fulfil its obligations under EU law. The Court investigates the allegations and gives its judgment. If found to be at fault, the accused Member State must set things right without delay to avoid the fines the Court can apply.

3. PROCEEDINGS FOR ANNULMENT

If any of the Member States, the Council, the Commission or (under certain conditions) the Parliament, believes that a particular EU law is illegal they may ask the Court to annul it. These 'proceedings for annulment' can also be used by private individuals who want the Court to annul a particular law because it directly and adversely affects them as individuals.

4. PROCEEDINGS FOR FAILURE TO ACT

The treaty requires the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission to make certain decisions under certain circumstances. If they fail to do so, the Member States, other EU institutions and (under certain conditions) individuals or companies can lodge a complaint with the Court so as to have this violation officially recorded.

How the Court works

The **Court of Justice** is composed of 28 Judges, one from each Member State, so that all the EU national legal systems are represented. The Court is assisted by nine 'Advocates General' who present reasoned opinions on the cases brought before the Court. They must do so publicly and impartially. The Judges and Advocates General are either former members of the highest national courts or highly competent lawyers who can be relied on to show impartiality. They are appointed by joint agreement of the Member State governments. Each is appointed for a term of 6 years. The Judges of the Court select a President who serves for 3 years. The Court of Justice can sit as a full Court, a Grand Chamber of 13 Judges or Chambers of five or three Judges, depending on the complexity and importance of the case. Nearly 60 % of cases are heard by Chambers of five Judges and around 25 % by Chambers of three Judges.

The **General Court** is also composed of 28 Judges, appointed by the Member States for 6-year terms. The Judges of the General Court also elect a President among themselves for a 3-year term. This Court sits in Chambers of three or five Judges (sometimes a single Judge) to hold hearings. Around 80 % of General Court cases are heard by three Judges. A Grand Chamber of 13 Judges, or a full Chamber of 28, may meet if the complexity or importance of the case justifies this.

All cases are submitted to the Registry at the Court and a specific Judge and Advocate General are assigned. After submission, there are two steps: first, a written stage and then an oral stage. In the first stage, all the parties involved submit written statements and the Judge assigned to the case draws up a report summarising these statements and the legal background to the case. This report is discussed at the Court's General Meeting which decides the judicial formation that will hear the case and whether oral arguments are necessary. Then comes the second stage — the public hearing — where the lawyers put their case before the Judges and the Advocate General, who can question them. After the oral hearing, the Advocate General assigned to the case draws up his or her opinion. In the light of this opinion, the Judge draws up a draft ruling which is submitted to the other Judges for examination. The Judges then deliberate and deliver their judgment. Judgments of the Court are decided by a majority and pronounced at a public hearing. In most instances the text is available in all official languages of the EU on the same day. Dissenting opinions are not expressed.

Not all cases follow this standard procedure. When the urgency of a case so dictates, simplified and expedited procedures exist which allow the Court to rule within approximately 3 months.

The European Central Bank

Ensuring price stability

Role: To manage the euro and euro area monetary policy

Members: Euro area national central banks

Location: Frankfurt am Main, Germany

► <http://www.ecb.int>

Mario Draghi has been President of the European Central Bank since 2011.



© ImageGlobe

The purpose of the European Central Bank (ECB) is to maintain monetary stability in the euro area by ensuring low and stable consumer price inflation. Stable prices and low price inflation are considered vital for sustained economic growth as they encourage enterprises to invest and create more jobs — thus raising living standards for Europeans. The ECB is an independent institution and takes its decisions without seeking or taking instructions from governments or other EU institutions.

What the ECB does

The ECB was set up in 1998, when the euro was introduced, to manage monetary policy in the euro area. The primary objective of the ECB is to maintain price stability. This is defined as a consumer price inflation rate of less than, but close to, 2 % per annum. The ECB also acts to support employment and sustainable economic growth in the Union.

How does the ECB manage price stability?

The ECB sets the interest rates for lending to commercial banks, which influences the price and the amount of money in the economy — and thus the inflation rate. For example, when money is in plentiful supply, the consumer price inflation rate may rise, making goods and services more expensive. In response, the ECB can raise the cost of borrowing by increasing the interest rate on its loans to commercial banks — which reduces the supply of money and leads to downward pressure on prices. Likewise, when there is a need to stimulate economic activity, the ECB can reduce the interest rate it charges, to encourage borrowing and investment.

