



## STUDY PROGRAMME

1. POL  
2. MATA

## ACADEMIC YEAR

2023 - 2024

## 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 as the key institution of the EU -System has evolved over its fifty years, 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- e.g. economic and foreign policy governance
  - ii. its role as crisis manager managing -especially in dealing with the global climate challenges the migration waves, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war
  - iii. its procedures and patterns of getting to consensual agreements and/or to decide by
  - iv. limits of qualified majority voting (QMV)
- c. Advising
  - i. how the performance (efficiency and effectiveness) of its work as well as democratic legitimacy of this institution could be improved
- d. Acting: Learning professional skills



- I. Simulating a summit on the European Council's adoption of the Strategic agenda 2024 - 2029
- II. Preparing policy papers like a draft conclusion of the European Council on a specific issue

The European Council is an intriguing institution to study. It is both fascinating and 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 as crisis manager, using it to react to global financial crises, stabilise the Eurozone, and deal with the refugee waves, the Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine. 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 Schoutete and Micossi: 2013: 1) and disposes of an 'overall political leadership on all EU affairs' (Piris 2010: 208.). With the leader's strategic agenda 2014 and 2019 the members of the European Council have again claimed a dominant role in the EU's institutional architecture. 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, it is less studied than other EU bodies (e.g. EP, Commission and Court). Theory-oriented studies used to explain the evolution of this institution, however stimulating, remain 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 look at 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 a crisis management body in climate and migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. 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 (particularly the EP and the Commission)? In assessing the balance of power within the EU's architecture, we will argue that the traditional dichotomy between a simplified intergovernmental and supranational reading are to be discussed.

Individually, this course examines the relative power positions of different Member States within the European Council and tries to identify how national leaders make use of this system to reach outcomes in line with their own national 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 Merkel, Macron or Orban.

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's multi-level system;
- Students have a general knowledge of the main components of the EU political system: institutions, actors, decision-making procedures, competences and policies;
- 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 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 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: Challenges on the political agenda and basic features of this key institution and multiple approaches for understanding role(s) like the Presidency model, the Council model and the Fusion model; a survey on current academic approaches

Block 2: The Pre-History till 1974 and the History of the European Council until 2024 – 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; and as a special focus\_ managing crises: the Eurozone crises, the climate and migration challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine



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; the impact of crises on the institutional balance

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; the French /German hegemony

Block 6: Conclusions and future Perspectives – especially the Rise and Decline of the European Council in five scenarios. A simulation game on the drafting a strategic agenda by the European Council for the period 2024 -2029

The course also envisages to deliver real world insights by real actors from the Council Secretariat, the European Parliament and/or permanent representations.

## 4. TEACHING METHOD(S)

The professor has an interactive way of teaching, and the course will allow for intensive group discussions based on preparatory readings of individual students, the so called 'experts'. 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.

## 5. COURSE MATERIAL

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

## 6. EVALUATION

Students are required to draft an academic paper or a policy paper, to actively participate in the class and in the simulation game as well as pass a final oral examination.

There are two components of course assessment:

### 1. Debate & Simulation Game (50%)

As the course will be interactive, students should participate in an active way. Students will be asked to participate as expert and in the EUCO Simulation Game.

### 2. Oral exam (50%)

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

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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.)



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# ECTS CARD

## Assessment at second attempt

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