

IN ENGLISH

THE
PARLIAMENT
OF FINLAND
and
THE EU



Finland joined the European Union in 1995. One consequence of this was that a part of our national sovereign power was given up to be used in conjunction with the Union's collective decision-making. Powers, that had resided with Parliament, were shifted to be used by the Council of the European Union, which consists of representatives of the Member State governments. In return, Finland now has better opportunity to influence EU policy.

The European Commission, the Council of the European Union, i.e. the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament are the key organs of EU decision-making. The Commission prepares and proposes new legislation, but decisions are made by the Council and the European Parliament.

The Council of the European Union consists of ministers representing the different Member States. Ministers from the sector being dealt with at the meeting in question will be involved in decision-making. This means that foreign ministers will be present if the issue at hand involves foreign policy, while ministers of agriculture will attend when the questions are related to farming, for example.

Finland did not want to let parliamentary powers slip to the Government when we joined the EU. This is the reason behind the arrangement, where Parliament defines Finland's stance on issues that would have belonged to the remit of the Eduskunta prior to EU membership.

Every Member of Parliament takes part in the deliberation of EU affairs.

Parliament has the right—and duty—to express an opinion on all matters decided by the Council of the EU that factually fall under its remit (legislation, significant fiscal and foreign policy decisions).

Members of Government who act in the Council of the EU receive political mandate for their actions from Parliament.

Handling of EU affairs at Parliament

The Grand Committee – Parliament’s EU committee

The Grand Committee (not the plenary session) expresses Parliament’s stance on legislative, budget and treaty issues being decided by the EU. Unlike the other committees, the Grand Committee is thus an organ that makes decisions instead of preparing them. It usually deliberates on EU matters on the basis of statements provided by the sector committees of Parliament. This ensures that EU matters are prepared on a comprehensively democratic basis.

The Grand Committee has 25 members and 13 deputy members. In addition, the MP representing the Åland constituency is entitled to participate in Grand Committee meetings. The political weight of the Grand Committee is emphasised by the fact that its membership includes several chairpersons of the parliamentary groups and the special committees.

Foreign Affairs Committee – foreign and security policy

The Foreign Affairs Committee handles matters related to the European Union’s common foreign and security policy. The Government presents its

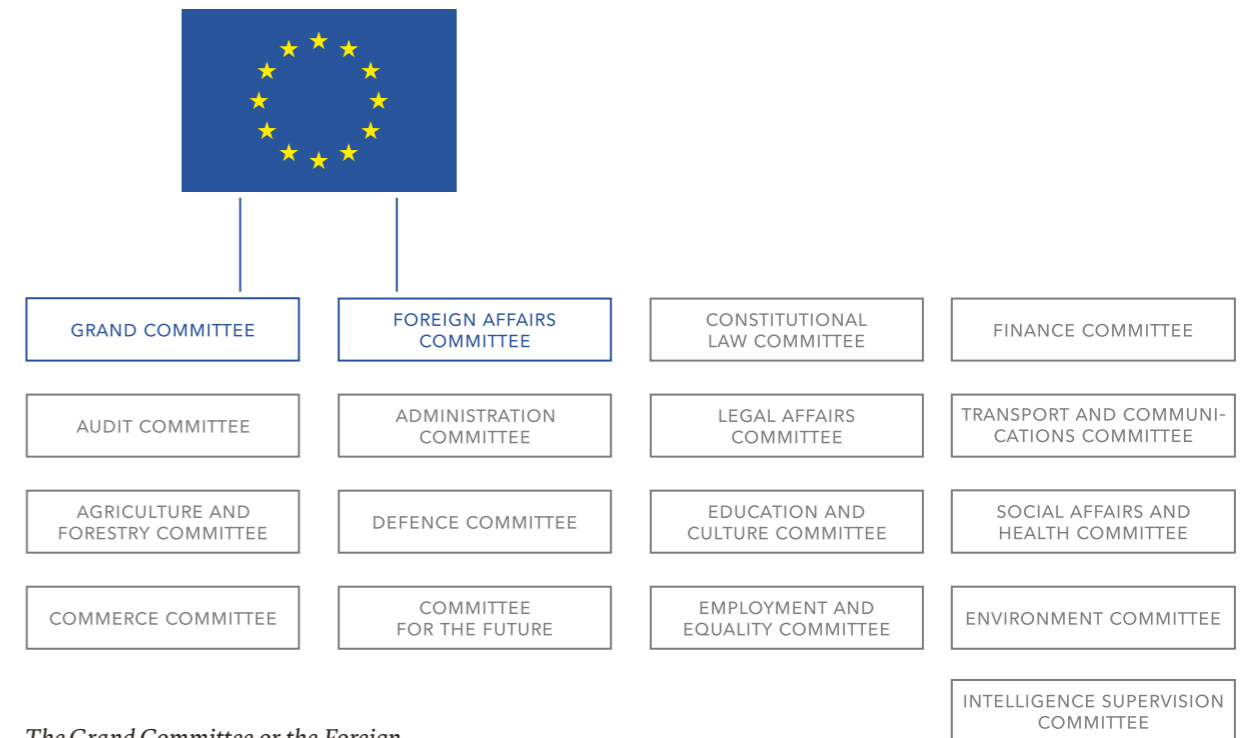
proposals regarding foreign and security policy to the Foreign Affairs Committee, which then decides the stance of Parliament regarding these issues. Thus, it functions in a similar role in the sector of foreign and security policy as the Grand Committee does in other EU affairs. In addition, the Foreign Affairs Committee provides the Grand Committee with statements on matters related to its remit, such as trade policy and development cooperation.

