
EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS: WHAT THEY ARE & WHAT THEY DO

PRE-READING

Do you know the answers to the following questions?

1. What is a commissioner?
2. How is the Council of Ministers different from the European Council?
3. Where is the European Parliament located?
4. Can a member state of the EU be taken to court?
5. Who keeps track of how EU money is spent?
6. What does the European Central Bank do?

READING

TASK 1: READ THE FOLLOWING TEXT AND MAKE NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Spread across the heart of Europe the institutions of the European Union form the framework for co-operation between the 27 member states. As well as the high-profile Parliament, Commission and Central Bank, the EU relies on a number of smaller bodies to keep it running. In addition, there are a raft of agencies across the continent dedicated to every aspect of European life. Use this guide to find out where they are and what they do.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The European Commission is more than simply a civil service for the European Union, it is the only body that can propose legislation. It is sometimes seen as the driving force behind European integration but the member states both guide and limit its activity. The commission is made up of 27 **commissioners** - the president and 26 others, each with responsibility for a policy area, such as agriculture or enlargement. Commissioners are appointed by the member states, and are usually senior politicians. However, their job is to act in the general European interest, not to advance the interests of their own country. The number of commissioners will change in 2014 under the Lisbon Treaty. From 2014 only two-thirds of member states will have a commissioner at any one time - so all will have a commissioner for 10 years out of every 15.

What is a commissioner?

COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

The Council of Ministers is the EU institution which represents the EU member states. It is a many-headed creature and may bring together government ministers from each country, heads of government, ambassadors, or merely government officials. Many decisions are made by officials meeting in technical committees and are then merely rubber-stamped by ministers. Unlike the Commission, the Council of Ministers is not a supranational body but an intergovernmental one. It should not be confused with the **European Council**, which is the name given to the regular meetings - sometimes called summits - of the EU member states' heads of state or government.

Council of Ministers

European Council

Text adapted from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/europe/04/eu_institutions/html/introduction.stm

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The parliament is the only directly elected body in the European Union. It holds regular *plenary sessions* in Strasbourg, and has a *secretariat* in Luxembourg, but members of the parliament do most of their work in Brussels. This is where they examine draft legislations in committees and consult with the Commission and Council of Ministers. The parliament has the power to sack the Commission, it holds hearings on new commissioners, and has the last word on about half the spending in the EU annual budget. Its powers have been steadily increasing. Most EU legislation now needs the approval of both parliament and the Council of Ministers before it becomes law.

Location

Powers

COURT OF JUSTICE

The court rules on disputes over EU treaties and other EU legislation. Its decisions are binding on EU institutions and member states. A member state may be taken to court for failing to meet its obligations under EU law. Big fines can be imposed for non-compliance with the court's rulings. The court hears actions brought by individuals seeking damages from European institutions, or the annulment of EU legislation which directly concerns them. It also clarifies points of European law at the request of courts in member states. It is made up of senior judges from each member state, who hold office for a renewable term of six years.

Structure

Responsibilities

COURT OF AUDITORS

The Court of Auditors is meant to keep track of EU money so that citizens know where their money goes. Its aim is to improve the efficiency of EU financial management. The court audits the EU accounts and the implementation of the budget, providing the *European Parliament* and the *Council of Ministers* with a statement on the accounts' reliability. It also delivers opinions, when requested to do so, on the financial implications of proposed legislation. In the 1990s the court regularly revealed cases of fraud, payments made in error and other cases of spending that failed to meet its objectives.

Aim

Activities

EUROPEAN CENTRAL BANK

The bank is responsible for monetary policy within the eurozone. Its main goals are maintaining price stability and safeguarding the value of the euro. It does this together with the eurozone's 12 national central banks, by setting interest rates, conducting foreign exchange operations, and managing national foreign reserves. The ECB aims to ensure that the year-on-year increase in consumer prices is less than, but close to, 2% over the medium term. The bank is formally independent, along the lines of the German Bundesbank. When taking decision on monetary policy, neither the European Central Bank nor the national central banks are allowed to take instructions from EU institutions or member states. The ECB's own foreign reserve assets amount to 40 billion Euros.

Aims

Policies

TASK 2: ARE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS TRUE OR FALSE?

1. A Greek commissioner in an important post should, in theory, help Greece. True False
2. When the Council of Ministers meet, they don't generally go into many technical details. True False
3. The European Parliament is more powerful than the Commission. True False
4. Greece can disregard the rulings of the ECJ if they are against Greek law. True False
5. The Court of Auditors has found financial irregularities in EU spending. True False
6. The ECB is free to pursue its fiscal policy as they consider best. True False

TASK 3: WHAT DO THESE SENTENCES MEAN?