To carry out its lending operations, the ECB holds and manages the official foreign reserves of the euro area members. Other tasks include conducting foreign exchange operations, promoting efficient payment systems in support of the single market, approving the production of euro banknotes by the euro area members and collating relevant statistical data from the national central banks. The President of the ECB represents it at relevant high-level EU and international meetings.

How the ECB works

The European Central Bank is an institution of economic and monetary union (EMU) to which all EU Member States belong. Joining the euro area and adopting the single currency — the euro — is the final phase of EMU. Not all EU Member States belong to the euro area: some are still preparing their economies to join, and others have opt-outs. The ECB stands at the core of the European System of Central Banks, which brings together the ECB and the national central banks of all EU Member States. The organisation of the ECB reflects this situation in its three main groupings.

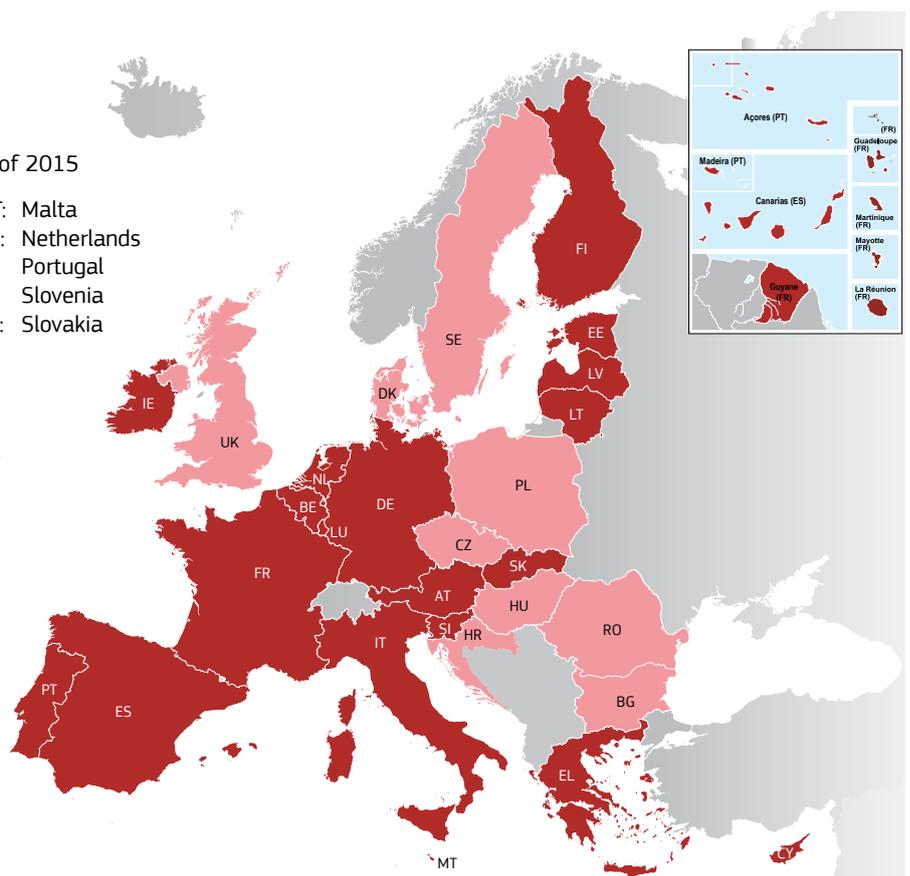
- ▶ The General Council of the European System of Central Banks comprises the governors of the 28 national central banks, together with the ECB President and Vice-President.
- ▶ The Executive Board of the ECB consists of the President, the Vice-President and four other members — all appointed by the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, for 8-year terms of office. The Executive Board is responsible for implementing monetary policy, the bank's day-to-day operations and preparing Governing Council meetings as well as exercising certain powers delegated to it by the Governing Council.
- ▶ The Governing Council of the ECB comprises the six members of the ECB Executive Board and the Governors of the national central banks of the 19 euro area members: together they form the Eurosystem. The Governing Council is the main decision-taking body of the ECB and meets twice a month. As a rule, at its first meeting each month, the Governing Council assesses economic and monetary developments and takes its monthly monetary policy decisions. At its second meeting, the Council mainly discusses issues related to other tasks and responsibilities of the ECB.

