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***The European Council in 2019 –  
a key institution in dynamic operation***

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**TRACK** Teaching and Researching  
the European Council

# TRACK Annual Report

## The European Council in 2019 - a key institution in dynamic operation

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## Abstract

In 2019, the European Council (EUCO) played a key role in the European Union (EU) as an electoral body, a constitutional architect, a collective voice of Member States in external affairs and by deepening of the Single Market as a driver of economic governance. For contributing to research and teaching on this key institution, this Annual Report offers an overview over the European Council's meetings in 2019 and provides insights for a more thorough analysis and assessment of the most important topics discussed. The Annual Report argues that passing the Withdrawal Agreement for Brexit and agreeing on a roadmap towards climate neutrality, the European Council agreed on history making decisions. The Heads of State or Government also followed a path that has been put down by earlier generations of political leaders. Again, a look beyond the official conclusions draws our attention to different patterns of noticeable consensus or conflicts amongst groups of participants.

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## Introduction

The European Council, the institution of the Union's leaders, remains a significant object for research and teaching in European Studies and beyond. This report aims to offer a factual overview of the activities in 2019 as well as an analysis and assessment of the European Council to stimulate discussions on this institution. It will list the meetings held by the Heads of State or Government and summarizes the most important topics the European Council has dealt with. The report will especially focus on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU (Brexit), the election of the EU's top jobs and the EU's answer to the climate crisis. Other major topics in 2019 will briefly be analysed as well.

## Meetings of the European Council

*"I want Europe to become global leader of the green economy with jobs, innovation and a high quality of life. We have to find a way forward that works for all member states. And their people."*

*- Charles Michel, the new President of the European Council (29 November 2019)*

Table 1: European Council meetings in 2019

24 - 25 February 2019	EU-League of Arab States summit, Sharm El-Sheik
21 March 2019	Special European Council (Art. 50)
21 – 22 March 2019	European Council
09 April 2019	EU-China summit
10 April 2019	Special European Council (Art. 50)
25 April 2019	EU-Japan summit
09 May 2019	Informal meeting of Heads of State or Government, Sibiu
28 May 2019	Informal dinner of Heads of State or Government
20 – 21 June 2019	European Council
21 June 2019	Euro summit
30 June 2019	Special meeting of the European Council (nominations for EU top jobs)
8 July 2019	EU-Ukraine summit
17 - 18 July 2019	EU-Canada summit
17 - 18 October 2019	European Council
17 October 2019	Special European Council (Art. 50)
12 - 13 December 2019	European Council
13 December 2019	Special European Council (Art.50)

Source: *European Council Meeting calendar*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Council Meeting Calendar. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/calendar/?filters=2031>



In 2019, EU leaders met 16 times<sup>2</sup>; the European Council in total held four ordinary summits, four special summits related to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union, one related to the nominations for EU top jobs, two informal meetings as well as five summits with third countries, respectively regional organisations. During these numerous summits, the European Council had to find agreements on a number of issues. Topics which were already high up on the agenda of summits in previous years, such as migration or the Single Market, have also been discussed in 2019 and obviously agreeing on the terms of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union remained one of the biggest challenges to be solved. However, the elections to the European Parliament and its outcome also led to new topics on the agenda, most prominently the decision on EU top jobs and the European Green Deal.

