

Composition of the Council of the European Union

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/composition_of_the_council_of_the_european_union-en-ec51c458-5ced-4806-92c6-0d5fd7804d43.html



Last updated: 09/07/2016

Composition of the Council of the European Union

The Council consists of the representatives of the Member States.

Initially, the Special Council of Ministers of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) consisted of the Foreign Ministers delegated by each Member State government. There were several reasons for this:

- The pre-eminence of the Foreign Ministers resulted from their role in the negotiations on the ECSC Treaty.
- Conventional diplomatic procedures were the only known mechanisms for discussing certain issues.
- Given the strategic importance of coal and steel, it seemed logical for politically sensitive decisions to be taken by the Foreign Ministers.

Nevertheless, as time passed, the Ministers for Economic Affairs, Industry, Trade and Energy replaced the Foreign Ministers, particularly for the consideration of technical points. The Foreign Ministers continued to debate the more political issues.

The composition of the EEC and Euratom Councils also varied on the basis of which Ministers were appointed as their representatives, as each Government saw fit: Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, Agriculture, Transport, Energy, etc.

The merging of the executive bodies in 1967 did not affect the composition of the Council. The Council of the European Communities continued to be composed of representatives from the Member States. Each Member State appointed to the Council one of the members of its government.

The wording of the provisions of the Founding Treaties (Articles 146 of the EEC Treaty, Article 116 of the EAEC Treaty and Article 27 of the ECSC Treaty) was amended by the 1992 Treaty on European Union, which states: 'The Council shall consist of a representative of each Member State at ministerial level, authorised to commit the government of that Member State.' The aim of this amendment was to permit a member of a regional executive body to sit on the Council in respect of those areas for which he is responsible under national law. This Treaty also introduced the possibility for the Council to meet at Heads of State or Government level in order to take certain decisions. The Treaty of Nice of 26 February 2001 did not introduce any changes to Article 203 of the Treaty establishing the European Community or to Article 116 of the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community. The ECSC Treaty expired on 23 July 2002.

The composition of the Council varies according to the agenda for each meeting. It meets in different configurations according to the subject being discussed. With each successive reform of the Treaties, the number of specialist configurations has increased to some 20 in total, as has the scope and variety of the areas of activity of the European Communities and the European Union. This increase in activities, which resulted in an excessive fragmentation of the work of the European Union and an overlapping between agendas and the deliberations of the various Council configurations, prompted the Helsinki European Council of December 1999 to recommend limiting their number. On 22 July 2002, in application of the conclusions of the June Seville European Council, the Council amended its Rules of Procedure in order to lay down a shorter list of its configurations. This list is as follows:

- General Affairs and External Relations,
- Economic and Financial Affairs,
- Justice and Home Affairs,
- Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs,
- Competitiveness (Internal Market, Industry and Research),
- Transport, Telecommunications and Energy,
- Agriculture and Fisheries,

- Environment,
- Education, Youth and Culture.

Also since 2002, as part of the reform of the Council with a view to enlargement, the ‘General Affairs and External Relations’ configuration, until that time referred to as ‘General Affairs’, has held two separate meetings, covering respectively the following two main areas of activity: on the one hand, preparation for and follow-up to European Council meetings, institutional and administrative questions, overall coordination of EU policies, as well as the consideration of any matter forwarded to it by the European Council, and, on the other, the conduct of the whole of the Union’s external action, namely the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the European security and defence policy (ESDP), foreign trade, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

The various configurations of the Council may meet at the same time in order to deal with questions concerning several areas of activity; this takes place in what is commonly known as the ‘Jumbo Council’. Despite the number of different configurations, the unity of the Council, as an institution, remains intact.