EU Member States using the euro as of 2015

AT: Austria	FI: Finland	MT: Malta
BE: Belgium	FR: France	NL: Netherlands
CY: Cyprus	IE: Ireland	PT: Portugal
DE: Germany	IT: Italy	SI: Slovenia
EE: Estonia	LT: Lithuania	SK: Slovakia
EL: Greece	LV: Latvia	
ES: Spain	LU: Luxembourg	

EU Member States not using the euro

BG: Bulgaria	PL: Poland
CZ: Czech Republic	RO: Romania
DK: Denmark	SE: Sweden
HR: Croatia	UK: United Kingdom
HU: Hungary	



Economic governance: Who does what?

Economic and monetary union (EMU) is a core element of European integration and all EU Member States are part of it. Fiscal policy (tax and spending) remains in the hands of individual national governments, as do policies about labour and welfare. However, the coordination of sound public finances and structural policies is vital for EMU to function effectively. The responsibilities are shared between the Member States and EU institutions as follows.

- ▶ *The **European Council** sets the main policy orientations.*
- ▶ *The **Council** coordinates EU economic policymaking and takes decisions which can bind individual EU Member States.*
- ▶ *The **EU Member States** set their national budgets within agreed limits for deficit and debt, and determine their own structural policies involving labour, pensions, welfare and markets.*
- ▶ *The **euro area Member States** coordinate policies of common interest for the euro area at the level of Heads of State or Government in the euro summit and at the level of finance ministers in the Eurogroup.*
- ▶ *The **European Central Bank** sets monetary policy for the euro area, with price stability as the prime objective.*
- ▶ *The **European Commission** monitors what the EU Member States are doing and issues policy recommendations.*
- ▶ *The **European Parliament** shares the job of formulating legislation with the Council and exercises democratic oversight of the economic governance process.*
- ▶ *The **European Stability Mechanism** is the financial body owned by the euro area countries to provide assistance to euro countries experiencing, or threatened by, severe financial difficulties. In the years 2011–13, this so-called 'fire-wall' helped five euro countries to overcome the worldwide economic crisis.*

Supervision of banks

In response to the economic crisis, the ECB now also oversees that banks operate in a safe and reliable way. The weakness of some large banks and the differences in rules and controls among countries were major factors leading to the crisis. New EU banking rules set stricter conditions for banks, in particular the amount of reserves they must have. Under the 'Single Supervisory Mechanism' the ECB directly supervises the largest credit institutions, while the national supervisory authorities monitor the smaller ones, under a common system. The mechanism covers all euro area countries. Other EU countries can choose to participate.

The European Court of Auditors

Helping to improve EU financial management

Role: To check that EU funds are collected and used correctly, and help improve EU financial management

Members: One from each EU Member State

Location: Luxembourg

► <http://eca.europa.eu>

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) is the independent external audit institution of the European Union. It checks that the Union's income has been received correctly, that its expenditure has been incurred in a legal and regular manner, and that financial management has been sound. It performs its tasks independently from the other EU institutions and governments. In doing so, it contributes to improving the management of European Union funds in the interests of its citizens.

What the European Court of Auditors does

The European Court of Auditors' main role is to check that the EU budget is correctly implemented — in other words, that EU income and expenditure is legal and regular, and financial management is sound. This work helps to ensure that the EU is managed efficiently and effectively. To carry out its tasks, the ECA undertakes detailed audits of EU income or expenditure at all levels of the administration of EU funds. It carries out on-the-

spot checks at the organisations managing the funds, or the beneficiaries receiving them, both in the EU Member States and in other countries. Its findings are published in annual and specific reports, which draw the attention of the Commission and the Member States to errors and weaknesses found, and make recommendations for improvement.

Another key function is for the European Court of Auditors to help the budgetary authority (the European Parliament and the Council) by providing them with an annual report on the implementation of the EU budget for the previous financial year. The ECA's findings and conclusions in this report play an important role in the Parliament's discharge decision on the Commission's handling of the budget.

The European Court of Auditors also gives its opinion on new or revised EU regulations with financial impact at the request by the other EU institutions. The ECA can also issue position papers on other issues on its own initiative.



Ear tags on cows help EU auditors keep track of where EU money has been spent.

How the European Court of Auditors works

The European Court of Auditors operates as a collegiate body of 28 Members, one from each EU Member State. The Members are appointed by the Council, after consultation with the European Parliament, for a renewable term of 6 years. They are chosen for their competence and independence, and work full-time for the ECA. They elect one of their number as President for a term of 3 years.

