



## STUDY PROGRAMME

1. POL  
2. MATA

## ACADEMIC YEAR

2021 - 2022

## SEMESTER

Second

## COURSE TITLE

The European Council : A Real World Analysis of the Leaders' Institution through Practical Exercises and Insider Insights

## COURSE PROFESSOR

Wolfgang Wessels

## COURSE ASSISTANT

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## NATURE OF COURSE (COMPULSORY, OPTIONAL)

1. Optional  
2. Optional

## LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

English

## ECTS CREDITS

5

## 1. COURSE OBJECTIVE

The objectives of the course follow a quadruple 'A' approach:

- a. Analysing
  - i. how the European Council has evolved over several decades, both in legal words like in the real world
  - ii. how it exercises power inside the EU institutional architecture and
  - iii. how power is distributed within this club of European leaders
- b. Assessing strong and weak features of
  - i. its performance in several central areas of public policies and
  - ii. its procedures and patterns of getting to consensual agreements and/or to decide by
  - iii. limits of qualified majority voting (QMV)
- c. Advising
  - i. how the performance (efficiency and effectiveness) as well as
  - ii. democratic legitimacy of these institutions could be improved
- d. Acting : Learning professional skills
  - I. Simulating a summit
  - II. Preparing policy papers like a draft conclusion



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# ECTS CARD

The European Council is an intriguing institution to study. It is both fascinating as frustrating. From the early summits onwards, the Heads of State or Government prepared and concluded many history-making decisions that shaped the Union's constitutional and geographic architecture. Since its creation in 1974, the European Council has regularly exercised major system- and policy-making functions. In this institution, national leaders have agreed on treaty revisions, on accession agreements and have also acted as the ultimate decision-makers on a state-like agenda of public policies, including the EU's external action. The European Council's activities, agreements and acts have thus dealt with the most contested issues of Europe's history from the 1970s onwards. Since 2008, the 'Union's highest executive leaders' (Van Rompuy 2012) have once more increased the institution's authority, using it to react to global financial crises, stabilise the Eurozone, and deal with the refugee waves, the Brexit and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

A closer look at the European Council's functioning and performance leads to a stimulating and controversial debate on the nature and impact of the institution itself. At the same time, this body is key to analysing the institutional architecture and political dynamics of the EU system and discussing the overall finalité of the multi-level polity. Political leaders and academics alike have described the European Council as the 'supreme political authority of the EU' (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006; see also Giscard d'Estaing 2003) or as the 'informal centre of the big, strategic decisions' (Van Rompuy 2010: 4; see also Tindemans 1975: 14). Some have even proposed the label 'European government' (cf. Fischer 2000 ; see also Monnet 1976 : 592; Gillissen 2011: 105-123), which acts as the 'principal decision-maker' (De Schoutheete and Micossi: 2013: 1) and disposes of an 'overall political leadership on all EU affairs' (Piris 2010: 208.). With the leader's agenda (from 2017) the members of the European Council have again claimed their role in the institutional architecture of the EU system. The European Council also plays a significant part in the debate on the development of a 'post democratic executive federalism' (Habermas 2012: 12). As relevant as this key institution is we have fewer studies than on other EU bodies (e.g. EP, Commission and Court). Also theoretical approaches to explain the evolution of this institution are already stimulating but in many ways still limited.

This course thus takes a specific interest in the role of this key institution. With the quadruple 'A' approach, it pursues a course strategy for debating its evidence-based role in regard to several theoretical and normative approaches.

Collectively, the course will place the European Council within the larger EU architecture and its balance of power. We will explain the Member States' strategies to maintain their leadership over the European integration process. With this aim, it will deepen the role of the European Council through significant moments of the history of European integration and, more specifically, on the role of the European Council as crisis management in the Corona pandemic. How do Member states exercise leadership over the EU architecture? What are the relations between the European Council and the other EU institutions and national administrations? -especially to the EP and the Commission. We will argue that simple answers- e.g. following a simplified intergovernmental reading – are to be discussed.

Individually, this course examines the relative positions of different Member States within the European Council and tries to identify how national officials make use of this system to reach outcomes in line with their preferences. Claims such as the existence of a 'Directoire' of large Member States, especially of a Franco-German leadership or even of German hegemony, are scrutinised, along with the role of individual national leaders, such as the German Chancellor as well as the impact of national elections on the European leadership (e.g. the case 'Post-Merkel epoch').



Conversely, we examine the fundamental transformations that the involvement of national leaders has made on European statehood.

Thanks to the interactive teaching method, the debates and simulation games, and the discussions with practitioners and experts, students will be able to exercise and adapt presentation, analytical and writing skills that will prove to be an asset for their future professional careers.

