

Briefing: The Institutions of Europe



Summary: This briefing relates to the The European Union, European Parliament, European Council and European Commission, setting out in brief the background, structures and duties of each body.

1. The European Union

The European Union is an economic and politically cooperative union established following the Second World War, the end of which marked the beginning of Europe's reconstruction. The human and economic cost of this devastating war inspired a commitment to cooperation and peace amongst European nations.

1951 - Treaty of Paris, creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)

1957 - Treaty of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom)

Economic cooperation was embarked on, not only to improve the economies of European countries, but also with the aim of integrating these countries' economic and political interests to ensure a lasting peace.

The unique composition of the European Union ensures that each member state remains an independent sovereign nation whilst delegating some of their decision-making powers to shared institutions created and agreed upon by all

members. This pooling of certain aspects of sovereignty strengthens each EU country, increasing our global influence and prosperity.

Today the European Union consists of **27 member states** and is a vocal advocate for human rights throughout the world.

2. The European Parliament

The only directly-elected body of the European Union, with elections occurring every five years, the [European Parliament](#) is where EU democracy thrives.

There are **736 Members** of the European Parliament representing half a billion citizens in the EU's 27 member states. This is the second largest democratic electorate in the world. There are currently 13 Labour MEPs working in cooperation with Social Democrats across Europe in the 'Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats' (abbreviation S&D), the second largest political group in parliament with **184 MEPs**.

The powers of the European Parliament have increased since the first elections in 1979, and the European Parliament now has powers of co-decision with the Council of Europe, as well as holding budgetary authority. The **Lisbon Treaty** (in force 2009) gives the European Parliament unprecedented powers, and so a greater responsibility in ensuring the fundamental rights of individual EU citizens are promoted, expanded and defended.

3. The European Council

The European Council was made an official institution with the Lisbon Treaty. All Heads of State or Government are members and attend meetings (which take place four times a year) chaired by the [President of the European Council](#).

The President - currently **Hermann van Rompuy** - is elected by the European Council with a qualified majority: the President's term is two and a half years, and this may be renewed once. Decisions of the European Council are usually

taken by consensus but are sometimes adopted by unanimity or by a qualified majority.

At present, **Cathy Ashton** is the 'High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy' and thus responsible for the coordination of the European Union's external action, the aims of which are the promotion of prosperity, global human rights and peace.

4. **The European Commission**

The [European Commission](#) is the EU's executive body and manages the day-to-day business of implementing policies/governing the allocation of EU funds. In order to represent the citizens of all EU member states, there are 27 commissioners from each country and these are chosen by the president from a list of candidates put forward by the countries. The **European Parliament** must thereafter provide its approval of the chosen commissioners after the Council of Ministers adopts the list by qualified majority. The European Commission holds the right of initiative in the lawmaking process.

EU laws are made after the Commission department responsible puts forward a proposal for new regulations, directive and decisions. The Commission consults national authorities, interested parties and other stakeholders in member states and then formally adopts the proposal. The decision-making process is usually one of **co-decision**, meaning that the European Parliament, Council of Ministers and other committees will scrutinize the proposal. The European Commission acts as the mediator in this process, which will ensure that the Europe's interests remain at the heart of decision-making. Once the law is passed it will be adopted into the national law of all EU countries.

5. **The Council of Ministers**

The Council of Ministers, also known as 'The Council of the European Union', acts as a legislator and coordinator within the EU.

The Council of Ministers has the power of concluding **international agreements** on behalf of the EU and coordinates the actions and broad economic policies of member states. The Council consists of ministers from each country who are responsible for the specific issue on the agenda and are **accountable to their democratically elected national governments**.

The presidency of the Council is held by each member state on a **rotational basis** for a term lasting six months (the United Kingdom will next hold the presidency in the second half of 2017).

During these six months the head of government in question becomes the President of the Council.

The Council of Ministers discusses issues proposed by the European Commission and each EU country has a defined number of votes, a number roughly determined by the size of their population (although vote allocation is weighted in favour of smaller countries).

The UK is however amongst the member states assigned the **highest number of votes** with 29 (out of 345).