



Council of the European Union

PRESS
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BACKGROUND¹
Brussels, 16 March 2023

General Affairs Council **Brussels, 21 March 2023**

Chair: Jessika Roswall, Minister for EU Affairs of Sweden

The meeting will begin at 9.30.

Ministers will discuss draft conclusions of the European Council meeting on 23-24 March 2023.

The Council will address EU-UK relations. It will be invited to adopt two decisions related to the Windsor Framework, concerning the EU position to be taken in the Joint Committee and the Joint Consultative Working Group established by the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement.

Ministers will also address issues related to the European Semester.

As part of the annual rule of law dialogue, they will hold a country-specific discussion.

During a working lunch, ministers will hold an informal discussion with Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, about reform work in Ukraine.

A press conference will take place at the end of the meeting (+/- 17.00).

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[General Affairs Council, 21 March - meeting page](#)

[Press conferences and public events by video streaming](#)

[Video coverage in broadcast quality \(MPEG4\) and photo gallery](#)

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¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office.

March European Council

The Council will continue preparations for the European Council on 23-24 March 2023 by discussing draft conclusions.

At its upcoming meeting, the European Council will address Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in all its dimensions and the EU's continued support to Ukraine and its people.

EU leaders will also address competitiveness, single market and the economy. They will discuss Europe's long-term strategy to boost competitiveness and productivity, and how to make the EU's economic, industrial and technological base fit for the green and digital transitions. They will also hold a strategic discussion on EU trade policy and address the reform of the EU economic governance framework, as well as the 2023 European Semester.

The European Council will also take stock of progress in the implementation of its conclusions on energy. The presidency and the Commission will inform EU leaders on progress in the implementation of the February European Council conclusions on migration.

[Annotated draft agenda](#)

EU-UK relations

The Council will be invited to adopt two decisions related to the Windsor Framework:

- Council decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the Joint Committee established by the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement
- Council decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the Joint Consultative Working Group established by the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement

The European Commission and the UK government reached a political agreement in principle on the Windsor Framework on 27 February 2023. It comprises a comprehensive set of joint solutions aimed at addressing, in a definitive way, the practical challenges faced by citizens and businesses in Northern Ireland, thereby providing them with lasting certainty and predictability.

The joint solutions cover a wide range of areas, including new arrangements on customs, agri-food, medicines, VAT and excise, as well as governance and stakeholder involvement. The new arrangements also include robust safeguards to ensure the integrity of the EU's single market, to which Northern Ireland has unique access.

The solutions identified in the Windsor Framework should now be put in place.

- *EU position in the Joint Committee*

The Joint Committee is established under Article 164(1) of the Withdrawal Agreement. It includes EU and UK representatives, and is responsible for overseeing the implementation and application of the agreement. It is expected to meet before the end of March.

The draft Council decision allows the EU to agree to a Joint Committee decision concerning the main elements of the Windsor Framework package, as well as a set of recommendations and declarations to be made.

As part of the political agreement in principle on the Windsor Framework, the Joint Committee is expected to adopt a decision including targeted amendments to the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. The amendments concern a reference to specific arrangements for the movement of goods within the UK's internal market where the goods are destined for final consumption or final use in Northern Ireland (Article 6(2)), the establishment of the Stormont brake (Article 13(3)) and detailed arrangements regarding VAT and excise (Annex 3).

The Joint Committee is also expected to replace its existing decision on the determination of goods not at risk of subsequently being moved into the EU, integrating key elements of the political agreement in principle in this regard. In addition, its decision will establish an enhanced coordination mechanism to allow the EU and the UK to discuss any issues related to the functioning of the protocol in the areas of VAT and excise concerning goods.

Together the decision, recommendations and declarations constitute a comprehensive commitment to implement the joint solutions.

Under Article 164 of the Withdrawal Agreement, the Joint Committee is the appropriate body to adopt these measures, as it has a possibility, for a 4-year period from the end of the transition period (i.e. until the end of 2024), to adopt amendments that are necessary to address deficiencies or unforeseen situations.

- *EU position in the Joint Consultative Working Group*

The Joint Consultative Working Group is established under Article 15(1) of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to the Withdrawal Agreement. It serves as a forum for the exchange of information and mutual consultation on the implementation of the protocol between the EU and the UK representatives.

The draft Council decision allows the EU to agree to a change in the rules of procedure of the working group to provide for structured sub-groups. The aim is to better ensure that the UK is able to discuss its views in the working group on EU acts within the scope of the protocol, including on the basis of input provided by stakeholders in Northern Ireland, so they can be considered before such EU acts are adopted.

- *Legislative proposals*

The Council has a role also in putting in place other elements of the the Windsor Framework, notably the adoption of three legislative proposals related to the package. The proposals concern sanitary and phytosanitary measures, medicinal products for human use, and tariff rate quotas.

The three legislative proposals will undergo the ordinary legislative procedure. The Council has yet to examine these proposals in detail and agree its position on them.

[The Windsor Framework \(European Commission, 27 February 2023\)](#)

[EU relations with the United Kingdom \(background information\)](#)

European Semester

The Council will also focus on the European Semester.

Ministers will examine a synthesis report on the Council contributions on the 2023 European Semester. The report, drawn up by the Swedish presidency, summarises Council conclusions concerning the autumn package of the 2023 European Semester, published in November last year. The results of the related discussions in the various relevant Council configurations are also reflected in the document.

The presidency will present an updated roadmap for the 2023 European Semester, which outlines the key steps of the 2023 European Semester cycle.

The Council is also expected to agree to forward a draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area to the European Council. The text will be formally adopted by the Council after endorsement by the European Council.

[Synthesis report on Council contributions on the 2023 European Semester](#)

[European Semester 2023 - Updated roadmap](#)

[Draft Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area](#)

[How the European Semester works \(background information\)](#)

Annual rule of law dialogue

As part of the annual rule of law dialogue, ministers will hold a country-specific discussion. The exchange of views will focus on key developments in Slovakia, Finland, Belgium, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

This will be the sixth round of country-specific discussions after the ones held in November 2020, April and November 2021, and April and December 2022.

The discussions on Slovakia and Finland will conclude the first cycle of dialogue. The discussions on Belgium, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic will start the second cycle, following the protocol order.

The country-specific discussions are part of the commitment to make the annual rule of law dialogue stronger and more structured, while fully respecting the principles of objectivity, non-discrimination and equal treatment of all member states. The objective is to have a constructive and open exchange of comments and best practices.

Each of the five member states will be asked to present key national developments and particular aspects of their national rule of law framework. This will be followed by a round of comments in which other delegations can share their experiences and best practices in relation to the developments mentioned.

[2022 Rule of law report \(European Commission\)](#)