The sector committees prepare EU actions

The sector committees of Parliament monitor EU affairs that fall under their respective remits. Sector committees present written statements on the issues of their own sector to the Grand Committee, which usually bases its decisions on the views presented by the sector committees.

Each sector committee has an unlimited right to be informed about matters falling under its remit by the Government or the relevant ministries.

Parliament has 16 sector committees, which typically consist of 17 members and 9 deputy members. However, the Finance Committee has 21 members



The Grand Committee or the Foreign Affairs Committee decides parliament’s stance on EU matters, often after hearing sector committees.

and 19 deputy members, and the Audit Committee has 11 members and 6 deputy members. The Intelligence Supervision Committee has 11 members and 2 deputy members.

The plenary session and EU affairs

Any EU matter can be debated at a plenary session, but Parliament’s view is always expressed by either the Grand Committee or the Foreign Affairs Committee.

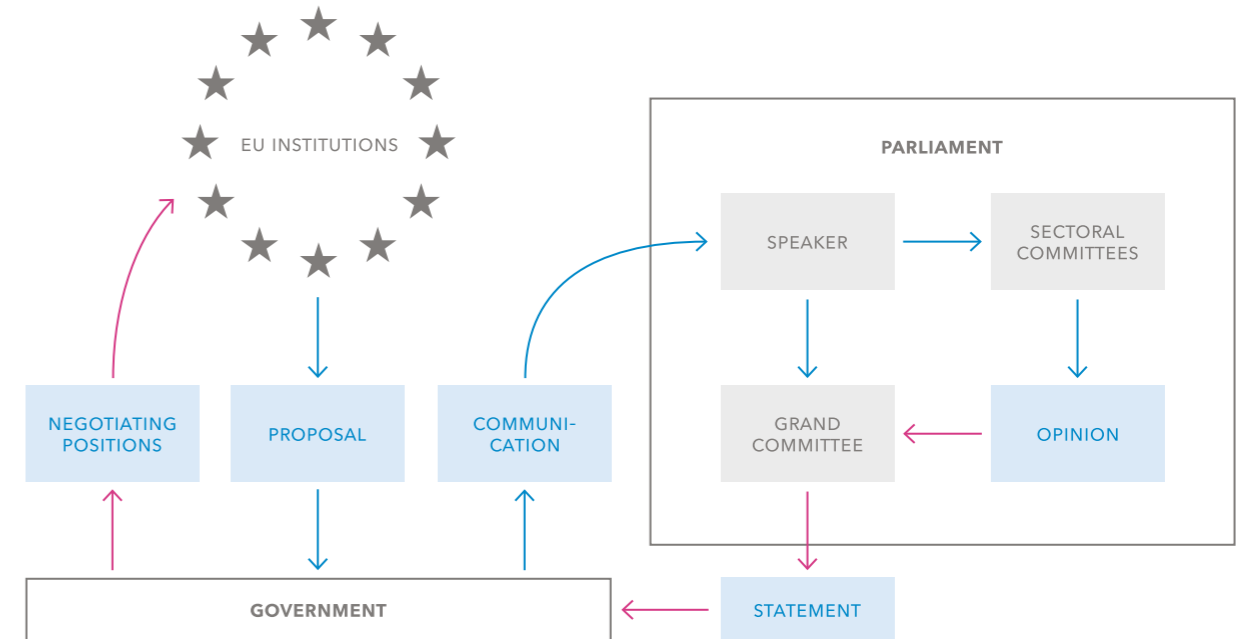
Plenary session discussions regarding EU affairs have been conducted on, for example, amending EU treaties and other key reforms. Every electoral term, the Government issues a report that defines the

guidelines for Finland’s EU policy. This is deliberated on in plenary session on the basis of a Grand Committee statement.