To be effective, the Court of Auditors — like any other supreme audit institution — must remain independent of the institutions and bodies it audits. The ECA is free to: select its audit topics, the specific scope and approach to be followed; decide how and when to present the results of its selected audits; and choose the publicity to be given to its reports and opinions. These are important elements of independence.

The European Court of Auditors is divided into chambers, which prepare the reports and opinions for adoption by the ECA. The chambers are supported by qualified staff originating from all Member States. The auditors frequently audit in the other EU institutions, the Member States and other beneficiary countries. The ECA also cooperates closely with supreme audit institutions in the Member States. Indeed, although the ECA's work largely concerns the EU budget — for which the Commission retains overall responsibility — in practice, management of over 80 % of expenditure is shared with national authorities.

The European Court of Auditors has no judicial powers but through its work brings irregularities, weaknesses and cases of suspected fraud to the attention of the EU bodies responsible for taking action, including the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Since its creation in 1977, the ECA has made a significant impact on the financial management of the EU budget through its objective reports and opinions. In doing so, it has fulfilled its role of independent guardian of the financial interests of the citizens of the Union.

The European Economic and Social Committee

The voice of civil society

Role: To represent organised civil society

Members: 353 from all EU Member States

Location: Brussels

► <http://www.eesc.europa.eu>

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is an advisory body of the European Union. It is a unique forum for consultation, dialogue and consensus between representatives from all the different sectors of 'organised civil society', including employers, trade unions and groups such as professional and community associations, youth organisations, women's groups, consumers, environmental campaigners and many more. The members of the EESC are not bound by any mandatory instructions and work in the Union's general interest. The EESC thus acts as a bridge between the EU institutions and EU citizens, promoting a more participatory, more inclusive and therefore more democratic society in the European Union.

What the EESC does

The EESC has three key tasks:

- to advise the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission;
- to make sure the views of civil society organisations are heard in Brussels and to increase their awareness of the impact of EU legislation on the lives of EU citizens;
- to support and strengthen organised civil society both inside and outside the EU.

The Committee shall be consulted by the European Parliament, by the Council or by the Commission in many fields foreseen by the treaties. In addition to the range of compulsory consultation, the Committee may issue opinions on its own initiative in cases in which it considers that such action is important to

defend the interests of civil society. It also produces exploratory opinions, requested by EU lawmakers when they want an overview of civil society's views, and publishes information reports on topical issues. The EESC delivers around 170 opinions on a yearly basis, of which roughly 15 % are issued on its own initiative.

How the EESC works

The EESC is made up of 353 members from 28 EU Member States. The members come from all social and professional backgrounds and have a vast range of knowledge and experience. They are appointed by the Council for a term of 5 years on a proposal by Member States but they work independently for the EESC in the interests of all EU citizens. Members are not based full-time in Brussels: most continue to do their own jobs in their home countries, which means they can stay in touch with people 'back home'.

The members of the Committee are organised internally into three groups: 'employers', 'workers' and 'various interests'. The aim is to build consensus between these groups so that EESC opinions truly reflect the economic and social interests of EU citizens. The EESC elects its President and two Vice-Presidents for a term of 2½ years. EESC members meet nine times a year in plenary sessions in Brussels where opinions are approved by simple majority voting. Preparation for these plenary sessions is done by six thematic sections headed by Committee members and supported by the Committee's Brussels-based Secretariat-General. The thematic sections and committees are:

- the section for economic and monetary union and economic and social cohesion (ECO);



The planning of energy supplies is of concern to all Europeans — as well as to civil society organisations in the European Economic and Social Committee.

- ▶ the section for the single market, production and consumption (INT);
- ▶ the section for agriculture, rural development and the environment (NAT);
- ▶ the section for external relations (REX);
- ▶ the section for employment, social affairs and citizenship (SOC);
- ▶ the section for transport, energy, infrastructure and the information society (TEN);
- ▶ the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI).

The EESC tracks the progress of long-term EU strategies through the so-called observatories and a steering committee that monitor their implementation and impact at grass-roots level. They deal with sustainable development, the labour market, the single market and the 'Europe 2020' growth strategy respectively.

Relations with economic and social councils

The EESC maintains regular links with regional and national economic and social councils throughout the European Union. These links mainly involve exchanges of information and joint discussions every year on specific issues.

