

EU institutions and other bodies

The European Union (EU) is not a federation like the United States. Nor is it simply an organisation for co-operation between governments, like the United Nations. It is, in fact, unique. The countries that make up the EU (its 'member states') remain independent sovereign nations but they pool their sovereignty in order to gain a strength and world influence none of them could have on their own.

Pooling sovereignty means, in practice, that the member states delegate some of their decision-making powers to shared institutions they have created, so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level.

The EU's decision-making process in general and the co-decision procedure in particular involve three main institutions:

- the European Parliament (EP), which represents the EU's citizens and is directly elected by them;
- the Council of the European Union, which represents the individual member states;
- the European Commission, which seeks to uphold the interests of the Union as a whole.

This 'institutional triangle' produces the policies and laws that apply throughout the EU. In principle, it is the Commission that proposes new laws, but it is the Parliament and Council that adopt them.

Two other institutions have a vital part to play: the Court of Justice upholds the rule of European law, and the Court of Auditors checks the financing of the Union's activities.

The powers and responsibilities of these institutions are laid down in the Treaties, which are the foundation of everything the EU does. They also lay down the rules and procedures that the EU institutions must follow. The Treaties are agreed by the presidents and/or prime ministers of all the EU countries, and ratified by their parliaments.

In addition to its institutions, the EU has a number of other bodies that play specialised roles:

- the European Economic and Social Committee represents civil society, employers and employees;
- the Committee of the Regions represents regional and local authorities;
- the European Investment Bank finances EU investment projects, and helps small businesses via the European Investment Fund;
- the European Central Bank is responsible for European monetary policy;
- the European Ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration by EU institutions and bodies;
- the European Data Protection Supervisor safeguards the privacy of people's personal data;
- the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities publishes information about the EU;
- the European Personnel Selection Office recruits staff for the EU institutions and other bodies;
- the European Administrative School task is to provide training in specific areas for members of EU staff.

In addition, specialised agencies have been set up to handle certain technical, scientific or management tasks.