

The Committee of Ministers

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The Committee of Ministers

The Committee of Ministers is the Council of Europe's decision-making body and has the power to act on behalf of the organisation. It adopts its internal rules of procedure which lay down the statutory rules relating to its internal organisation and operation. The first meeting of the Committee of Ministers was held on 8 August 1949 at Strasbourg Town Hall. This session was opened by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman.

According to the Statute, each Council of Europe member state has a representative on the Committee of Ministers, and each representative has one vote. Representatives on the Committee are the Foreign Affairs Ministers or their Deputies. According to the Rules of Procedure, each representative appoints a Deputy to act on his or her behalf when the Committee is not in session.

The internal Rules of Procedure provide for the holding of sessions by the Committee not only in the days immediately preceding and following the opening of the Assembly sessions but also if any of the members so request or if the Secretary General deems it necessary, and if two thirds of the members agree to this. In practice, the Committee holds sessions at Foreign Minister level twice a year, in May and November. The Deputies meet once a week for the purpose of transacting business and for the taking of decisions on behalf of the Committee. They also meet several times a week in committees and in rapporteur and working groups.

The chairmanship of each session of the Committee of Ministers is held, in turn, by each member state in English alphabetical order. The Chairman, who is responsible for leading the debates, speaks and votes but has no casting vote. When the Committee is not in session, the Chairman remains in office until the opening of the next session.

With regard to the Committee's powers and responsibilities, Article 15 of the Statute states that it has a duty, on the recommendation of the Assembly or on its own initiative, to consider the action required to further the aim of the Council of Europe, including the conclusion of conventions and agreements and the adoption by governments of a common policy on specific matters. It may discuss any issues (human rights, democracy, European integration, etc.) except for defence matters. Its conclusions may take the form of recommendations to governments, and it then monitors the action taken by those governments.

The Committee is also the body which takes binding decisions on all matters relating to the internal organisation and arrangements of the Council of Europe and, for this purpose, it adopts such financial and administrative arrangements as may be necessary.

With regard to the Committee's voting procedures, the adoption of any resolutions relating to important matters, including recommendations to governments, requires unanimity. All other resolutions require a two-thirds majority, with the exception of matters relating to the Rules of Procedure or to financial or administrative regulations which may be adopted by a simple majority. A quorum is established when two thirds of the representatives of the members are present.

Apart from recommendations to governments and decisions which are the subject of conventions and agreements, the Committee of Ministers also adopts resolutions on matters regarding the Council of Europe's internal organisation and on political issues, declarations on topical issues and replies to recommendations made by the Assembly.

Since, in practice, the rule of unanimity applies, and because of the Committee's strictly intergovernmental nature, the body's decision-making powers have proved to be limited.