## Topics discussed by the European Council

Table 2: Overview of important topics for the European Council

<p><b>Brexit: a case for the role as constitutional architect</b>          commitment to an orderly withdrawal on the basis of the Withdrawal Agreement          close as possible a future relationship with the UK in line with the Political declaration          Reappointment of Michel Barnier to negotiate future relationship after withdrawal of the United Kingdom</p>
<p><b>Agreeing on top positions: the role as electoral body</b>  <i>President of the European Commission:</i> Nomination of Ursula von der Leyen  <i>President of the European Council:</i> Election of Charles Michel  <i>High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP):</i> Nomination of Josep Borrell Fontelles  <i>President of the European Central Bank:</i> Nomination of Christine Lagarde</p>
<p><b>Climate Change: framing the EU's policy</b>          Commitment to the objectives of the Paris Agreement/1.5°C goal          Goal of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050 (except Poland)          Importance of the EU submitting an ambitious long-term strategy → European Green Deal</p>
<p><b>Migration: deep cleavages</b>          Support for Member States facing the most serious challenges in terms of migratory flows</p>
<p><b>External Affairs: a collective voice</b>  <i>Russia/Ukraine:</i> non-recognition of Russian annexation of Crimea, criticizing Russian presidential decree of 24 April simplifying the issuing of Russian passports in Eastern Ukraine, demand to release captured Ukrainian sailors  <i>Turkey:</i> Condemnation of Turkey's unilateral military action in North East Syria and halt of arms exports, Criticism of Turkey's illegal drilling activities in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone  <i>Africa:</i> Emphasis on crucial importance of the EU's strategic partnership with Africa</p>
<p><b>Single Market: pushing a key item of the acquis</b>          Economic and Monetary Union and Single Market should be deepened          Focus on digitalisation of the economy and remaining globally competitive in key technologies and strategic value chains</p>

<sup>2</sup> Excl. Euro Summit



<p><b>A master of Enlargement</b>  <i>Accession of Albania and North Macedonia: European Council will revert to the issue before the EU-Western Balkans summit in May 2020.</i></p>
<p><b>EU budget</b>  Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027: First proposal by Finland’s Presidency</p>
<p><b>Shaping the future of European democracy hand in hand with civil society</b>  <i>Conference on the Future of Europe 2020-2022:</i>  Croatian presidency should work towards content, scope and functioning of such conference engaging the European Parliament and Commission.</p>
<p><b>Strategic Agenda 2019-2024: A detailed list of a broad agenda</b>  Setting up main priorities for the European Union in the following five years</p>

**Source: *Compilation by the authors based on European Council conclusions***

Table 2 gives an overview over specific issues the Heads of State or Government discussed during the European Council summits in 2019. It documents again that Heads of State or Government pursue a state like agenda – dealing with nearly all issues on the political agenda in Europe. For an in-depth study, the report will especially draw attention to the following issues: The role of the European Council in the process of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union and its role as an electoral body agreeing on the EU’s top positions.

## **Brexit: a case for the role as constitutional architect and its impact on the internal balance of power**

Brexit stood high up on the agenda of the EU’s Heads of State or Government, as it is a constitutional problem of fundamental importance. In 2019, Brexit was on the agenda of four summits specially dedicated to Article 50. After requests by Theresa May and later Boris Johnson, EU27 leaders agreed to extend the deadline for the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union three times (Article 50 TEU). A particular topic that complicated the negotiations has been the so-called “Irish backstop“. EU27 leaders showed great unity, especially in comparison with usual controversies during negotiations with third countries. During hardly any other major challenge in the history of the European Council since its establishment in 1975, were EU leaders able to find consensus multiple times and as quick as during the Brexit negotiations. The revised political declaration,<sup>3</sup> setting out the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the UK and replacing the first political declaration from November 2018, has been passed by the European Council during its October 2019 summit.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2019). POLITICAL DECLARATION SETTING OUT THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE UNITED KINGDOM. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/revised\\_political\\_declaration.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/revised_political_declaration.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> Special European Council, Art. 50, 17.10.2019. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2019/10/17/art50/>)



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***The Union and United Kingdom are determined to work together to safeguard the rules- based international order, the rule of law and promotion of democracy, and high standards of free and fair trade and workers' rights, consumer and environmental protection, and cooperation against internal and external threats to their values and interests.***

***- Revised Political Declaration***

The United Kingdom then finally left the European Union on 31 January 2020 after the ratification of the withdrawal agreement by the European Council one day earlier.<sup>5</sup> Negotiations on the United Kingdom's future relationship with the European Union are however still to proceed and the situation after the end of the 11-month transition period ending on 31 December 2020, remains unclear and will be a major topic for 2020.