1. The member states both guide and limit [the Commission's] activity.
2. The Council of Ministers is not a supranational body but an intergovernmental one.
3. The ECJ clarifies points of European law at the request of courts in member states.
4. Its aim is to improve the efficiency of EU financial management.
5. The court revealed cases of spending that failed to meet its objectives.

VOCABULARY

TASK 1: FIND WORDS OR PHRASES IN THE TEXT THAT HAVE THE FOLLOWING MEANING

1. To give formal approval without much deliberation (CoM)
2. To listen to what an official has done / intends to do, and pose questions in order to reach a decision (EP)
3. Disobedience to the law or a treaty (ECJ)
4. To ensure that prices do not go up (ECB)

TASK 2: WHAT DO THE FOLLOWING WORDS MEAN?

1. summit
2. draft legislation
3. consult with someone
4. secretariat

TASK 3: MATCH THE WORDS TO CREATE PHRASES

monetary	sessions
financial	area
policy	policy
plenary	implications
foreign	reserves

TASK 4: COMPLETE THE SENTENCES

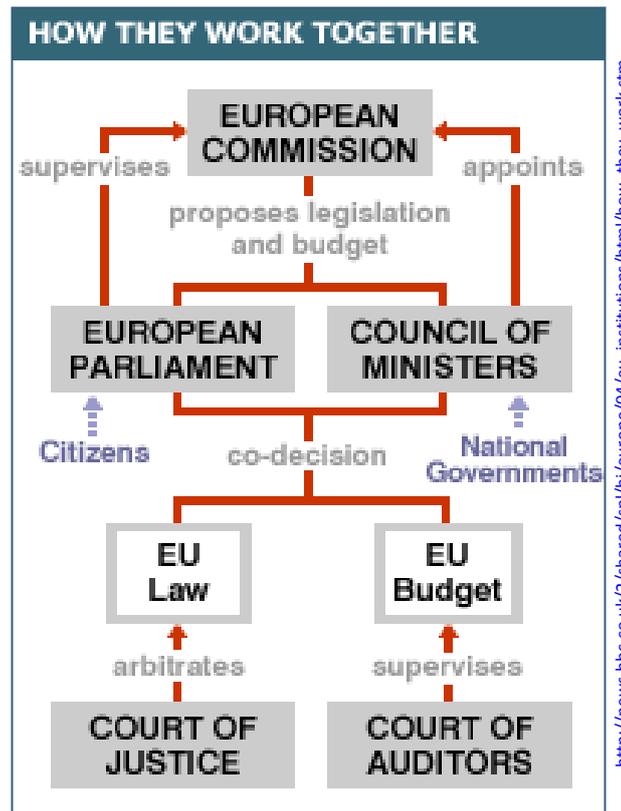
1. A member state may be taken _____ court for failing to meet its obligations _____ EU law.
2. Its decisions are binding _____ EU institutions and member states
3. The Court of Auditors is meant to keep track _____ EU money
4. The court rules _____ disputes over EU treaties and other EU legislation
5. It also delivers opinions _____ the financial implications of proposed legislation
6. The ECB's own foreign reserve assets amount _____ 40 billion Euros.

PRODUCTION TASKS

SPEAKING

Working in pairs or small groups, use the information in the following diagram to discuss how the European institutions work together to produce laws and distribute funds. Then discuss the following questions:

- In what ways are the peoples of Europe involved in these processes?
- How likely is it that a single powerful country can affect these processes to advance their own national interests?



WRITING

You will write a text describing and evaluating the legislative process of the EU and the procedures for allocating funds to various projects. Your text should:

- describe** how European institutions work with each other to produce new laws and to decide how funds will be spent (200-300 words).
- evaluate** these processes. You may want to discuss whether they are efficient, democratic or fair. You will need to justify your opinion, by referring to the text above or other suggested readings (100-200 words).

FURTHER READING

- EU institutions and other bodies, http://europa.eu/about-eu/institutions-bodies/index_en.htm
- The European Commission at work, Basic facts, http://ec.europa.eu/atwork/basicfacts/index_en.htm
- About Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/public/staticDisplay.do;jsessionid=FECB51BA55B2CBF73DBEE5103C2E00DF.node2?id=146>
- The ECB (educational info), <http://www.ecb.int/ecb/educational/html/index.en.html>