

## Introduction

The European Council is made up of the heads of state or government from each of the 28 EU countries. It also includes the President of the Commission, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy and the President of the European Council, who is elected by the Council. It meets in summits at least four times a year to discuss EU policy and any controversial issues that may arise. It seeks to provide leadership to the Council of the European Union and directs EU policy.

## History

Regular meetings of the leaders of the EU countries were set up in 1974. Since then, the European Council has become the EU's most visible decision-taking body owing to its high-profile meetings. It has often driven the EU's agenda forward by signing constitutional treaties and making proposals for reform. The European Council became a formal institution of the EU following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

Until 2009, the Presidency of the European Council passed between all the governments of the EU on a six-month rotation; when a country held the Presidency, its head of government was the President. However, changes in the Lisbon Treaty established an independent President of the European Council, currently Donald Tusk, former Prime Minister of Poland. He represents the EU on the world stage, organises Council summits, and informs Parliament of the outcomes. The President must be a non-head of government and serves a two and a half year term, which can be extended to five years.

## How does the European Council work?

The European Council usually hold summits at least four times a year. The President of the European Council can call additional meetings to address urgent issues. An emergency summit was called last September to try and address the refugee crisis. They are designed to allow deals to be thrashed out quickly between countries and to get agreement on the future direction of the EU.

The European Council nominates the President of the European Commission for the approval of the European Parliament and appoints the President of the European Central Bank and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy. The European Council settles issues that cannot be resolved by the Council of the European Union and takes the lead in more complex areas of policy. The Council also officially approves important documents and is involved in EU treaty negotiations.

Decisions in the European Council are usually made by consensus, with members agreeing to certain policy directions for the EU. For some decisions, such as treaty changes and agreeing to the accession of a new EU country, unanimous support is required. In other less important issues, where there is not agreement, a qualified majority vote may be taken. The European Council publishes conclusions after its meetings, these are usually in the form of policy ideas that the Commission and Council of the European Union are expected to pursue. The European Council does not have the ability to officially introduce or approve EU laws.

The next European Council summit will be held on 18 and 19 February. Discussions will be on the UK's negotiations with the rest of the EU, to reach an agreement so the UK can hold a referendum on continued membership. They will also focus on how the EU should deal with the ongoing refugee crisis.