***"Things will inevitably change but our friendship will remain. We start a new chapter as partners and allies."***

***– Charles Michel, President of the European Council (24 January 2020)***



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*President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (left), Head of Task Force for Relations with the United Kingdom Michel Barnier (background) and President of the European Council Charles Michel (right)*

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union (2020). Brexit: Council adopts decision to conclude the withdrawal agreement. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/01/30/brexit-council-adopts-decision-to-conclude-the-withdrawal-agreement/>)



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One relevant question is if and in what sense the British prime minister's exit from the European Council will have an impact on its internal power constellations. Without the United Kingdom, northern and western European countries are going to lose a partner in defending and creating a liberal and open, multilateral economic order. As a consequence, the fiscally conservative member states Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden have created the Dutch-led Hansa Group, also referred to as "New Hanseatic League".<sup>6</sup> Governments sceptical of further European integration, such as Denmark and the Visegrád Group also lose some backing. The United Kingdom's withdrawal could further strengthen the Franco-German tandem, as long as they agree on common integration steps. Germany's role as "benevolent or reluctant hegemon"<sup>7 8</sup> could gain further significance, in case the Federal government actively pursues such a role and historical reservations lose relevance. Since the European Council's foundation, German members have played a crucial role, which could gain further significance with the United Kingdom's departure and upcoming challenges. Furthermore, France as the only permanent member of the UN Security Council and only nuclear power might claim even more a leading role than in the past. A further –unintentional – consequence of Brexit could lead to a new alliance outside of the European Council, when it comes to foreign and security policy. Proposals of the German chancellor<sup>9</sup> and the French president<sup>10</sup> suggest, that the „big three“ could install a kind of European Security Council outside the Union's legal framework. Such a "directorate" would overlap or even replace deliberations and negotiations on security and defence-related questions in the European Council.<sup>11</sup> Brexit most probably will have negative effects on the Union's international profile, as the EU's influence in the G7, G20 as well as UN-institutions could be weakened.

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<sup>6</sup>Finnish Ministry of Finance (2018). Finance ministers from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden underline their shared views and values in the discussion on the architecture of the EMU. (<https://vm.fi/documents/10623/6305483/Position+EMU+Denmark+Estonia+Finland+Ireland+Latvia+Lithuania+the+Netherlands+and+Sweden.pdf/99e70c41-6348-4c06-8ff8-ed2965d16700/Position+EMU+Denmark+Estonia+Finland+Ireland+Latvia+Lithuania+the+Netherlands+and+Sweden.pdf>)

<sup>7</sup> Bulmer, Simon. "Deutschland in der EU: Europas unverzichtbarer Hegemon?." *integration* 42.1 (2019): 3-20. N

<sup>8</sup> Bulmer, Simon, & Paterson, William E. (2013). Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon? Of economic strength and political constraints. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(10), 1387-1405.

<sup>9</sup> Merkel, Angela (2018): Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 13 November 2018. (<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/speech-by-federal-chancellor-angela-merkel-to-the-european-parliament-strasbourg-13-november-2018-1550688>)

<sup>10</sup> Macron, Emmanuel (2019). Dear Europe, Brexit is a lesson for all of us: it's time for renewal. *The Guardian*. (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/04/europe-brexit-uk>)

<sup>11</sup> Wessels, Wolfgang (2016). *The European Council*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p.146.



## The Spitzenkandidat conflict and beyond - Agreeing on top positions: the role as electoral body

In 2019, the European Council once again had to fulfil its treaty obligations to pursue electoral functions. The Heads of State or Government not only had to elect the president of the European Council (Art. 15 TEU) but also “propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission” (Art. 17 TEU) as well as “appoint the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy” (Art. 18 TEU). Furthermore, a new president of the European Central bank had to be decided on (Art. 283 TFEU). In particular the process of proposing a new president of the European Commission provoked significant media attention as it resulted in a conflict between the European Parliament’s claim to determine the *Spitzenkandidat* process and the European Council’s position to keep autonomy to nominate a candidate according to the leaders’ preference

Table 3: Timetable for the process of nominating the president of the European Commission