The Committee of the Regions

The voice of local government

Role: To represent Europe's cities and regions

Members: 353 from all EU Member States

Location: Brussels

► <http://www.cor.europa.eu>

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is an advisory body composed of representatives of Europe's regional and local authorities. It gives the regions of Europe a say in EU policymaking and checks that regional and local identities, competences and needs are respected. The Council and the Commission must consult the CoR on matters that concern local and regional government, such as regional policy, the environment, education and transport.

What the Committee of the Regions does

As around three quarters of EU legislation is implemented at local or regional levels, it makes sense for local and regional representatives to have a say in the development of new EU laws. By involving the elected local representatives, who are perhaps closest to Europe's citizens and their concerns, the CoR is a force for a more democratic and accountable EU.

The Commission and the European Parliament are obliged to consult the CoR on legislative proposals in policy areas that directly affect local and regional authorities — for example, civil protection, climate change and energy. Once the CoR receives a legislative proposal, the members discuss it in plenary session, adopt it by a majority vote and issue an opinion. Importantly, the Commission and the Parliament are not obliged to follow the advice of the CoR, but they are obliged to consult it. If the appropriate mandatory consultation in the legislative process has been ignored, the CoR has the right to bring actions before the Court of Justice. The CoR can also, on its own initiative, offer opinions on topical issues.

How the CoR works

The Committee members are elected municipal or regional politicians, representing the entire range of local and regional government activities in the EU. They may be regional presidents, regional parliamentarians, town councillors or mayors of large cities. They all have to hold a political office in their home country. EU governments nominate them, but they work with complete political independence. The Council appoints them for 5 years, and they may be reappointed. The CoR appoints a President from among its members, for a term of 2½ half years.

CoR members live and work in their home regions. They meet in Brussels five times a year in plenary sessions, during which policy is defined and opinions are adopted. Six specialist commissions, made up of CoR members and covering different policy areas, prepare the plenary sessions:

- Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy (COTER);
- Commission for Economic and Social Policy (ECOS);
- Commission for Sustainable Development (DEVE);
- Commission for Education, Youth, Culture and Research (EDUC);
- Commission for Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE);
- Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX);
- Commission for Natural Resources (NAT).

CoR members are also grouped into national delegations, one for each Member State. Interregional groups also exist to promote cross-border cooperation. In addition, there are four political groupings.

The European Ombudsman

Investigating your complaints

Role: To investigate maladministration

Location: Strasbourg

▶ <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu>

The European Ombudsman investigates complaints about cases of poor or failed administration (maladministration) by the EU institutions. The Ombudsman receives and investigates complaints from EU citizens, residents, businesses and institutions.

What the Ombudsman does

The Ombudsman is elected by the European Parliament for a renewable term of 5 years. By receiving and investigating complaints, the Ombudsman helps to uncover maladministration in the European institutions and other EU bodies — in other words, cases where an EU institution fails to do something it should have done, or does it in the wrong way, or does something that ought not to be done. Examples of maladministration include:

- ▶ unfairness;
- ▶ discrimination;
- ▶ abuse of power;
- ▶ lack or refusal of information;
- ▶ unnecessary delay;
- ▶ incorrect procedures.

Any citizen or resident of an EU Member State can make a complaint to the Ombudsman, as can any association or business. The Ombudsman only deals with EU institutions and bodies, not with complaints against national, regional or local government authorities or institutions. He operates completely independently and impartially and does not request or accept instructions from any government or organisation.

Often, the Ombudsman may simply need to inform the institution concerned about a complaint in order for it to resolve the problem. If the case is not resolved satisfactorily during the course of his inquiries, the Ombudsman will try, if possible, to find an amicable solution which puts right the case of maladministration and satisfies the complainant. If this fails, the Ombudsman can make recommendations to solve the case. If the institution concerned does not accept his recommendations, he can make a special report to the European Parliament.

The Ombudsman's website has a practical guide on how to lodge a complaint.



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In her role as Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly examines complaints of poor and failed administration in the EU system.

The European Data Protection Supervisor

Protecting your privacy

Role: To protect citizens' personal data processed by the EU institutions and bodies

Location: Brussels

► <http://www.edps.europa.eu>

In the course of their work, the European institutions may store and process personal information on EU citizens and residents in electronic, written or visual format. The European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) is charged with protecting this personal data and people's privacy, and with promoting good practice in this field among the EU institutions and bodies.

