

The Committee of Permanent Representatives

The Council is assisted in its ongoing affairs by a committee made up of permanent diplomatic representatives from the Member States, called Coreper, and by a number of expert working groups.

Coreper consists of two levels : Coreper I and Coreper II.

Coreper I is made up of Deputy Permanent Representatives to the EU (the Deputy Ambassadors of each Member State) and manages preparatory and technical matters for all Councils other than those which fall under the responsibility of Coreper II.

Coreper II consists of the Permanent Representatives to the EU (the Ambassadors of each Member State). This body addresses political and external affairs issues arising in the General Affairs, Ecofin and Development Councils; and those connected with areas which emerged under the single institutional framework, and under the intergovernmental cooperation of the CFSP and JHA.

Coreper, as a whole, is responsible for administering committees or working groups convened, when necessary, to study specific issues. It is also responsible for two additional committees established after the ratification of the TEU – the Political Committee and the K4 Committee – which are responsible for preparatory matters falling under the CFSP and JHA. The Political Committee, which consists of Political Directors, addresses issues related to the CFSP, while the K4 Committee, a Coordinating Committee consisting of senior officials and enshrined in Article K.4 of the TEU, reports on JHA matters still under intergovernmental cooperation.

All of these committees and working groups consist of experts, who are most of the time national civil servants from Government departments of the Member States, or officials from the Member States' Permanent Representations to the EU. They are charged with the primary task of negotiating the details of particular proposals submitted by the Commission and reporting to the appropriate Coreper. Coreper, in turn, continues the negotiations and reaches agreement, when attainable, on the proposals.

Despite the fact that the Council will usually decide accordingly the agreement reached at the Coreper, the two levels of Coreper cannot as such approve decisions having budgetary implications. The objective behind delegating preliminary work in this manner is to avoid the discussion of straightforward and negotiable issues at the ministerial level. This method reserves debate by the Ministers in the Council for contentious issues; matters of a purely political nature or

requiring higher level of discussion.

The Commission is represented at all Coreper and working groups meetings. The scrutiny of the proposal begins within the working group, where Member States' views are reflected by the national civil servants. The political problems that Coreper cannot solve are first identified. After addressing the technical aspects of the proposals, the file is sent to Coreper. Coreper will then try to reach texts that all, or a qualified majority, of Member States can accept.

Interaction between the Commission and the national civil servants within these bodies therefore serves a twofold purpose: national views are reflected to some extent by the Commission (which represents the Community interest, thus the views of all Member States), but every national administration is also confronted with the views of the Commission (the "Community" position) and of the other national administrations.

Experts of working groups also function as a conduit. They are the "eyes and ears" of their national governments by advising on the views of other Member States and the Commission on particular proposals. Their influence on the final decision-making of the Council is arguable. While they are often more closely attuned to what is "politically" possible in terms of the development of a particular proposal, their actual ability to influence the final positions taken at the highest level of decision-making will vary depending on the area, the particular Ministers involved at the Council level, and the extent of internal negotiations which take place within the Council.

The items on the agenda for Council meetings are separated into two categories: "A" items and "B" items. "A" items are matters upon which prior agreement has been reached within Coreper, and which require Council approval without the need for further debate at the ministerial level. "B" items have also been addressed in Coreper and Council working group meetings, but agreement has not been reached at this level. A full debate is thus required at the ministerial level by the Council responsible for the relevant subject areas.

Council Activities in Community Affairs

In the Community context, the Council's primary function is to ensure the objectives set out in the Community Treaties are attained. This requires the proper coordination of the Member States' general economic policies and the adoption of decisions relating to the Community policies. The Council's decisions are taken on the basis of Commission proposals and in compliance with the appropriate decision-making procedures as determined by the nature of the proposal. Most of the time, the Council endorses the recommendations