Elections 2019	24 – 26 May 2019	<p><i>European Parliament election</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EPP wins a relative majority of seats but fails to bring about a majority with other pro-European groups in the EP</li> <li>- EPP “Spitzenkandidat“: Manfred Weber</li> </ul>
	28 May 2019	<p><i>Informal dinner by Heads of State or Government</i></p> <p>Résumé of election results and initiation of nomination procedure for EU top jobs</p>
	20 June 2019	<p><i>Meeting of Heads of State or Government</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No majority for Weber</li> <li>- Other „Spitzenkandidaten“ ruled out as there is no majority for Weber</li> <li>- Negotiations postponed until 30 June 2019</li> </ul>
	28 – 29 June 2019	<p><i>G20 Summit in Osaka</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The present Heads of State or Government rule out Weber as Commission president</li> <li>- Potential compromise between Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Pedro Sánchez and Mark Rutte:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Timmermans (S&amp;D) as Commission president</li> <li>○ Kristalina Georgieva (EPP) as President of the European Council</li> <li>○ Manfred Weber (EPP) as President of the European Parliament (first half, second half: Guy Verhofstadt (Renew Europe))</li> <li>○ Margrethe Vestager as High Representative of the Union for</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



		<p>Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rejection Timmermans mainly from Visegrád-countries, but also EPP-led governments as he is responsible for infringement procedure concerning the Rule of Law in Poland and Hungary</li> </ul>
	30 Juni – 02 July 2019	<p><i>Special summit of Heads of State or Government</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Negotiations about the appointments for the EU's top jobs with special regard to geographic, demographic and gender diversity</li> <li>- Visegrad-countries und Italy keep rejecting Timmermans</li> <li>- bilateral talks between Tusk and Heads of State or Government bilateral consultations</li> <li>- Nomination of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission (proposed by France)</li> <li>- Election of Charles Michel as President of the European Council</li> <li>- Nomination of Josep Borell Fontelles as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP)</li> <li>- Nomination of Christine Lagarde as President of the European Central Bank</li> </ul>
	16 July 2019	<p><i>European Parliament elects Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission</i></p>

**SOURCE: Own survey based on Thieme, A. & Wessels, W. (2020). *Europäischer Rat*.<sup>12</sup> and POLITICO (2019). *EU summit: As it happened*.<sup>13 14</sup>**

As most of the Heads of State or Government regarded the *Spitzenkandidat* process as a loss of power of the European Council to the European Parliament, some of them, such as French president Macron, strongly rejected it. Others, such as German chancellor Merkel, tried to find a solution, which took into account the European Parliament's concerns. In spite of a wide range of positions, worried about the

<sup>12</sup> Thieme, Alina, & Wessels, Wolfgang (2019). *Europäischer Rat*. In *Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2019* (pp. 93-100). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

<sup>13</sup> Politico (2019). *EU Summit: As it happened*. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-summit-live-blog-extra-top-jobs-spitzenkandidat/>)

<sup>14</sup> Politico (2019). *EU Summit: As it happened*. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-summit-live-blog-spitzenkandidat-elections-top-jobs/>)



loss of power, after the European Parliament elections 2019, members of the European Council insisted that there “can be no automaticity” to appoint one of the lead candidates.<sup>15</sup>

Even though a qualified majority would have been sufficient for nominating candidates for the EU’s top jobs (Art 7 (7) TEU), the Heads of State or Government aimed to reach for a broad consensus, taking into account gender, geography and party affiliation. After leaders of the “big” member states came together on the side of the G20 Summit in Osaka, everything seemed to indicate that Frans Timmermans, the Spitzenkandidat of the Party of European Socialists (PES) emerging as the compromise candidate. This solution was however blocked not only by the Visègrad-states, who disliked Timmerman’s tough stance on the rule of law procedure against Hungary and Poland, but also by other conservative/EPP-led governments. The final agreement amongst the members of the European Council resulted in the appointment of German defence minister Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission from the EPP, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel from the Liberal party family as president of the European Council, Spanish foreign minister Josep Borell Fontelles of the Socialist party family as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and French IMF Chair Christine Lagarde as new president of the European Central Bank. In the 27 member states voted in favour of the proposal while Germany abstained due to the rejection of the proposal by Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union’s (CDU) coalition partner Social democratic Party of Germany (SPD).<sup>16</sup>