What the European Data Protection Supervisor does

Strict European regulations govern EU institutions' use of citizens' personal data — such as names, addresses, health data or employment history — and protection of this information is a fundamental right. Each EU institution has a data protection officer who ensures that certain obligations are respected — for example, that data can only be processed for specific and legitimate reasons. Furthermore, the person whose data is being processed has certain enforceable rights, such as the right to correct the data. The job of the EDPS is to supervise the data protection activities and systems of the EU institutions and to ensure they comply with best practice. The EDPS also deals with complaints and conducts inquiries. Other tasks include:

- monitoring the EU administration's processing of personal data;
- advising on policies and legislation that affect privacy;
- cooperating with similar authorities in the Member States to ensure consistent data protection.

How the EDPS works

For everyday operations, the EDPS comprises two entities. Supervision and Enforcement evaluates data protection compliance by the EU institutions and bodies. Policy and Consultation **advises** the EU legislator on data protection issues in a range of policy areas and in proposals for **new legislation**. The EDPS also monitors **new technologies** that may have an impact on data protection.

Anyone who considers that his or her rights have been infringed when an EU institution or body has processed data relating to him or her can complain to the European Data Protection Supervisor. The complaint must be lodged using a complaint submission form available on the EDPS website.

The European Investment Bank

Investing in the future

Role: To make long-term finance available for investments in EU-related projects

Shareholders: The EU Member States

Board of Directors: One from each Member State plus the European Commission

Location: Luxembourg

▶ <http://www.eib.org>

The European Investment Bank (EIB) is the Bank of the European Union. It is owned by the Member States and its mission is to lend money for investments that support the Union's objectives — for example, in the fields of energy and transport networks, environmental sustainability and innovation. The EIB's focus is on increasing Europe's jobs and growth potential, supporting climate action and supporting the EU's policies beyond its borders.

What the EIB does

The EIB is the largest multilateral borrower and lender, providing finance and expertise for sound and sustainable investment projects, mostly in the EU. France's Viaduc de Millau and TGV lines, flood protection in Venice, wind farms in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia's Oresund bridge, the Athens metro and the clean-up of the Baltic Sea are but a few of the thousands of projects financed by the EIB over the years.

The EIB does not use money from the EU budget. Instead, it finances itself by issuing bonds on world financial markets. In 2013, the EIB lent €79 billion for 400 large projects in over 60 countries — €69 billion in the EU Member States and €10 billion outside the EU with a focus on the pre-accession countries, Europe's southern and eastern neighbours, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, and Latin America and Asia.

The EIB is AAA rated. The EIB usually lends up to 50 % of the project costs. Acting as a catalyst, it leverages co-funding from other sources. For loans above €25 million, the EIB lends directly to public and private sector bodies, such as governments and enterprises. For smaller loans, the EIB makes credit lines available to commercial banks and other financial institutions that on-lend the EIB funds to small and medium-sized enterprises or smaller projects undertaken by public sector borrowers.

Within the EU, the priorities for the EIB's lending activities are:

- ▶ innovation and skills,
- ▶ access to finance for smaller businesses,
- ▶ climate action,
- ▶ trans-European networks for transport, energy and IT.



© ImageGlobe

The construction of new railway lines is among the type of projects that may benefit from loans from the European Investment Bank.

How the EIB works

The EIB is an autonomous institution that makes its own borrowing and lending decisions on the merits of each project and the opportunities offered by the financial markets. The Bank cooperates with the other EU institutions, especially the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

The EIB's decisions are taken by the following bodies.

- ▶ The Board of Governors consists of ministers (normally the finance ministers) from all the Member States. It defines the Bank's general lending policy.
- ▶ The Board of Directors, chaired by the President of the Bank, comprises 29 members, 28 appointed by the Member States and one by the European Commission. It approves lending and borrowing operations.
- ▶ The Management Committee is the Bank's full-time executive body. It handles the EIB's day-to-day business.

The European Investment Fund

The EIB is the majority shareholder in the European Investment Fund (EIF), which finances investment in SMEs, which comprise 99 % of EU companies and employ over 100 million Europeans. SMEs often find it difficult to get the funding they need to invest and grow. This is especially true for start-ups and small companies with innovative products or services — exactly those entrepreneurial SMEs that the EU wants to encourage. The EIF meets these needs through venture capital and risk finance instruments — amounting to several billion euro annually — partly offered in partnership with the European Commission, commercial banks and other lenders.