EU regulations often require Finland to amend national laws. These cases are decided on the basis of Government Bills like normal legislative issues. In addition, changes dealing with the EU Treaty, the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and national budget responsibilities are deliberated on in a plenary session.

The plenary session also decides, based on a Grand Committee report, on sending a reasoned opinion to the EU institutions (so-called subsidiarity objection). This can be done if the view is that the objectives of the proposed EU regulation could be better achieved through national effort.

EU affairs are handled in cooperation between Parliament and the Government



The flow of information and consultation process in legislative matters.

The Government presents EU affairs to Parliament for deliberation.

The Constitution requires the Government to submit to the Eduskunta all proposals to amend EU regulations and treaties that fall within the remit of Parliament so that MPs can express their view on the matter. The Constitution also grants the Grand Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee an unlimited right to receive information from the Government on other EU affairs as well.

The stance of Parliament does not bind the Government legally, but politically: the Government has to answer to the Eduskunta for all of its actions. The view of Parliament, most usually of the Grand Committee, is the normative point of departure for Finnish representatives at the EU's Councils of Ministers.

Finland's national stance at the EU Council of Ministers is represented by the minister whose remit the matter at hand falls under.

In parliamentary procedure, EU business is separated into U, E and UTP matters. U matters are cases that fall under the remit of Parliament, while E and UTP matters are other types of business.

U matters – cases that fall within the remit of Parliament

U matters fall within the traditional remit of Parliament, i.e. they deal with legislative and budget matters as well as the ratifying of international treaties. In such cases, the Finnish stance can be expressed at the EU only after Parliament has decided on an opinion.

The Government decides on the content of a U statement and submits it to Parliament. The Speaker of Parliament forwards the statement for deliberation by the Grand Committee (or the Foreign Affairs Committee if the matter relates to foreign and security policy). In this conjunction, the Speaker also decides which sector committees shall provide the Grand Committee with statements on the matter. The Grand Committee can request additional statements from other committees as well.

The Grand Committee makes its decisions based on the statements submitted by the sector committees. The Grand Committee usually decides along the recommendation of a sector committee, but it is entitled to decide otherwise as well.

The ministries report on the progress of U matters in the EU by sending follow-up statements. In practice, ministries send follow-up statements if there is need to revise the mandate issued by the Grand Committee or update the information received by Parliament.

E matters – Parliament's unlimited right to be informed about EU affairs

Under the Constitution, the Grand Committee has an unlimited right to be informed of European Union proceedings regarding any matter. In parliamentary proceedings, these kinds of cases are referred to as E matters. An E matter usually is submitted when the Government deems that Parliament needs to be informed because of the significance of the matter. The

Grand Committee can also request that the Government report on a matter being prepared by the EU.

E matters can involve regulatory proposals that are not considered to be actual legislative matters in Finland. This category also includes, inter alia, preparatory documents for upcoming EU legislative ventures like Commission Communications.

An E statement is sent from the competent ministry to the Grand Committee, which then forwards it to the sector committees. Once the sector committees have completed drafting their statements, the Grand Committee sends them to the Government for guidance. However, the Grand Committee may also itself voice an opinion on an E matter. The stance of the Grand Committee provides a guideline for the Government.

UTP matters – EU foreign and security policy

The Foreign Affairs Committee has a constitutional right to receive Government reports on matters pertaining to EU foreign and security policy. These reports are referred to as UTP matters. The Foreign Affairs Committee decides Parliament's opinion with regard to these cases, just like the Grand Committee does on the part of other EU affairs.

Subsidiarity oversight – decisions must be taken at the correct level

According to the Lisbon Treaty, which was ratified in 2009, each national parliament can send a reasoned opinion to an EU institution regarding violations of the subsidiarity principle. This can be done if the objectives of proposed EU regulation could be better achieved through national- or local-level action instead of EU-level measures. Subsidiarity objections only question the correct level of EU regulation, i.e. they do not deal with the political content or necessity of proposals.

The subsidiarity mechanism has not achieved any special significance. For this reason, the Grand Committee will only evaluate an EU regulatory proposal's compliance with the subsidiarity principle if a Committee member, a sector committee of Parliament or the Parliament of Åland requests that it do so. The final decision regarding a subsidiarity objection is taken by the plenary session on the basis of a Grand Committee statement.