The compromise further resulted in national politicians not having to be afraid of the creation of a “Madame l’Europe” or “Monsieur l’Europe”<sup>17</sup> as none of the elected candidates have emerged with an ambitious or controversial profile. Ursula von der Leyen, as a politician whose career had solely emerged on the national level, thus has much lower chances of becoming a “Madame Europe” than e.g. Frans Timmermans or Margarethe Vestager, as one of the most prominent Commissioners that have been considered as candidates, as well. The same holds true for the election of Charles Michel, the new president of the European Council.

Furthermore, during negotiations, the party affiliation played a more crucial role than previously. The European Parliament showed a great weakness in 2019 One of the main reasons was that unlike after

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<sup>15</sup> Tusk, Donald (2019a): Remarks by President Donald Tusk at the press conference of the informal dinner of EU Heads of State or Government (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2019/05/28/remarks-by-president-donald-tusk-at-the-press-conference-of-the-informal-summit-of-eu-heads-of-state-or-government/>)

<sup>16</sup> SPD (2019). SPD lehnt Vorschlag von EU-Ratspräsident Donald Tusk ab. (<https://www.spd.de/aktuelles/detail/news/spd-lehnt-vorschlag-von-eu-ratspraesident-donald-tusk-ab/02/07/2019/>)

<sup>17</sup> Nasshoven, Yvonne (2011). The Appointment of the President of the European Commission. Baden-Baden: Nomos.



the previous European Parliament election, the two largest groups, the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and European People's Party (EPP) did not reach the necessary majority of component members of the European Parliament in the 2019 elections and thus the election of any College of Commissioners also had to rely on the support of the liberal "Renew Europe" Group. The narrow majority of just nine votes, Ursula von der Leyen received in the European Parliament, indicates the fragility of the new Commission's parliamentary support. As this weak result already indicates, in order to achieve parliamentary majorities for her major projects von der Leyen might have to form alliances with additional partners such as the strengthened Greens. This new constellation of a higher plurality (or as some might call it: fragmentation) will in future create more difficulties for the European Council to find agreements in cases where the European Parliament has a veto power, such as in adopting the next multiannual financial framework (MFF).

## Climate change: framing the EU's policy

***"Europe is determined to lead the fight against today's climate threat. That is why the European Union is more resolved than ever to implement the Paris Agreement fully and effectively."***

***- Donald Tusk, former President of the European Council (23 September 2019)***

The climate crisis is one of the most pressing issues of current times. It has also been high up on the agenda of the European Council in 2019, where it has been a topic in all four ordinary summits. In 2019, EU leaders once again committed to the "objective of the Paris Agreement, including by pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels". European Institutions are invited to "advance work on the conditions, the incentives and the enabling framework to be put in place so as to ensure a transition to a climate-neutral EU in line with the Paris Agreement."<sup>18</sup>

During the European Council summit in December 2019 all member states except of Poland, agreed to step up climate action and committed to "the objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050, in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement."<sup>19</sup> EU leaders are not only emphasizing the need for global climate action but also the opportunities and challenges, which may arise with a transition to climate neutrality. The European Council therefore recognises the need for an enabling framework

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<sup>18</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 June 2019

<sup>19</sup> European Council Conclusions, 12 December 2019



that benefits all Member States and ensures a cost-effective and socially balanced transition taking national circumstances into account.

