



Brussels, 14 March 2014

BACKGROUND¹
GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL
Tuesday, 18 March in Brussels

*Starting at 10.00, the Council will prepare the **European Council** meeting on 20-21 March on the basis of draft conclusions. A discussion that will later continue over lunch with the President of the European Council, **Herman Van Rompuy**.*

*The Council is also expected to take note of a presidency synthesis report on the discussions and main messages of the different Council configurations in relation to the 2014 **European Semester**.*

*The Commission will present its Communication on the **Rule of Law Mechanism** to Ministers.*

*Over lunch Ministers will also have a discussion on **subsidiarity**.*

A presidency press conference will be held after the end of the meeting (+/- 15.30).

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Video coverage in broadcast quality (MPEG4): www.eucouncil.tv

Photos of the event: www.consilium.europa.eu/photo

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

P R E S S

Preparation for the March European Council

The Council will examine draft conclusions for the European Council meeting to be held on 20-21 March, prepared by the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, in cooperation with the Greek presidency and the Commission.

The spring European Council is expected to focus on:

- *Growth, competitiveness and jobs*; Heads of State or government are expected to conclude the first phase of the European Semester; discuss industrial competitiveness building on the Commission's recent Communication on the topic; and hold a first policy debate on a framework for climate and energy in the period from 2020 to 2030.
- *External relations*: leaders will look at the state of preparations for the upcoming EU-Africa summit and have an in-depth policy debate on EU-Africa relations, with a special emphasis on peace and security. In light of events, the European Council will also re-assess the situation in Europe's Eastern neighbourhood, in particular in Ukraine.

An annotated draft agenda was discussed by the Council on 11 February ([5153/14](#)).

European Semester

As regards competitiveness, growth and jobs, the presidency has prepared a report providing a synthesis of the discussions and main messages of seven different Council configurations² involved in the current European Semester exercise (7699/14).

The report gives a broad picture of what is necessary to prepare the European Council and, more generally, to implement the Europe 2020 strategy. The report aims to highlight the most crucial points; the focus on implementation, the emerging results and the areas where progress is lacking despite commitments at EU level.

The European Semester involves simultaneous monitoring of the member states' fiscal, economic and employment policies during a six-month period every year. In the light of the guidance provided by the European Council, the member states will prepare their national reform programmes (economic and employment policies) and stability or convergence programmes (fiscal policies) for this year.

² Economic and Financial Affairs Council, Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, Competitiveness Council, Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council, Environment Council, Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council and Justice and Home Affairs Council.

Rule of law mechanism

The Commission will present its communication on the rule of law mechanism ([7632/14](#) + [7632/14 ADD 1](#)). The Commission communication sets up a framework for addressing systemic threats to the rule of law in the 28 member states, complementing the infringement procedure (in the case of a breach of EU law) and the so-called article 7 procedure of the Lisbon Treaty (which allows for the suspension of voting rights in the case of a serious and persistent breach of EU values). The purpose of the framework is to enable the Commission to find a solution with the member state concerned in order to prevent the emerging of a systemic threat to the rule of law that could develop into a clear risk of a serious breach which would potentially trigger the use of article 7.

The Commission communication follows the Council conclusions on fundamental rights and the rule of law adopted in June 2013 which set out some elements to consider when taking forward the debate on the possible need for and shape of a future initiative aimed at better safeguarding the Union's fundamental values, in particular the rule of law and fundamental rights in the Union ([10168/13](#)).

Lunch

Over lunch, ministers will have an exchange with the President of the European Council on the upcoming European Council. After this exchange, Ministers will have a political discussion on the principle of subsidiarity, following discussion in the Council and in other fora in the last months. In view of this discussion, the Presidency has provided a background paper.
