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European Union: The Main Decision-Making Body of the EU

The Key Role of the Council

The European Parliament as well as the Council of the European Union were set up by the founding treaties in the 1950s. The Council of the EU is the main decision-making body. It represents the member states, and its meetings are attended by one minister from each of the EU's national governments.

The Council of the EU has the main role in agreeing legislation, although in recent years this has been shared more and more with the Parliament under the co-decision procedure. When the Council acts as a legislator, in principle it is the European Commission that makes proposals. The Council can modify the proposals before adopting them.

The Council consists of one government minister from each Member State. Although there is just one Council, different groups of ministers meet depending on what the topic is being discussed at the weekly meeting. Each minister is empowered to commit his or her government and is accountable to their own national parliaments for decisions taken in the Council.

The Nine Council Configurations

Depending on the matter under discussion, the Council meets in different configurations, within which each country is represented by the minister responsible for that subject. If the Council, for example, is to discuss environmental issues, the meeting will be attended by the environment minister from each country and it will be known as the "Environment Council". The nine Council configurations are:

- ' General Affairs and External Relations;
- ' Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN);
- ' Justice and Home Affairs (JHA);
- ' 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.

Each minister in the Council is empowered to commit his or her government. That means the minister's signature is the signature of the whole government. Moreover, each minister in the Council is answerable to his or her national parliament and to the citizens that parliament represents, which ensures the democratic legitimacy of the Council's decisions.

Six Key Responsibilities of the Council

The Council has the following six key responsibilities:

- ' To pass European laws. As above-mentioned the Council legislates jointly with the European Parliament;
- ' To coordinate the broad economic policies of the member states. This coordination is carried out by the economic and finance ministers, who collectively form the ECOFIN Council;
- ' To conclude international agreements between the EU and one or more states or international organisations;
- ' To approve the EU budget, jointly with the European Parliament;
- ' To develop the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP);

' To coordinate cooperation between the national courts and police forces in criminal matters.

Most of these responsibilities relate to the “Community” domain – for example: areas of action where the member states have decided to pool their sovereignty and delegate decision-making powers to the EU institutions. This domain is the “first pillar” of the European Union. However, the last two responsibilities relate largely to areas in which the member states have not delegated their powers but are simply working together. This is called, “intergovernmental cooperation” and it covers the second and third “pillars” of the European Union.

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