***“As President of the European Council, I have a clear goal: to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent on the planet by 2050. So, we will be the champion of the green transition.”***

***- Charles Michel, President of the European Council (2 December 2019)***

Proposals for the European Green Deal, the EU’s long-term strategy should be made by the European Commission in early 2020.<sup>20</sup> Financially, the European Council furthermore ensured the European Union’s commitment to the scaling up of the Green Climate Fund.<sup>21</sup>

## **Other major topics: pursuing a state like agenda**

### **Migration: deep cleavages**

Whereas migration has been a recurring topic on the agenda of the European Council in the previous years, in 2019 it has been a slightly less frequent topic in European Council summits. Heads of State or Government were however unable to agree on a reform of the Dublin Regulation or the Common European Asylum System.<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> EU-leaders renewed their determination to “further develop a fully functioning comprehensive migration policy” and to find agreement on “agreement on an effective migration and asylum policy”<sup>24</sup> and committed themselves to address the refugee crisis in the light of evolving events, supporting the most affected Member States.<sup>25</sup>

***“The European Union remains engaged in its efforts towards effectively addressing the serious humanitarian and refugee crisis in the light of evolving events, including by supporting those Member States that are facing the most serious challenges in terms of migratory flows in the Eastern Mediterranean.”***

***- European Council Conclusions 17 and 18 October 2019***

### **A new strategic agenda 2014-2019: a detailed and comprehensive list**

Also, in view of the new legislative cycle after 2019 and of the nominations for the key positions, the political leaders have used their treaty powers “to define the general political directions and

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<sup>20</sup> European Council Conclusions, 12 December 2019

<sup>21</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 June 2019

<sup>22</sup> European Council Conclusions, 18 October 2018

<sup>23</sup> European Council Conclusions, 13 December 2018

<sup>24</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 June 2019

<sup>25</sup> European Council Conclusions, 17 and 18 October 2019



priorities” [of the Union] (Art.15(1)). In their session on 20 June 2019, the European Council agreed on a “new strategic agenda 2019-2024”

***This strategic agenda focusses on four main priorities:***

- ***protecting citizens and freedoms***
- ***developing a strong and vibrant economic base***
- ***building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe***
- ***promoting European interests and values on the global stage.***

By defining the tasks in these ‘four priority’ areas, the Heads of State or Government enumerate a detailed list of nearly all points on the public agenda in 2019. However, projects for deepening, such as treaty revisions, were not mentioned. In view of widening the document remained vague as well: “[the Union] will uphold the European perspective for European states able and willing to join.”<sup>26</sup>

### **External Affairs: a collective voice**

The European Council functions as the EU’s voice in external affairs on a regular basis. 2019, the Heads of State or Government again emphasized the importance of the EU-Africa relations.<sup>27</sup> EU-leaders further agreed on strengthening the European-Arab partnership in order to find common multilateral answers to global challenges and to hold League of Arab States (LAS)-EU Summits regularly, alternating between Arab and European states, the next one taking place in Brussels in 2022.<sup>28</sup>



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<sup>26</sup> European Council (2019). A new strategic agenda. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>)

<sup>27</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 June 2019

<sup>28</sup> European Council (2019). Sharm El-Sheikh summit declaration. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2019/02/25/sharm-el-sheikh-summit-declaration/>)



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During the EU-Japan summit, both sides reaffirmed their strong support for the rules-based international order and appraised the implementation of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA).<sup>29</sup> The European Council furthermore showed a united stance towards Russia, condemning the country's violation of international law and emphasising the non-recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea.<sup>30</sup>

Concerning EU-Turkey relations, the European Council condemned Turkey's unilateral military action in North East Syria and all Member States halted their arms exports to Turkey. It furthermore affirmed its "full solidarity with Cyprus" while deeming Turkey's drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean illegal.<sup>31</sup>

***"The European Council expresses serious concerns over Turkey's current illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and deplors that Turkey has not yet responded to the EU's repeated calls to cease such activities."***

***- European Council Conclusions 20 June 2019***

### Single Market: pushing a key item of economic governance

***"The Single Market should be further deepened and strengthened [...] remaining barriers must be removed [...] and no new ones created."***

***- European Council Conclusions 21 and 22 March 2019***

The Heads of State or Government emphasized the need for a further deepening and strengthening of the single market, which is considered as "one of the great achievements of the Union"<sup>32</sup>. They demand remaining unjustified barriers to the single market to be removed. A particular emphasis has been put on the development of a service economy and on mainstreaming digital services and deepening the Capital Markets Union and Energy Union. Furthermore, the European Council invites the Commission to develop a long-term action plan for an enhanced implementation and enforcement of Single Market rules by March 2020. The European Union should moreover step up investment in research and innovation in order to remain globally competitive in key technologies and strategic value chains.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> European Council (2019). Joint statement of the 26th EU-Japan summit.

