



# How *the* EU WORKS

*This leaflet is a brief guide to the institutions of the European Union (EU) and how decisions are made by the EU. It is one of a series of leaflets which are designed to provide information about the EU to people living in Ireland.*





## MEMBERS OF THE EU

There are 27 Member States of the European Union (EU). These are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The EU has an agreement called the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement with Iceland, Norway and Leichtenstein. This agreement means that many of the rights of citizens of the EU also apply in these countries. The EU has a separate agreement with Switzerland which means that Swiss citizens also have many of the same rights. None of these countries is a member of the EU and so is not involved in the decision making of the EU.

## THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE EU

The EU is governed by a number of institutions which have specific roles. The institutions are the Council of Ministers, the European Council, the Commission, the European Parliament, the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Auditors.

## THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS AND THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

The Council is composed of a Minister from each Member State - there are Councils to cover various areas, for example, Agriculture Council, Environment Council. When heads of government meet they are called the European Council. Councils, other than the Foreign Affairs Council, are chaired by the representative from the country which holds the six month rotating presidency. The Foreign Affairs Council is chaired by the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The Council of Ministers makes all the decisions on EU policies and laws. Most of these decisions are made in conjunction with the European Parliament.

The European Council has a full time President who presides at its meetings.

## THE COMMISSION

The Commission consists of 27 people - each is nominated by the governments of the Member States. Once appointed, Commissioners are not expected to act as representatives of their countries but in the wider EU interest.

Commissioners are appointed for 5 year terms.

Each Commissioner has responsibility for an area or areas of EU activities.

The main functions of the Commission are:

- It proposes policy and legislation; in most cases, the Commission is the body with the sole right to make proposals. The Commission does not make the final decision on these proposals; this is done by the Council and the European Parliament.
- It implements EU policies and programmes. These policies include policies in relation to agriculture, consumer policy, environmental policy, policy on asylum and immigration. Policies are usually implemented in conjunction with the governments of the Member States. In general, the Commission sets out the overall implementation rules and monitors their detailed implementation by the governments of the Member States.
- It ensures that EU laws are respected; if a Member State fails to abide by EU rules, the Commission has various powers to ensure that they do so, including, if necessary, taking the State to the European Court of Justice.



## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected by the people entitled to vote in the 27 Member States. Ireland elected 12 MEPs in 2009. The division of the country into constituencies is decided by the Irish government.

### *Laws and Policies*

The European Parliament makes many of the major policy and legislative decisions jointly with the Council. So, for example, it is the joint decision maker in relation to policy and laws which affect the environment, consumer rights and employee rights. The Parliament and the Council of Ministers exercise joint control over the EU Budget. The Parliament has a limited role in some areas, for example, foreign and defence policies.

## EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) interprets the Treaties governing the EU and rules on whether or not Member States comply with them.

## EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS

The *European Court of Auditors* audits the EU's expenditure and accounts.



## OTHER BODIES OF THE EU

The *European Central Bank* is the monetary authority for the countries in which the euro is the currency – at present, they are Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

The *European Investment Bank* provides funds for investment in programmes in different Member States.

## ADVISORY BODIES

The *European Economic and Social Committee* is an advisory committee composed of representatives of the social partners who are nominated by the national governments. The Committee must be consulted by the Commission on a number of issues particularly in the social field. There are 9 Irish representatives on the Committee.

The *Committee of the Regions* is an advisory committee composed of representatives of regional and local government. Ireland has 9 members on this and they are chosen from among members of local authorities.

## HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE

The decision making process is quite complex and differs in many respects from the national government process.



The legal status of the decisions depends on what type of instrument is used. The main ones are:-

**Directives:** Directives are legally binding on the Member States. They set out the end to be achieved and the date by which it must be achieved but leave it to the national governments to decide on the means. Usually they must be brought into effect by laws passed in national parliaments but individuals can sometimes rely on them even if this has not been done. In some cases, if a national government fails to implement a Directive, an individual may sue the government for damages resulting from the government's failure.

**Regulations:** Regulations are also binding on the Member States. They do not usually need to be specifically brought into national legislation. If national laws are in conflict with a Regulation then the Regulation overrules the national law.

**Decisions:** These may be addressed to an individual, an organisation or a Member State. They are legally binding on the person/people to whom they are addressed.

**Recommendations:** These are not binding and have moral force only.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

### *European Commission Representation in Ireland*

The European Commission has Representation offices in each of the Member States. The Irish office is at:

European Union House,  
18 Dawson Street, Dublin 2

Tel: **(01) 634 1111**

[www.euireland.ie](http://www.euireland.ie)

This office provides an information service and a legal advisory service on citizens' rights.

### *The European Parliament Office in Ireland*

This office provides information on the European Parliament's role and powers, on Irish MEPs and their activities, and on issues currently being considered by the Parliament.

43 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2.

Tel **(01) 605 7900**

<http://www.europarl.ie>

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