## 2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

These learning outcomes link up with the following programme-specific learning outcomes:

- Students possess a pluri-disciplinary understanding of European integration, allowing them to understand fully the nature, dynamics and functioning of the EU system;
- Students have a general knowledge of the main components of the EU political system: institutions, actors, decision-making procedures, competences and policies;
- Students comprehend the disciplinary knowledge and theories specific to EU studies;
- Students possess an in-depth knowledge of fundamental aspects of the EU political system (institutions, actors, policies etc.);
- Students develop a concrete understanding of the logics of policy-making and negotiations within the EU political system, thanks to simulation exercises and the drafting of policy papers;
- Students recognize the normative assumptions and implications of theories of European integration;
- Students can recognize, contextualize, explain, and interpret political, societal and economic phenomena in European integration. They can assess events, governance problems and political crises;
- Students can analyse the process and actors of EU policy-making at different levels of governance and can reflect on potential developments;
- Students can transform a complex problem into a research question, mobilize theories, develop a research design, and conduct empirical work to provide solutions in an analytical and balanced way;
- Students can flexibly apply theories and analytical frameworks from different disciplinary perspectives to the main issues of EU politics and policies;
- Students are able to analyse, in a limited amount of time, complex and new issues, by finding and investigating various sources of information and delivering an analytical and critical synthesis;
- Students are capable of working as part of a complex project, individually or collectively, and they develop skills of planning, organisation, prioritisation and time management;
- Students can communicate clearly and effectively, through oral presentations or written documents, to different kinds of audiences;
- Students are capable of evolving in a multi-cultural context and of taking into account the variety of political systems, institutional logics and cultural backgrounds;

For MATA students, the following MATA programme-specific learning outcomes are relevant:

- The graduate is capable of processing a large amount of information and appropriately analyse relevant sources depending on his or her disciplinary focus within a short period of



time and of suggesting possible actions that contribute to problem-solving in a creative way;

### 3. COURSE CONTENTS

The course will be taught over blocks:

Block 1: The Political and Academic relevance: Basic features of this key institution and multiple approaches for understanding role(s) like the The Presidency model, the Council model and the Fusion model; a survey on current academic approaches

Block 2: The Pre-History and History of the European Council: from the fifties to 2016 – generations of leaders and the institutional trajectory; the evolution of the leaders' summits

Block 3: The performance of the European Council in central areas of the EU procedures and policies: the role as constitutional architect in treaty revisions, accession and the Brexit as well as *gouvernement économique*, the European voice for external action, and practicing pre-constitutional and pre-legislative functions in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice; managing crises: the Eurozone and the migration challenge

Block 4: Shifting the institutional balance towards a horizontal fusion: the relations with the other institutions inside the EU architecture. The Spitzenkandidaten Procedure: experiences and future of an experiment

Block 5: Inside the European Council: the Dynamics and constraints of decision making – QMV, the puzzle of consensus formation; the administrative infrastructure; new and old cleavages and coalitions: east vs west; prosperous vs less prosperous members

Block 6: Conclusions on the role the institution and Perspectives – especially the Rise and Decline of the European Council in five scenarios – including the potential impacts of Brexit;

An additional session with real actors from the Council Secretariat, the European Parliament and/or permanent representations is envisaged.

### 4. TEACHING METHOD(S)

The professor has an interactive way of teaching, and the course will allow for intensive group debates based on preparatory readings. A schedule is provided before the course begins, and the designated students are expected to prepare for each class by reading the required readings (a specific bibliography will be provided to the students). For each session one student will be asked to act as an 'expert' to guide our discussion along with the professor. More details will be provided.

During the course students have to deliver a written assignment where they are expected to analyze relevant institutional and political trends in the European Council relying also on the main theories discussed during the course or deliver a practical work like drafting a conclusion for the European Council or drafting policy briefs.

Oxford style debates or situation games will be organized on topic suggested by the professor and the students themselves.



## 5. COURSE MATERIAL

Please refer to the detailed course outline for full reading list.

## 6. EVALUATION

Students are required to draft an academic paper/policy paper, to participate to debates, as well as pass a final oral examination.

There are three components of course assessment

### 1. Written assignment (30%)

Students are supposed to write an individual short assignment. on a specific issue on the research agenda on the European Council or presenting a policy paper on a topical debate taking place. The topic will be discussed with the professor.

### 2. Debate & Simulation Game (20%)

As the course will be interactive students should participate in an active way. Oxford-style debates and simulation games will be organised during the course on specific subjects. Students will be asked to participate in the expert activity and the EUCO Simulation Game to defend a specific position using the empirical as well as practical knowledge developed during the course.

### 3. Oral exam (50%)

The exam consists of a discussion with the Professor. The professor will start with questions concerning the paper and then continue with issues of the course as debated during the sessions.<sup>1</sup>

### Assessment at second attempt

During the second examination session the course is assessed 100% on the basis of a written resit exam.

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<sup>1</sup> The evaluation modalities of the final exam may be subject to adaptations in function of the evolution of the sanitary situation.)