(<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2019/04/25/joint-statement-of-the-26th-eu-japan-summit/>)

<sup>30</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 and 21 March 2019

<sup>31</sup> European Council Conclusions, 20 June 2019

<sup>32</sup> European Council Conclusions, 13 December 2018

<sup>33</sup> European Council Conclusions, 21 and 22 March 2019



## **As master of Enlargement: delaying negotiations for the Balkan accession**

The European Union has constantly grown in size since the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the latest example being the accession of Croatia in 2013. Several countries are still aiming to join the Union. However, in recent years, in some Member States the openness to further enlargements of the European Union has been shrinking. ‘Enlargement fatigue’ is a key notion of the respective Zeitgeist. On opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, the European Council has been unable to find a compromise and decided to “revert to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May 2020.”<sup>34</sup> During a video conference on 26 March 2020 the members of the European Council finally agreed to start accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.<sup>35</sup>

## **Dimensions and lessons for research and teaching**

Besides giving an overview over the European Council’s activities in 2019, this report should also provide information and insights for a more detailed analysis and assessment of evidence using five different dimensions which we see as useful for our academic activities: history, real world functions, internal patterns of decision-making, impact on the EU’s institutional architecture and lessons for teaching and research.

### *(1) Links to the History Dimension: history making decisions and path dependency*

The United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union has definitely been an event which can be called historic. Never before has a Member State left the union. Thus, the Withdrawal Agreement can thus be defined as a history making decision. As climate change is one of the most pressing issues in generations, the European Council agreement could be seen as major decisions to frame the governance of this polity field. In exercising the role as collective voice for positions concerning international events and framing policies for the internal market this key institution followed a path that has already been put down by earlier generations of leaders.

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<sup>34</sup> European Council Conclusions, 17 and 18 October 2019

<sup>35</sup> European Council (2019). Joint statement of the Members of the European Council, 26 March 2019.

(<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43076/26-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf>)



(2) For analysing real world functions

**For our teaching agenda we could use following key words:**

- **Political leadership by defining ‘general directions and priorities’: a new strategic agenda 2019-2024**
- **Deepening: The Constitutional architect**
  - **Conference on the Future of Europe**
  - **Deepening of Economic and Monetary Union and Single Market**
- **Widening: The Master of Enlargement:**
  - **Brexit postponement**
  - **Accession application of Albania and North Macedonia**
- **Economic Governance: Towards a ‘gouvernement économique’**
  - **Digitalisation of the economy**
  - **competitiveness in key technologies and strategic value chains**
  - **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**
- **External Action: In Search of a Coherent and Effective Global Role**
  - **United stance against Russian annexation of Crimea**
  - **Strong condemnation of Turkish unilateral military action in North East Syria and drilling activities in the Mediterranean**
- **The Area of Freedom, Security and Justice: Pre-Constitutional and Pre-Legislative Functions**
  - **Migration: support for Member States facing the most serious challenges**
- **Framing Future Policies:**
  - **Define the “general political directions and priorities” of the Union (Art 15(1) TEU)**

(3) internal decision-making: patterns of consensus and dissent

As a perennial issue for understand the European Council we need to explain if and why the Heads of State and Government find a consensus (or not) showed during the Brexit negotiations and criticizing Russia’s actions in Eastern Ukraine show a high degree of unity. In many of these issues we observe an attitude of compromise. Outgoing president Donald Tusk furthermore played a crucial role in facilitating consensus by holding a large amount of private consultations with the Member State’s leaders.

However, the failure to agree on a common migration policy, as well as France blocking the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, document again, that dissent is not exceptional in some major issues. Another example of conflict amongst Member States is the climate policy, with Poland insisting on an opt-out clause regarding the implementation of the goals formulated for climate neutrality. Heads of State or Government further postponed the decision on the Budgetary



Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness as part of the deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union. Here, we can observe a typical pattern: To prevent dissent, the EUCO has delegated the task to other institutions (here the Euro-summit).

