

EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS

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Glossary*
UDC 331 (4-67 EU:497.5)
JEL H72

The European Union is an organisation of member states that have transferred part of their sovereignty to European institutions so that decisions can be made in the common, European, interest. The process by which joint decisions are made involves three fundamental institutions: the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament. Although many other bodies, agencies and committees work within the European Union, those that are particularly important for the working of the Union are the European Council and the European Court of Justice. These five constitute the fundamental institutions of the EU.

The Council of the European Union, also known as the Council of Ministers or shortened simply to the Council represents the individual member states. It is the main decision-making body of the EU, and practically every piece of legislation has to be adopted by the Council of the EU. The main task of the Council is to adopt new regulations that relate to the implementation of the founding treaties, but also of any measures impinging on the EU budget and international treaties that involve the EU. The Council is also competent in matters of

coordinating economic policy of the member states in the context of the EMU, the Economic and Monetary Union. In many areas, the Council of the EU shares its legislative role today with the European Parliament. This is the result of the democratisation process of European integration, in which the role of the European Parliament, the only democratically elected body at the European level, has constantly gained in strength. But in many areas without the involvement of the Council of the EU, no single decision of a lawmaking nature can be taken in the Union. The Council of the EU consists of one representative of each state, usually a minister. Since it is composed of ministers of the national governments of the member states, in this institution, the national interests are represented at a European level. The composition of the Council depends depending on the area in which the decisions are being made. When, for example, it concerns the Common Agricultural Policy, then the agriculture ministers of the member states will sit in the Council, but when it is the trans-European transportation networks, the transport ministers or some other appropriate line ministry will be represented in the Council. Depending on the

* *Received:* January 1, 2007.
Accepted: February 12, 2007.

topic under debate, the Council of the EU will in practice be called by other names. Thus for example when it is discussing the EMU matters, then it is called the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, abbreviated to ECOFIN. The Council of the EU makes its decisions using two methods of decision-making. On the most important issues – changes of the founding treaties, the acceptance of new members or the adoption of a budget lasting several years (in the EU jargon known as the Financial Perspective), the Council must decide unanimously. In other areas, accounting for about 80% of all decisions of the Council of the EU, it decides by a qualified majority voting.

The European Commission is a political body that represents the interests of the EU as a whole, and it is at the centre of the institutional structure. This body, the headquarters of which lies in Brussels, has three main tasks: to propose legislation to the Parliament and the Council; to implement EU policy; and to collaborate with the European Court of Justice in the enforcement of European laws. Until the accession of the new members it was composed of 20 Commissioners (two each from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK, and one each from the other member states). After the accession of the new members, in its new composition (for 2004 to 2009) the Commission has 25 Commissioners. The Commissioners are chosen by their national governments, and they must be confirmed by the European Parliament, to which the Commission is accountable. Commissioners have a five-year period of office. They are not representatives of the member states and must not seek their opinions or represent their interests. Each Commissioner is charged with a special area, and each of them is at the head of a body that is similar to a ministry in terms of national states.

These ministries are called Directorates General or in European jargon shortened to DG. The DGs, as expert bodies of the Commission, prepare, conduct and analyse the complex network of EU policies, and provide a body of expertise for the making of decisions. Commission's decisions are adopted by a simple majority.

The European Parliament is the representative body of the citizens of the EU, the basic function of which is to share the legislative authority with the Commission and the Council, and to supervise all EU institutions, in particular the Commission. Its specific authorities are: to consider proposals of the European Commission, to take part in the adoption of regulations, the appointment and discharge of members of the EC, the right to make queries connected with the work of the European Commission and the Council of the EU, sharing authority in the adoption of the annual budget and supervision (together with the Council) of its execution. MPs have been elected by direct ballot in the member states since 1979. By the founding treaties, the member states have been assigned a certain number of seats in the European Parliament. This number corresponds to the size of the population of the given state. The national quota for each new member is determined by the accession treaty. Today, the Parliament has 732 representatives, and it sits in Strasbourg, although some sessions and meetings of committees are held in Brussels, with part of the administration being located in Luxembourg. The new constitutional treaty provides for any state, no matter how small it might be, to have at least six members of the European Parliament.

The European Council consists of the heads of states or heads of government of the member states and of the president of the European Commission. The European

Council adopts the main guidelines for European policy related to enlargement, the budget, key reforms in certain aspects of EU policy. Although it has no formal role in the legislative process, but since it consists of the heads of the governments of the member states, it is in fact the most influential body in the decision making process in the Union. It meets at least twice a year (in June and in December) in order to discuss essential matters relating to the EU. The political decisions of the Council have to go through the standard lawmaking procedure, including the Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. In colloquial talk, both the Council of the EU and the European Council tend to be called the Council. What is more, it is necessary to distinguish these EU institutions from the Council of Europe, which is an international organisation that is quite unconnected with the European Union. The Council of Europe is an inter-governmental organisation that has its seat in Strasbourg and promotes the growth of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and promotes the European cultural heritage. It was founded in 1949 by ten European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Holland, the UK and Sweden), while today it is composed of 46 members.

The European Court of Justice is a body vested with the sole right to interpret the founding treaties. It is also charged with settling disputes among member states, between the EU and member states, among EU states, and between individuals and the EU. It enables the uniform interpretation of EU law in its area via close collaboration with national courts. The headquarters of the European Court of Justice is in Luxembourg. It consists of one judge selected by the government of each member state, any individual judge having a term of office of 6 years.

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