

The Council of the European Union: presentation of the institution (1 May 2004)

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For over 50 years, the European Union has brought economic prosperity and peace to Europe. On 1 May 2004, ten new countries joined, bringing the total to 25 Member States. With 450 million people and 20 official languages, the European Union is a unique and innovative endeavour. It has brought together 25 countries of Europe, each with its own long history and strong identity, creating greater wealth, stability and peace.

The Council of the European Union is based in Brussels, at the heart of the European Union. Together with the European Parliament, it represents the people of Europe. While the European Parliament is directly elected, the Council of the European Union is made up of ministers from all of the Member States.

Heads of State and Government meet at least four times a year in Brussels. Depending on the issues under discussion, the composition of the Council varies. There are around nine configurations of the Council, each dealing with different areas of policy, from economic affairs to agriculture and the environment.

The Council has four key responsibilities: to further establish the European Union as an area where people and goods can move freely and where the environment, social rights and consumer rights are protected; to enhance security and justice for European citizens; to conduct the European Union's foreign policy; and to approve the European Union budget jointly with the European Parliament. To that end, the Council passes European laws and concludes agreements between the European Union and other parties.

Each Member State has a permanent team in Brussels, the head of which is called the country's Permanent Representative. They meet weekly in the Permanent Representatives' Committee, known as Coreper.

The Presidency rotates to give Member States the opportunity to lead the Council. The Presidency sets the Council's agenda, ensures that it runs efficiently and hosts informal meetings. The President often helps to mediate between different interests, enabling the Council to reach decisions. The Presidency is assisted by the General Secretariat, who are responsible for the smooth operation of the Council's work at all levels. In total, 3 000 people work in the Council, 600 of whom provide linguistic services, ensuring that language is never a barrier to mutual understanding.

Proposals are submitted to the Council by the European Commission and debated first by a working party. They are then considered by the Permanent Representatives who pass them to the Council for consideration and decision. Each year, the Council concludes many agreements between the European Union and non-EU countries, as well as with international organisations. The diverse agreements cover, for example, trade, transport and technology.

Matters of foreign policy, security and defence remain in the control of Member States. However, the European Union has established a common foreign and security policy to preserve peace and strengthen international security.

'As you remember, the security aspects of the European Union were established in Helsinki, in the summit of Helsinki, late 1999, early 2000, and from there on, we have done quite a lot. I think that, in real terms, we have established all the committees here to take decisions, and we have already run a good number of operations, operations which are of military side for peace-keeping, or operations for humanitarian aid, or operations for civilian aspects. We have an operation of police in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we are in Kosovo, we have been in Africa. A lot of things have been done in order to help stabilise the regions of the world in which that help is needed. But I think that we can be pleased and happy that things are done fairly rapidly so we can contribute to make the world a better place.'

Drug smuggling, terrorism, fraud and human trafficking are transnational crimes, and only cross-border cooperation can tackle them effectively.

'We have a very clear, detailed, factual list of priorities established at the highest political level in the

European Union.’

The Justice and Home Affairs Council, comprising the justice and interior ministers of Member States, improves cooperation in criminal matters like extradition, as well as in civil matters like divorce proceedings. The Council ensures that national courts, police forces, customs offices and immigration services work together to enforce national and Community legislation.

The Council has a major press centre. Here, it holds regular briefings to communicate its decisions. The Council is committed to ensuring openness and that it is accountable to the people of Europe. Certain Council debates are relayed to the public audiovisually. All legislative and other core documents are translated into the 20 official languages, together with a wide range of information about the Council’s work.

‘We have now 25 members, we have the double of the population of the United States, we have a GDP which is about a quarter of the GDP of the world, so we have to be a global actor, and we are a global actor. The mechanism of decision-making has to be upgraded, and make it ready for that. But we have been able really to do it fairly well. As you know, we are working now with the new Constitution of the European Union in which we changed some of the mechanism of working so that the, both the, well, the efficiency and the transparency and the democracy and the accountability — all these values that we want to defend — are a reality, no matter how many members the European Union has.’

The Council of the European Union is a forum that enables the 25 Member States to negotiate compromises, coordinate action and take decisions in the common interest to ensure peace, stability, liberty, security and justice for all the people of Europe.

The Council of the European Union: helping Europe speak with one voice.