ECTS CARD

STUDY PROGRAMME	ACADEMIC YEAR	SEMESTER
1. POL 2. MATA	2025 - 2026	First

COURSE TITLE

The European Council: A Real-World Analysis of the Leaders' Institution

COURSE PROFESSOR	COURSE ASSISTANT
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NATURE OF COURSE (COMPULSORY, OPTIONAL)	LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION
Optional	**English**

ECTS CREDITS

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1. COURSE OBJECTIVE

The European Council, as a key institution in the EU lexicon, plays a pivotal role in shaping the direction of European integration and governance. Its influence on the EU's decision-making processes and the power balance among Member States make it a crucial subject for analysis, especially when trying to understand how power is exercised within the EU's institutional architecture.

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 50 years of existence, both in legal words and in the real world;
    ii. how it exercises power inside the EU's inter-institutional architecture through relevant case studies;
    iii. how this 'club' of European leaders get to consensus on vital issues via specific patterns and procedures.

b. Assessing strong and weak features of
    i.   its performance in several central areas of EU public policies, notably economic and foreign policy governance;
    ii. its role as crisis manager managing – especially in dealing with financial and budgetary issues, migratory movements, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war;
    iii. its democratic legitimacy.

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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 session of the European Council;
 II. Preparing policy papers like draft conclusions 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 their institution's authority as crisis manager, using it to react to global financial problems, stabilise the Eurozone, deal with the large movement of refugees, the Brexit challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic and, most recently, 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.

This course takes a specific interest in the role and functions of the European Council in the EU's institutional architecture: what are its relations with the other main EU institutions, particularly the European Parliament and the European Commission, as well as with national administrations? 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 questioned.

The course also 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 that are 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 a German hegemony, are scrutinised, along with the role of individual political leaders such as Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Delors, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, or Viktor Orbán. In parallel, the roles of key EU figures of the present set-up like Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa will be examined.

Thanks to the interactive teaching method, the simulation game, and the discussions with real-world actors, students will be able to exercise and adapt oral presentations. They will develop analytical and writing skills that will prove to be an asset for their future professional careers.

2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- 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 can communicate in both French and English in an academic or professional context.

- 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 can communicate clearly and effectively, through oral presentations or written documents, to different kinds of audiences.

- Students can evolve in a multi-cultural context and of taking into account the variety of political systems, institutional logics and cultural background.

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: Introduction into the topic; the European Council: historical milestones and key developments; multiple analytical approaches for understanding role(s) like the Presidency model, the Council model and the Fusion model.

Block 2: 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: North vs. South, East vs. West; a French, German or Franco-German hegemony?

Block 3: 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. Shifting the institutional balance towards a horizontal fusion?

Block 4: Simulation of a European Council negotiation. The exercise will focus on budgetary negotiations, in particular the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), through which the European Council provides strategic guidance.

Block 5: Insights by real-world actors.

Block 6: Conclusions and future Perspectives – especially the Rise and Decline of the European Council in five scenarios.

4. TEACHING METHOD(S)

The professors have an interactive way of teaching, and the course will allow for intensive and inclusive group discussions. The discussions will be based on preparatory readings and presentations of individual students or groups of students, the so-called "experts" for the respective sessions. Case studies on the relations of the European Council with the other main EU institutions will be the main focus.

5. COURSE MATERIAL

Students should use the draft chapters of the forthcoming book *W.Wessels/L. Schramm: The European Council*.

Preliminary chapters will be accessible on the online platform of the course. Further readings are indicated in the respective chapters. Please also refer to the detailed course outline for the full reading list.

6. EVALUATION

Students are required to act as expert based on a short preparation paper, to actively participate in class and in the simulation game, as well as to pass the final oral examination. There are **three** components of course assessment:

1. **Performance as an expert with a short paper (25%)**

As the course will be interactive, students should participate in an active way. They will be asked to take the role of expert on a certain lecture and thus will be expected to produce a short paper on the respective topic.

2. **Oral Participation in Class & Simulation Game (25%)**

Students' active participation throughout the course will form part of the evaluation. In addition, they will be required to take part in the European Council Simulation Game.

3. **Oral exam (50%)**

The exam consists of a discussion with the Professor. The professor will start with questions concerning your input as expert and then continue with issues of the course as debated during the sessions.

Plagiarism: In line with Section 4.4 of the College Study Regulation 2024-2025 "[i]t follows that plagiarism, self-plagiarism, collusion and the falsification of data are all prohibited." Any written work submitted by a student shall be assessed on its originality as well as the depth and breadth of research undertaken. All cases of plagiarism, self-plagiarism or falsification of data within the meaning set out within the mentioned Study Regulation will result in the application of penalties, as defined by article 40 thereof.

Artificial Intelligence: Pursuant to Articles 38 and subsequent provisions of the College of Europe Study Regulations 2025–2026, the category of permitted generative AI (genAI) use for the present course is **open use**. Students may employ genAI tools at all stages of the work process, including brainstorming, literature screening, data organisation, analysis, interpretation, argument generation, and drafting of text, provided that any use is transparently acknowledged in accordance with the department's referencing guidelines.

The non-generative use of AI tools, such as for spell-checking, reference style management, or information searches, remains by default permitted for all course work and the Master's thesis.

Students bear full responsibility for the entirety of the content they submit, irrespective of the tools used, and must ensure compliance with College regulations on academic integrity, data protection, and intellectual property. Violations of proper AI use, including failures to acknowledge genAI assistance, shall constitute academic misconduct and will be sanctioned in line with Articles 39a, 39b, and 40 of the Academic Regulations

on plagiarism, falsification of data, and related infringements.

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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