


The Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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The Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union is held in rotation. It is held in turn by each Member State.

The ECSC Treaty laid down a three-month term for the Special Council of Ministers, but experience showed that the rotation was too rapid, and the 1957 Treaties of Rome therefore extended the term to six months for the EEC and Euratom Councils. The same term — which has not been changed since — was retained for the Presidency of the Single Council established by the Treaty of 8 April 1965.

Initially, the rotation followed the alphabetical order of the names of the Member States in their respective national languages. As from 1987, following the accession of Spain and Portugal, provision was made for an initial six-year cycle in which the Presidency would rotate in strict alphabetical order, and for a second cycle of the same duration in which, on the basis of the same alphabetical order, the two States called upon to hold the Presidency in the same year would exchange turns. This change was meant to give each Member State an opportunity to perform the presidential function over the two half-years, bearing in mind that the two periods feature different priorities because of the budgetary timetable.

Since 1995, following a modification introduced by the 1992 Treaty on European Union, the Council has itself determined the order in which the Presidency has been held. Nevertheless, in taking the decisions concerned, the Council always ensures that the current cycle is complete before providing for the participation of new Member States in a new cycle. In practice, at the Council table, and until completion of the cycle, the delegations of the new Member States occupy a fixed place, assigned in accordance with the alphabetical order of the States' names in their respective national languages, while the delegations of the existing Member States shift one place to the left every six months.

The Council Presidency, supported by the General Secretariat, plays an essential role in the organisation of the institution's work, in particular in driving the legislative process forward. Before the reform of the Council's Rules of Procedure in 2002, the Presidency, in consultation with the General Secretariat and the European Commission, notified its draft half-year programme with its proposed dates for the Council sessions several months before assuming office. Since 2002, the future Presidency is required, when drawing up the draft agendas for the Council's meetings with the assistance of the Secretariat, to have regard both to the Council's 'multiannual strategic programme', covering a three-year period, and to its 'annual operational programme'. Responsibility for establishing the two programmes lies primarily with the Presidencies concerned — of which there are six in the case of the multiannual programme and two in that of the annual programme; in doing so, the Presidencies always act in consultation with the Commission. The multiannual strategic programme is adopted by the European Council on the recommendation of the General Affairs and External Relations Council. The annual operational programme is drawn up in the light of the multiannual operational programme and of the discussions within the General Affairs and External Relations Council. Account is taken *inter alia* of relevant factors arising out of the Commission-initiated dialogue on the annual political priorities.

The Council meets when convened by its President. The latter, a Minister of the Member State holding the Presidency during the current half-year, organises and chairs the Council's meetings and draws up the provisional agenda for each session. At the meetings, the Presidency ensures compliance with the Rules of Procedure and the smooth running of the debates. It is also part of its task to help achieve consensus within the Council. The Presidency does not speak on behalf of its national delegation and, for that reason, occupies a separate place at the conference table. The Presidency sits at the head of the table, next to the General Secretariat and opposite the European Commission.

In principle, the organs responsible for preparing the work of Council (Coreper, the committees and the working parties) are chaired by the representative or delegate of the Member State holding the Council Presidency.

The Presidency is assisted by the representative of the Member State which will next hold the Presidency.

This representative, acting at the Presidency's request and on its instructions, stands in for the Presidency as required, relieves it, where appropriate, of certain administrative tasks and ensures the continuity of the Council's work.

The Presidency plays an important representational role in the Community's external relations, in relations with the other institutions — the European Parliament in particular — and in keeping the media regularly informed as to the Council's activities.

Under the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the Presidency of the Council represents the European Union in matters falling within this policy area. The Presidency is responsible for the implementation of the decisions taken on these matters; in this capacity, in principle, it expresses the Union's position in international organisations and at international conferences. Following the entry into force of the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, the Presidency is assisted in these tasks by the Secretary-General of the Council (High Representative for the CFSP) and, where necessary, by the Member State which will hold the subsequent Presidency. The Commission is fully involved in these tasks (Article 18 of the Treaty on European Union). The configuration commonly known as the *Troika*, in which the Council Presidency worked together with the previous and subsequent Presidencies, has thus been changed, and the Presidency of the Council is no longer assisted by the Member State which held the previous Presidency.

Under the third pillar of the Union, the Presidency is required to inform the European Parliament regularly of the work carried out in the areas of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (Article 39 of the Treaty on European Union).

Under Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union, the President of the Council is responsible for convening a conference of representatives of the governments of the Member States for the purpose of determining by common accord the amendments to be made to the Treaties.