

'Reform of the Council: setting a good example' from EUmagazin (2002)

Caption: Extract concerning changes to the structure and modus operandi of the European Council, as decided at the Seville European Council in June 2002.

Source: EUmagazin. Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Wirtschaft, Recht und Politik in der Europäischen Union. Hrsg. Schwarz, Volker; König, Heinz ; R Herausgeber Zeller, Horst; Grittmann, Gunter. 2002, 34. Jahrgang, Nr. 9. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. ISSN 0946-4689. "Ratsreform: Mit gutem Beispiel voran", auteur:Fischer, Klemens , p. 25-26.

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Reform of the Council

Setting a good example

It passed almost unnoticed by the public when, at their summit conference in Seville in late June, the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States decided to make radical changes to the organisation and the working methods of the Council, in view of the enlargement of the European Union. These decisions have already been reflected in the new Rules of Procedure of the Council that have been in force since the end of July.

The outcome of the European Council of Seville deserved more attention from the public than was actually devoted to it. The Heads of State or Government not only set out their position on the accession negotiations with the applicant countries, on asylum and immigration, on the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and on the economic outlook, they also took decisions on specific measures to reform the Council and the European Council which brought immediate consequences. The cornerstones of these reforms are as follows:

- reshaping the environment for meetings of the European Council;
- reduction in number of Council configurations;
- division of the previously integrated General Affairs Council into a General Affairs and Foreign Relations Council;
- introduction of a strategic multiannual programme for the work carried out by the Council;
- introduction of an annual programme by each of the successive presidencies;
- introduction of the possibility that the incoming presidency of the Council may already assume the chairmanship in Council working parties before taking office.

The Heads of State or Government took the decision on their own responsibility that the European Council will in future involve only one-day sessions and will meet for a joint working dinner the evening before. The agenda of the European Councils — as the EU summits are officially called — will be fixed by the Council for General Affairs Council, with the provisional order of business being determined four weeks before the meeting. This will also affect all the other Council configurations in as far as they will also have to finalise their contributions in good time if they are to have them entered on the agenda for the European Council meeting. Their final submissions must have been received at the latest two weeks before the meeting of the European Council.

Between the final preparatory session of the General Affairs Council and the meeting of the European Council, there should not in future be any meetings of other Council configurations, save in exceptional circumstances — such as in the event of an international crisis. In addition, it was decided that the European Council should meet four times a year in total — twice in every six months. This is, at all events, in line with the procedure that had previously been customary, but, in accordance with the conclusions of the Seville Summit, there will no longer be any distinction drawn between formal meetings (June and December) and informal meetings (April and October). This is also to be seen in the light of the Treaty of Nice which, as we are aware, postulates that, from a certain point in time onwards, the formal meetings of the European Council will all take place in Brussels.

The substance of the work done by the European Council will be structured by the conclusions of Seville in so far as a distinction will be made between items on the agenda in accordance with the following four criteria:

1. agenda items that are to be adopted or approved without debate;

2. agenda items that are to be the subject of a debate with a view to the establishment of a general political objective;

3. agenda items that are to be the subject of a debate with a view to a resolution being adopted;

4. agenda items that are to be the subject of a debate without their being included in the conclusions.

[...]

[...] the Seville European Council has done a very good job on the reform of the Council and of the European Council.

Dr Klemens Fischer, Brussels