Hearing with ministers – reporting to the Grand Committee before a Council of Ministers meeting

Prior to a meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, Government members will present the matters to be dealt with by the Council to the Grand Committee. Members of the Grand Committee are given a ministry memo in advance that contains the Government's stance regarding each matter going before the EU Council. The Prime Minister gives a Grand Committee presentation before and after every EU summit, i.e. a meeting of the European Council. Reports per-

taining to the EU Foreign Affairs Council are primarily submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Ministerial hearings ensure that each matter has been negotiated in an accordance with the guidance of the Grand Committee. In addition, they provide the minister with a mandate for the upcoming negotiations. The Committee can also issue written instructions, which are politically binding for the minister. Should a minister for some reason deviate from these instructions, he or she is required to explain this conduct to the Committee without delay.

Publicity

The meetings of the Grand Committee and Parliament's other committees are not public. However, to promote public debate, a committee can decide to open its meeting to the public when it focuses on acquiring information through, for example, expert hearings. Public committee hearings like this can be followed through an online broadcast on Parliament's website.

The minutes of committee meetings and most other documents – including ones containing the Government's stance – are made public immediately after the meeting closes.

A press release about Grand Committee meetings is also published. It focuses on key decisions made by the Committee and the topics discussed at the meeting.

The Grand Committee (and the Foreign Affairs Committee in the case of foreign and security policy matters) can decide that Committee members and other persons participating in the proceedings must maintain confidentiality with regard to the matter deliberated on. Usually, this happens in situations where it is undesirable to reveal Finland's bargaining leeway because this could be detrimental to the attainment of negotiation objectives. The practice is also to refrain from revealing the negotiation stances of other Member States. The confidentiality requirement usually lapses once negotiations on the matter have concluded. The overwhelming majority of matters dealt with by the Grand Committee are not confidential.

Parliament's role in the handling of EU affairs is a strength

The status of the Parliament of Finland in the handling of EU affairs can be considered strong when compared to the parliaments of most other EU Member States.

The Finnish model has safeguarded Parliament's influence on decision-making during EU membership. The Government's obligation to bring EU legislative matters before Parliament without delay and Parliament's right to receive the information it desires on the handling of any EU matter have protected its opportunities to wield influence.

Parliament's right to be informed has ensured that the political opposition is also privy to reliable information on EU matters.

Each committee of Parliament deals with EU affairs in addition to its other duties, and this has ensured access to necessary specialist expertise in all EU policy sectors and, at the same time, engaged every MP in the handling of Union business.

Finland does not present differing Government and parliamentary stances on EU affairs. Finnish representatives gain an advantage in EU negotiations because they can promote a stance, which has the blessings of the Eduskunta and thus a firm parliamentary backrest, already in the early stages of preparation.

Any EU matter may be discussed in plenary session.

International cooperation

Parliament and Brussels

Finland has 13 representatives in the European Parliament. If the United Kingdom leaves the EU, the number of Finnish MEPs will climb to 14. These MEPs have no official status at the Parliament of Finland, but they enjoy free access to its facilities.

The Grand Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee regularly meet with Finnish MEPs to discuss topical EU matters. Parliamentary committees can also invite MEPs to attend their meetings in an expert capacity.

The Grand Committee makes regular visits to Brussels, where it meets with the leaders of EU institutions such as Commissioners and high-ranking EU officials as well as Members of the European Parliament. Officials from Finland's Permanent Representation to the EU provide the Committee with background information on matters being prepared and deliberated.

Parliament's EU secretariat coordinates relations between EU organs and the Eduskunta. The secre-

tariat includes a Brussels-based liaison officer, who informs Parliament about topical events at EU institutions.

Cooperation with the EU committees of other parliaments

COSAC is the cooperation organ of the European Parliament and the committees of Member State national parliaments that handle EU affairs. The Grand Committee is an active participant in the work of COSAC.

Members of Parliament's various committees also meet with their colleagues from other national parliaments at EU-themed conferences for various sectors of policy in order to be informed of the EU affairs involving their respective fields.

In addition, national parliaments have the electronic inter-parliamentary EU information exchange IPEX forum, which is used especially in relation to matters associated with subsidiarity oversight.

Finland's EU Presidency

The presidency of the Council of the European Union rotates between the member states of the EU. During the six-month presidency, representatives of the presidency state chair meetings of the Council and its working groups. Finland has held the presidency in 1999, 2006 and 2019.

The presidency drafts an agenda that determines what it wants the Council's focus areas to be during the period. The presidency is responsible for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, and cooperation among member states. Thus, the presidency acts as an impartial mediator.

The Finnish Parliament hosts the parliamentary EU conferences during Finland's presidency. The largest is COSAC, which brings together delegations from national parliamentary EU committees and representatives of the European Parliament.

The conferences organised by sector committees will discuss, among other things, foreign and security policy, defence policy, the EU's economic stability and coordination, strengthening Economic and Monetary Union as well as the topics chosen by the presidency.

Learn more about the parliamentary conferences of the 2019 EU presidency at parleu2019.fi.



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