



## BRIEFING FOR MEMBERS

# PROMOTING DIACONAL INTEREST THROUGH THE COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

## What is the Council of the European Union?

The [Council of the European Union](#) (often just called Council) is one of the three main EU Institutions and one of the two with legislative powers next to the [European Parliament \(EP\)](#). It is often also called Council of Ministers, because this is the place where the Ministers from all EU Member States gather regularly to discuss and adopt EU legislation. The Council negotiates and adopts EU legislation as well as the EU budget together with the EP, it develops the EU's foreign and security policy, concludes agreements with third countries or international organisations and coordinates EU countries' policies.



The Council can meet in 10 different configurations, corresponding to different policy fields. Member States send their Minister in charge depending on the configuration. For Eurodiaconia members, the most relevant Council configuration is [EPSCO – the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council](#). Generally, there are 4 EPSCO meetings a year, two of them are exclusively devoted to Employment and Social Affairs.

The work of the different Council configurations is prepared by working parties with experts from the ministries of each Member State. The working parties discuss the legislative proposals at technical level. Once an agreement has been reached on technical level, the Ambassadors of the Member States meet in a meeting called COREPER to prepare the agreement at political level. They have to agree to submit the piece of legislation to the Ministers in a Council configuration for a final discussion and vote.

### Three different Councils?

The Council of the European Union is not to be confused with the [European Council](#), which is composed of the European Heads of State and whose task is to provide political guidance on the big lines and directions the EU should take.

It should also not be confused with the [Council of Europe](#), which has its seat in Strasbourg and where the representatives of 47 countries meet and discuss mainly issues concerning human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Most EU legislation is adopted by the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP), which means that the legislation needs to be adopted by the Council and the EP. Therefore, both institutions discuss the proposed legislation independently, make changes and then need to agree in the end on the same text. In most cases, this agreement is reached during informal meetings called Trilogue, where representatives of the Commission, the EP and the Council meet to find an agreement on a common text. Only once this agreement has been reached, the EP and Council have their final vote on the text to adopt it. Most of the time, the Council needs to vote with a qualified majority to pass a legislation, which means that at least 55% of the Member States, representing 65% of the EU's population, have to vote in favour. For sensitive topics, such as foreign policy, a unanimous vote can be required. In practice, however, the Council tends to

adopt legislation by consensus, meaning that no Member State opposes.





## Which role does the Council Presidency play?

Unlike the other EU Institutions, the Council of the European Union does not have a President. Instead, Member States take turns in chairing the meetings. This is called the rotating Presidency, with each Presidency chairing the Council for a 6-months term.

The role of the Presidency is to chair the meetings of the Council in all its configurations, as well as all working parties and other preparatory bodies. The Presidency sets the agenda and represents the Council in negotiations with other Institutions. The Presidency should be a 'honest broker', meaning that it is impartial and aims at finding compromises between Member States on issues where there is disagreement.

Member States start preparing their Presidency about 1 to 1½ years in advance to set up a team, prepare the files and develop their priorities in accordance with the central issues at EU level. In 2007, the concept of Presidency Trios was introduced, under which the three Member States succeeding each other with the Presidency commit to cooperating closely on a common, overarching work programme. The trio system was introduced to increase policy coherence over a longer period of time and to encourage mutual support. Most Trios, however, do not use the full potential of this concept and give little visibility to their cooperation.

## Which are the up-coming Presidencies?

This is the list of the up-coming Presidencies:

July – December 2017	Estonia	<a href="https://www.eu2017.ee/">https://www.eu2017.ee/</a>
January – June 2018	Bulgaria	<a href="https://eu2018bg.bg/en/home">https://eu2018bg.bg/en/home</a>
July – December 2018	Austria	
January – June 2019	Romania	<b>The next Trios are:</b> Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria Romania, Finland and Croatia Germany, Portugal and Slovenia
July – December 2019	Finland	
January – June 2020	Croatia	
July – December 2020	Germany	
January – June 2021	Portugal	
July – December 2021	Slovenia	

## Why is the Presidency relevant for Eurodiaconia Members?

EU Member States which are not currently presiding over the Council try to promote their own national interests. As mentioned before, the task of the Presidency is to strike a balance between these diverging interests and to work towards a consensus. At first glance, the Presidency might therefore seem to be a less relevant advocacy target than EU Member States which are free to voice and advance their own interests. However, the Presidency is more than an arbiter; in its capacity of 'Agenda-setter', the Presidency can decide in which order legislative proposals put forward by the European Commission should be discussed, and it has some manoeuvring space for setting its own priorities and favouring some policy areas over others. For Member States the Presidency is also an opportunity to put forward policy issues and initiatives that are of particular interest to them. Finally, the Presidency is also simply an occasion for the entire country to present itself, including on a cultural and societal level, through several events.

For these reasons, holding the Presidency is also an important opportunity for Eurodiaconia members. It is a privileged moment to share key observations and concerns with your government and advocate for prioritising certain (social) issues and a policy response which goes beyond the national level, and which can capitalise on EU governance instruments such as the European Semester.



## What can Eurodiaconia members do?

The Council Presidency is an important opportunity for Eurodiaconia members to make your voice heard. There are several actions that you can take:

- **Ask your government to make specific social topics one of its priorities:** As explained above, each Member State defines a set of priorities ahead of its Presidency. This is a political commitment, meaning that they will work particularly hard on these issues. It can also be an opportunity for taking some additional initiatives in this field. In order to do this successfully, you should try to arrange a meeting with your relevant Ministry approximately one year ahead of the beginning of the Presidency, as this is the moment where they start developing their priorities. Find arguments why social issues should be a priority and what the benefits would be for your country. Arrange a meeting where you can bring forward your requests and proposals.
- **React to your government's priorities:** At some point during the last six months before your Country's Presidency starts, its political priorities for the Presidency will be made public. Once they are published, you can assess to what extent they address the most pressing (social) concerns in your country and the EU. You can share your analysis and recommendations with your national government and with Eurodiaconia.
- **Encourage your Government to make progress on specific files:** If there are specific files of interest for you that are discussed at Council level, you can encourage your government to make a special effort in this field to achieve progress. You should also provide them your analysis of the topic and your opinion about the most desirable outcome.
- **Use the Presidency to showcase your work at EU-level:** The Presidency is also an opportunity for the entire country to present itself in Brussels and/or in your capital. Many events take place at different levels, including cultural events. Together with Eurodiaconia, MEPs from your country and/or your country's Permanent Representation, you could organise an event in Brussels or in your capital around a specific topic to showcase your work.

The Presidency is always an extremely busy period for Member States. Therefore, advocacy efforts need to take into account the following factors:

- ✓ **Timing:** In order to have a chance to be heard, Eurodiaconia members are encouraged to start their advocacy efforts at the earliest possible stage. As preparations for the Presidency begin 1 to 1½ years ahead of its official start, a similar timeline is necessary for effective action by diaconal actors. Once the Presidency has started, it will often be too late to influence the agenda.
- ✓ **Relevance:** Make a clear case for why a particular initiative or recommendation would be in the interest of your government. Combining social with economic arguments will improve the feasibility of your proposal in the context of a wide spectrum of proposals from interested parties.
- ✓ **Contacts:** Establishing good contacts with your national government and with your country's Permanent Representation ahead of the Presidency is of crucial importance both during the preparatory phase and during the Presidency itself. The Eurodiaconia Secretariat can support your advocacy actions in Brussels and provide you with further advice on engaging with the Presidency.