Taking the Chair: A History of Ireland's EU Presidencies

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Introduction

The history of Ireland's presidencies of the Council of the European Union ("the Council") can be traced back decades before; to a referendum of the Irish people. On 10 May 1972, 83.09% of the electorate voted in favour of joining the European Economic Community (EEC), and after signing the Treaty of Accession, the country acceded to the EEC on 1 January 1973. Concurrently, Ireland joined the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Together these communities were known as the European Communities (EC) ("the Community"), which have now become the European Union (EU) that we know today.

The presidency's main responsibilities are to plan, coordinate, and chair meetings. It acts as an honest broker to help reach agreements within the Council. The country holding the rotating presidency also negotiates with other EU institutions, communicates its activities, and has the opportunity to host officials for meetings and summits in its own country. Since Ireland's first presidency in 1975, the country has taken on this role eight times; including its latest term from 1 July to 31 December of 2026. In this context, this explainer discusses the geopolitical challenges and major developments that have shaped the times when it was Ireland's turn to take the chair.

1

January-June 1975



Fig.1

Ireland's first presidency began exactly two years after joining the Community alongside Denmark and the United Kingdom on 1 January 1973. Denmark had a short period of six-months to prepare for its first rotating presidency (July-December 1973) whereas the UK had four years (January-June 1977) to make arrangements. In an interview with RTÉ News, then Minister for Foreign Affairs for Ireland, Dr Garret FitzGerald, stated that Ireland must "take a broader view of our community responsibilities than if we were merely a small country looking after its own interests". The minister added that the role involved a large undertaking for a small country, including that a lot of the work must be carried out in the French language.

During this presidency, Ireland had the responsibility of organising and hosting the first formal meeting of the newly established European Council (an institution which brings together Heads of State or Government of the Member States). Moreover, Ireland presided over the Equal Pay Directive (Council Directive 75/117/EEC) which established the principle of equal pay for men and women. In addition, the Irish presidency steered discussions to reach an agreement on the Passport Union and common rights for citizens of the community.

Taoiseach: Liam Cosgrave
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Garret FitzGerald

2

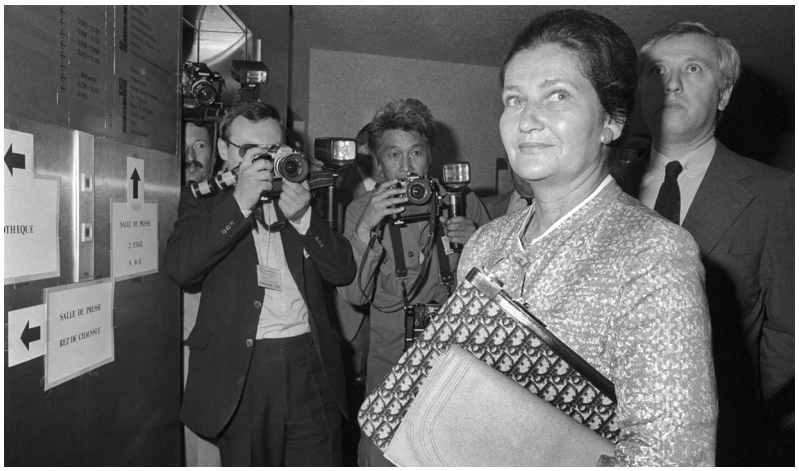

Fig.2

July-December 1979

Ireland's second presidency came at a significant moment for Europe, following the first direct elections to the European Parliament in June 1979. This change included the election of 15 Irish representatives and Irish woman Anne-Marie Manson-Hennon being appointed as a special advisor to Simone Veil, the first elected president to the Parliament. Consequently, establishing a working relationship between the newly elected Parliament and the other European institutions became an important focus for Ireland during this presidency. Moreover, as chair, the country helped advance early work on the European Monetary System (EMS), while also steering difficult negotiations on Member States' budgetary contributions. The Irish pound also joined the EMS during this presidency, marking an important step towards Ireland's growing integration into the European economic system.

Taoiseach: Jack Lynch and Charles Haughey
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Michael O'Kennedy and Brian Lenihan
Note: Change in Government on 11 December 1979

3

July-December 1984



Fig.3

Ireland's third presidency was marked by both international crises and significant developments in European enlargement. A key achievement was securing financial and food aid for the famine in Ethiopia and the Sahel. The presidency also oversaw the signing of a Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement between the EEC and China. Meanwhile, Ireland played a central role in the final stages of negotiations on the accession of Spain and Portugal to the EEC. This included steering discussions on outstanding issues including wine production, fisheries, and social issues; paving the way for the two countries to join the Community the following year. Their accession marked an important step in the expansion of the EEC following the end of decades of dictatorship in both countries.

