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The European Council

July-December 2019

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TRACK Teaching and Researching
the European Council

TRACK Semi-Annual Report: a short overview.

The European Council from July – December 2019



The European Council remained a significant object for research and teaching. This document aims to offer a factual overview of the activities in the second half of 2019 as well as an analysis and assessment to stimulate discussions on this institution of the political leaders.

Highlights were:

- The elections and nominations of the EU's top jobs
- The European Green Deal
- The Brexit negotiations

This report will list the meetings held by Heads of State or Government and provide a brief analysis on the major topics discussed by the European Council in the second half of 2019. For a more detailed analysis we advise you to have a look at our [Annual Report](#) available on our website.



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Table 1: European Council meetings July-December 2019

30 June – 02 July 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

In the second half of 2019, a variety of important issues stood on the agenda of Heads of State or government. Some of them were already major topic during previous summits, others newly came up after the election to the European Parliament in May 2019.

The European Council as electoral body: A comprehensive package

President of the European Commission (Art. 17 TEU): Nomination of Ursula von der Leyen

President of the European Council (Art. 15 TEU): Election of Charles Michel

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) (Art. 18 TEU):

Nomination of Josep Borrell Fontelles

President of the European Central Bank (Art. 283 TFEU): Nomination of Christine Lagarde

The second half of 2019 began with a special meeting of the European Council, discussing the the EU's top jobs. After the elections to the European parliament, the European Council had to fulfil its treaty obligations to act as electoral body. It 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 insisting on the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and the European Council being more critical towards it as many of the Heads of State or Government see it as a loss of power to the parliament. Even though a qualified majority would have been sufficient for nominating candidates for the EU's top jobs (Art 7 (7) TEU), Heads of State or Government tried to reach for a broad consensus, taking into account gender, geography and party affiliation. After reservations by the Visègrad-states against the first compromise candidate Frans Timmermans, leaders agreed on the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission. They furthermore appointed Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel as



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president of the European Council, Spanish foreign minister Josep Borell Fontelles as High Representative and French IMF Chair Christine Lagarde as new president of the European Central Bank. The European Council was able to act efficiently and effectively with a short delay. In terms of the institutional balance the political leaders re-established its powers vis-à-vis the European Parliament.

Brexit: a strong consensus among the EU27

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

Another major issue for the Heads of State or Government has been the ongoing negotiations on the terms of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. EU27 gave the impression of great unity and were able to quickly find consensus multiple times. The revised political declaration,¹ 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.² 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.³ The consequences of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union on the European Council are still to be seen. It is however very likely that governments sceptical of further European integration, such as Denmark and the Visegrád Group could lose some backing and a strengthening of the Franco-German tandem is likely. New alliances, such as the Dutch-led "Hansa Group" will potentially gain importance as well.⁴

¹ 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)

² Special European Council, Art. 50, 17.10.2019. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2019/10/17/art50/>)

³ 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/>)

⁴ 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>)





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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)

Climate Change

Climate change as one of the most pressing issues of current times has also been one of the main topics in the runup to the European parliament elections and thus emerged as one of the major issues for the European Council in the second half of 2019. All but one Member State 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.”⁵ The European Council further agreed to come back to the issue of Poland⁶, as the sole Member State, which sees itself, unable to reach these targets, in June 2020.

“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)

Migration

Migration has been a slightly less important topic for the European Council than in the previous years after it had already agreed on continuing its restrictive policy and Heads of State or Government were

⁵ European Council Conclusions, 12 December 2019

⁶ Tamma, Paolo (2019). EU fails to find unanimity on 2050 climate neutrality goal (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-fails-to-find-unanimity-on-2050-climate-neutrality-goal/>)



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once again unable to agree on a reform of the Dublin Regulation or the Common European Asylum System. EU-leaders nonetheless committed themselves to address the refugee crisis in the light of evolving events, supporting the most affected Member States.⁷

“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

Enlargement

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.”⁸ 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.⁹

Conclusions and lessons

The above-mentioned decisions by the European Council will most likely have long-lasting effects on the future of the EU. The United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the union is not only an event of historic dimensions but also has the potential to change alliances within the European Council. The Spitzenkandidat conflict might lead to potential future conflicts between the European Council and the European Parliament and the European Green Deal could become nothing less than Europe’s answer to climate change. Many of these topics will however re-appear in 2020, combined with the new issue of rebuilding the EU’s economy after the Covid 19-Pandemic. The European Council has once again shown that it is a key institution and most certainly gained specific attention for further research and teaching.

⁷ European Council Conclusions, 17 and 18 October 2019

⁸ European Council Conclusions, 17 and 18 October 2019

⁹ 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>)



Various lessons for teaching and research emerged in the second half of 2019. 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 as it will definitely have an impact on the future development of the union as well as on internal alliance-building inside the European Council. Of specific interest for further research is to analyse the narratives the European Council frames over longer period for relevant policy fields, such as climate change - one of the most pressing issues of current times.



Find out more...

- ▶ TRACK Annual Report No. 1: The European Council in 2019 – a key institution in dynamic operation.
- ▶ 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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