For studying this crucial part of the European Council, we draw the attention to the stronger tendencies of group building: Besides the Visegrád group<sup>36</sup>, the Hansa Group has gained importance<sup>37</sup> and the Franco German cooperation (or its limits and deficits) remains crucial and deserves a closer look.

#### *(4) Impact on the EU's institutional architecture: reconfirming its key role*

The impacts the European Council's actions in 2019 had on the EU's institutional architecture reconfirmed its key role. The EU's top job decisions, in particular the new President of the European Commission has strengthened the European Council vis-à-vis the European Parliament. We need to observe whether the more pluralistic (or fragmented) European Parliament will be able to "strike back", e.g. by blocking a decision by the EU Heads of States or Government, such as for the upcoming MFF.

#### *(5) Lessons for teaching and research*

This report might create stimulating and new opportunities on for teaching and research. In particular, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, as the first time in history a Member State leaves the union, will definitely lead to extensive research and a reflection on traditional theoretical approaches. The concept of the *ever closer union*<sup>38</sup> might also be debated in a potential Conference on the Future of Europe, during which questions about the *finalité* of the EU might arise. For analysing the past and ongoing negotiations, a wide and different set of theoretical approaches could be used to identify and explain typical patterns of (international and European) bargaining: We need to identify national interests (including the final flexibility for each Head), the role of the presidency to facilitate cohesion and consensus, coalition (or alliance) building and perhaps some kind of power exercised by a Franco-German couple as a 'hegemon'.<sup>39</sup> Of specific interest for further research is to analyse the narratives

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<sup>36</sup> Göllner, Ralf Thomas. "The Visegrád group—a rising star post-Brexit? Changing distribution of power in the European Council." *Open Political Science* 1.1 (2017): 1-6.

<sup>37</sup> Kuusik, Piret, and Kristi Raik. "The Nordic-Baltic region in the EU: A loose club of friends." (2018).

<sup>38</sup> Dinan, Desmond (2005). *Ever closer union: an introduction to European integration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>39</sup> TRACK Policy Brief 1 The European Council at the end of 2019 New faces – traditional patterns?



the European Council frames over longer period for relevant policy fields and for the Union's finalité overall.<sup>40</sup>

***Three potential opportunities for teaching and research are:***

- ***Theoretical Approaches for studying an ever closer union (or finalité) of the EU***
- ***Withdrawal of the United Kingdom: a next step towards a Multi-Speed Europe***
- ***“Spitzenkandidat process” – a lasting point of conflict between the European Council and Parliament?***

## Conclusions

2019 has been an important year in the development of the EU, the European Council's activities in that year are documented in the key words mentioned above. These had some probably long-lasting effects, such as the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union and its implications on new alliances (e.g. the Hansa Group) or potential future conflicts between the European Council and Parliament as a consequence of the Spitzenkandidat conflict. Many of the issues on the agenda of the European Council in 2019 (and in fact discussed in this report) will most likely re-appear in 2020, such as the MFF, the European Green New Deal and the “never-ending story” of the future relationship between the EU and the UK. With the Corona crisis the role of the European Council has certainly also gained specific attention for further research and teaching.<sup>41</sup>

If this report can be characterized as an analysis and assessment of the Union's architecture in times of the ‘old normalcy’, the next report will discuss if and in how far the European Council has changed in a period which some call the ‘new normalcy’.

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<sup>40</sup> See: e.g. Wessels, Wolfgang (2020). Narratives Matter: In search of a partnership strategy. IPC-Mercator Policy Brief.

<sup>41</sup> See: TRACK Policy Brief 3.



### Find out more...

- ▶ Weidenfeld, Werner; Wessels, Wolfgang (2020): [Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration](#). Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- ▶ Weidenfeld, Werner; Wessels, Wolfgang (2020): Europa von A bis Z. Taschenbuch der Europäischen Integration. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

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