Taoiseach: Garret FitzGerald
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Peter Barry



Fig.4

4

January-June 1990

Ireland's fourth presidency took place against the backdrop of major geopolitical change following the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. During the presidency, a special European Council meeting was held in Dublin in April in addition to the Council meeting in June 1990. Representatives agreed a common approach to German unification to allow for the smooth integration of the former territory of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) into the Community. Moreover, relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the "Iron Curtain" quickly became a major issue on the agenda. In addition, Ireland's presidency oversaw the agreement for the holding of intergovernmental conferences on the Economic and Monetary Union and Political Union, which were key steps towards the signature of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

Taoiseach: Charles Haughey
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Gerard ("Gerry") Collins

5

July-December 1996



Fig.5

Ireland's fifth presidency was marked by a significant focus on monetary policy. The presidency oversaw agreement on several key elements required for the introduction of the euro, including the legal arrangements governing its use, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), and a new Exchange Rate Mechanism. The design for the euro was officially unveiled during the December European Council in Dublin; however, it was not until 1 January 2002 that Ireland and eleven other Member States formally started using the euro as their official currency. In addition to advancements in monetary policy, the Dublin Declaration on Employment, which set out national and Community measures to stimulate employment across the Community, was adopted. The "Dublin II" draft text was warmly received and introduced improved provisions around various areas including, EU citizenship. Finally, the presidency advanced crucial steps towards the signature of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997.

Taoiseach: John Bruton
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Dick Spring

6



Fig.6

January-June 2004

Ireland's sixth presidency became synonymous with the largest enlargement in the history of the EU. On 1 May 2004, ten new Member States (Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) formally joined the Union. Leaders from all 25 Member States attended "The Day of Welcomes" event which took place in Phoenix Park, Dublin, where a specially commissioned poem by Irish poet Seamus Heaney was read. The enlargement also coincided with a period of increasing Irish influence within the EU institutions. Former Irish MEP, Pat Cox, had been serving as President of the European Parliament since 2002, becoming the first Irish person to hold the role. Regarding the work of the institutions, negotiations on the European Constitutional Treaty were finalised, paving the way for the Lisbon Treaty. However, this presidency also dealt with a pressed EU-US relationship primarily due to the Iraq War. Former Fine Gael TD and then Director General of the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), Alan Dukes, said that "the government passed with distinction when it came to EU enlargement, received honours on the treaty but that they must try harder on all other issues", according to RTE's Presidency Report Card (2004).

Taoiseach: Bertie Ahern
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Brian Cowen



Fig.7

7

January-June 2013

The seventh presidency, which began on 1 January 2013, marked the 40th year anniversary of Ireland's membership of what had come to be the European Union. This was also Ireland's first presidency following the Lisbon Treaty entering into force in 2009, which led to the introduction of a permanent president of the European Council. Therefore, while the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) still participated in European Council meetings alongside leaders from other Member States, it was only the Council of the European Union meetings that were chaired by the rotating presidency.

Despite the change in institutional infrastructure, the presidency worked on the recovery of the eurozone in the wake of the financial crash and made various achievements in other areas. Key developments include the Youth Guarantee, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, agreement for the €960bn Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 (the EU's 7-year long-term budget), and advancement of the Single Supervisory Mechanism (SSM) which was designed to prevent future financial crises.

Taoiseach: Enda Kenny
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Eamon Gilmore



Fig.8

8

July-December 2026

Ireland's eighth presidency focuses on the themes of competitiveness, security, and values; in line with the Trio Presidency Programme agreed with Lithuania and Greece. This aims to ensure continuity on shared priorities and long-term challenges for the 18-month period. Key items on the agenda for this Irish presidency include ongoing support for Ukraine, strengthening and stabilising relations with the EU's partners worldwide, as well as facilitating a timely agreement on the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, which allows the EU to budget for future challenges as well as supporting key existing policies (such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy). Moreover, the objectives of the One Europe, One Market Roadmap are treated as core priorities for the Irish presidency in 2026. Finally, this is the first Irish presidency since Irish (Gaeilge) became a fully operational EU working language in January 2022. Therefore, this six-month period aims to demonstrate the Union's commitment to linguistic diversity by integrating the Irish language into cultural events, official communications, and Council business.

Taoiseach: Micheál Martin
Minister for Foreign Affairs: Helen McEntee

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Seamus Heaney's Beacons at Bealtaine can be viewed here.

Photos

Fig.1: Women march in support of equal pay, a time when campaigns for workplace equality were becoming increasingly prominent.

Fig.2: Simone Veil, first elected president of the European Parliament and the first female president (1979). Available at alamy.com.

Fig.3: Ethiopia Famine November 1984 Mirror Mercy Flight labels on boxes locals wait as supplies arrive Mirrorpix. Available at alamy.com.

Fig.4: BERLIN WALL East German guards look on as the Berlin Wall is destroyed in November 1989. Available at alamy.com.

Fig.5: General view of the Citizens Hall inside the Royal Palace at the signing ceremony for the latest version of the European Union treaty in Amsterdam Thursday, 2 October, 1997. Available at alamy.com.

(AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

Fig.6: Young Czechs wave EU and Czech flags during a concert marking the European Union's enlargement and Czech Republic's entry in the EU in Prague's Old Town Square late Friday, 30 April, 2004. Available at alamy.com.

(AP Photo/CTK, Martin Sterba)

Fig.7: The Europa building in the European quarter is the seat of the Council of the European Union and the European Council since 2017.

Fig.8: Taoiseach Micheál Martin and European Commission President Ursula Von Der Hold a press conference in the Main Quadrangle at University College Cork, as Ireland begins its presidency of the Council of the EU. Available at alamy.com.

Picture date: Friday, 3 July, 2026.

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This explainer is part of the Future Proofing Europe project, which is kindly supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland



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