<http://www.eif.org>

The EU agencies

There are a number of specialised European Union agencies which offer information or advice to the EU institutions, the Member States and citizens. Each of these agencies has a specific technical, scientific or managerial task. EU agencies can be grouped into several categories.

Decentralised agencies

Agencies are bodies governed by European public law, but they are distinct from the EU institutions (Parliament, Council, Commission, etc.) and have their own legal personality. They have offices in different cities all over Europe, which is why they are often referred to as 'decentralised'. They may deal with tasks of a legal and scientific nature. Examples are the Plant Variety Office, in Angers in France, which establishes rights to new plant varieties, or the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, in Lisbon in Portugal, which analyses and disseminates information on drugs and drug addiction.

Three supervisory bodies help to enforce rules for financial institutions and thereby preserve the stability of Europe's financial system. They are the European Banking Authority, the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority and the European Securities and Markets Regulator.

Other agencies help the EU Member States to cooperate in the fight against organised international crime. An example is Europol, based in The Hague in the Netherlands, which provides a platform for law enforcement officers from the EU countries to work together. They help each other to identify and track the most dangerous criminal and terrorist networks in Europe.

Three agencies carry out very specific tasks within the framework of the European Union's common foreign and security policy. The European Union Satellite Centre, in Torrejón de Ardoz in Spain, is such an agency; it uses information from earth-observation satellites in support of EU decision-making in foreign and security matters.

Euratom agencies and bodies

These bodies work within the framework of the European Atomic Energy Community Treaty (Euratom) to coordinate research in the EU Member States on the peaceful use of nuclear energy and to ensure that the supply of atomic energy is both sufficient and secure.

Executive agencies

Executive agencies ensure practical management of EU programmes, for example treatment of applications for grants from the EU budget. They are set up for a fixed



The safety of our food needs to be controlled all over Europe — coordinating this work is a typical task for an EU agency.

period of time and they have to be located in the same place as the European Commission: Brussels or Luxembourg. One example is the European Research Council, which funds basic research by groups of EU scientists.

Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER)

Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC)

Community Plant Variety Office (CPVO)

Consumers, Health and Food Executive Agency (Chafea)

Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)

Euratom Supply Agency (ESA)

Eurojust

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)

European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex)

European Agency for the Operational Management of Large-scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA)

European Asylum Support Office (EASO)

European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)

European Banking Authority (EBA)

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)

European Chemicals Agency (ECHA)

European Defence Agency (EDA)

European Environment Agency (EEA)

European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA)

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)

European GNSS Agency (GSA)

European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)

European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)

European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority (EIOPA)

European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA)

European Medicines Agency (EMA)

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA)

European Police College (CEPOL)

European Police Office (Europol)

European Railway Agency (ERA)

European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA)

European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA)

European Training Foundation (ETF)

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)

European Union Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA)

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)

European Union Satellite Centre (EUSC)

Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized enterprises (EASME)

Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA)

Fusion for Energy Joint Undertaking

Office for Harmonisation in the Internal Market (Trade Marks and Designs) (OHIM)

Research Executive Agency (REA)

Single Resolution Board (SRB)

Translation Centre for the Bodies of the European Union (CdT)

All EU agencies can be found via:

► http://europa.eu/agencies/index_en.htm

Getting in touch with the EU



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Information in all the official languages of the European Union is available on the Europa website: www.europa.eu



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There are European Commission and Parliament representations and offices in all the countries of the European Union. The European Union also has delegations in other parts of the world.

The European Union



Member States of the European Union (2014)

Candidate countries and potential candidates

The European Union (EU) is unique. It is not a federal state like the United States of America because its Member States remain independent sovereign nations. Nor is it a purely intergovernmental organisation like the United Nations because the Member States do pool some of their sovereignty — and thus gain much greater collective strength and influence than they could have acting individually.

They pool their sovereignty by taking joint decisions through shared institutions such as the European Parliament, which is elected by the EU citizens, and the European Council and the Council, which both represent national governments. They decide on the basis of proposals from the European Commission, which represent the interests of the EU as a whole. But what does each of these institutions do? How do they work together? Who is responsible for what?

This booklet sets out the answers. It also gives a brief overview of the agencies and other bodies that are involved in the European Union's work. The aim is to provide you with a helpful guide to EU decision-making.

