

Looking ahead to the 2026 Irish Presidency

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The 2026 Irish Presidency in Context

In the second half of 2026, Ireland will assume the [rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union \(EU\)](#). This will be the eighth time that the country will take on this role since the first occasion in [1975](#).

Over the decades, the role of the rotating presidency has evolved and, arguably, become less significant in terms of EU policy and the EU's legislative agenda. This is especially the case since the introduction of a [permanent president of the European Council](#) following the passage of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. The European Council brings together the EU heads of state and government and represents the political apex of the bloc. While the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) participates fully in the meetings and work of the European Council, the Member State holding the rotating presidency does not chair these meetings and has no special role in organising its work.

However, the rotating presidency is still responsible for much of the work and organisation of the Council of the European Union. The Council brings together the ministers responsible for different policy areas from each of the 27 Member States and, on occasion, the relevant EU Commissioner. Alongside the European Parliament, the Council is one of the two EU institutions responsible for agreeing EU legislation. The rotating presidency is thus responsible for chairing, administering, and troubleshooting the work and meetings of the Council of the European Union, across the [ten configurations](#) in which the Council meets throughout the year. This includes the [General Affairs Council \(GAC\)](#), the [Foreign Affairs Council \(FAC\)](#), and the [Economic and Financial Affairs Council \(ECOFIN\)](#).

The presidency therefore brings each Member State in turn to the centre of EU politics and global affairs for six months which involves a huge mobilisation of effort for any country's bureaucracy and political system. The presidency represents the EU on the global stage and signs treaties and international agreements, such as at the annual [COP meetings](#). The Member State holding the presidency also has the opportunity to host major meetings throughout their term. The forthcoming Irish Presidency is expected to involve hundreds of meetings in Ireland, at least one EU Council summit, several high-profile conferences, and a meeting of the European Political Community, which will see the biggest meeting of world leaders ever on Irish soil. This raises major security concerns for the Irish State amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and the [risk of kinetic or hybrid attacks against Ukraine's allies](#).

The Priorities

Before taking office, the incoming presidency sets out a [range of priorities](#) for its time at the helm. Partly out of respect for the presidency in office, these priorities tend to be published in full only in the weeks leading up to the start of a new rotation. The priorities reflect the interests of the individual Member State as well as the prevailing legislative and political agenda of the EU at a given time. Starting from mid-2025, the Irish Government initiated a series of public and private consultations to support the promulgation of the Irish Government priorities. While not yet published, the forthcoming Irish Presidency is likely to focus in part on matters of competitiveness, the security and resilience of the EU, EU values and the rule of law, EU enlargement, as well as the EU's ongoing legislative agenda, as is discussed below.

Ireland joined the then-European Economic Community (EEC) in the first enlargement in 1973. Under its sixth presidency, Ireland oversaw the '[Day of Welcomes](#)' in 2004 which saw the largest EU enlargement in history when ten new Member States, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe joined the Union. Following its seventh presidency in 2013, Ireland handed over to the Lithuanian Presidency who welcomed Croatia, the most recent country to join the EU, in July 2013. In keeping with its association with previous enlargement rounds, it is possible that the [Irish Presidency](#) might be well placed to prepare a path for the next round of EU enlargement to southeastern Europe, potentially to Montenegro.

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty introduced the system of '[presidency trios](#)' which groups members into currently nine groups of three Member States. This affords each Member State the opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations with at least two others in the context of their own presidency planning and delivery. With the assistance of the [EU Council Secretariat](#), the body responsible for assisting with the work of both the European Council and the Council of the EU, each presidency trio sets long-term goals and prepares a common agenda spanning an 18-month period – the duration of three consecutive presidencies. Ireland will be the first in a new trio, handing on to Lithuania and Greece respectively in 2027.

Each trio inevitably brings together Member States with different histories, geographies, politics, and interests. In Ireland's case, the trio brings together three small maritime states from the extremities of the EU – Lithuania on Europe's Baltic frontier to the East, bordering Russia; Greece to the southeast, washed by the Aegean, Ionian, and Mediterranean Seas, bordering Turkey; and Ireland on the Atlantic fringe, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and the United Kingdom. The approach taken by each member of any trio with respect to major questions of EU security, enlargement, and institutional reform, will inevitably be shaped and framed by each Member State's context, institutions, and politics.

Shaping or Steering?

Despite the considerable mobilisation of effort that Member States tend to invest in the development of presidency priorities, conventional wisdom says that the presidency can no longer determine the EU's activities to the extent that it may once have done in the pre-Lisbon Treaty era of fewer Member States and a less complex, all-encompassing legislative agenda. Indeed, many of the key files that the Irish presidency will have to steward during its presidency will have been determined by the EU's policy agenda. Many EU laws, policies, and initiatives take years to come to fruition and are rarely in the custody of any one rotating presidency alone. However, while not having the power to 'shape' the EU's policy agenda by themselves, the rotating presidency has the power to 'steer' it to some extent.

Indeed, the political scientist [Steven Lukes](#) says that one of the most important faces of power is that of 'agenda setting' and of 'non-decision-making', and the presidency-in-office certainly maintains this authority. In this way, while the presidency has little power to introduce new initiatives by themselves, it does still have the opportunity to promote or block certain files and initiatives in keeping with their own interests and priorities.

Thus, while many things can and will intervene between now and the second half of 2026 to influence the EU policy agenda, it is possible at this stage to identify some of the major policies that may feature during the Irish presidency of 2026 that are likely to be of particular interest to the Irish Government and citizenry.

Digital Policy

Any policies pertaining to the digital agenda will be relevant to Ireland given the high density of technology companies that have their EU headquarters in Ireland (e.g. Apple, Google, Meta, and Microsoft) or who carry out significant activities in the country (e.g. Amazon, Intel, and Stripe). Ireland is also an active member of the [D9+ group](#) of digitally advanced countries and digital policy is likely to feature prominently across the country's presidency priorities.

The Commissioner from Ireland, [Michael McGrath](#), has responsibility for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection in the second Commission of President Ursula von der Leyen. In his role, Commissioner McGrath will be responsible for introducing the [Digital Fairness Act \(DFA\)](#), which is seen as a complement to the [EU Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#). The DFA is designed to deal with manipulative and unethical commercial practices including the widespread use of [dark patterns](#). The DFA will address influencer marketing, addictive designs, personalised pricing according to tracking and profiling, video games currency, and other challenges for consumers. The potential implications of the DFA are ventilated [here](#), at an IIEA event in July 2025.

In the realm of digital policy, it is also expected that laws seeking to combat child sexual abuse online through the introduction of a harmonised legal framework might also feature during Ireland's presidency, after the Danish Presidency (July-December 2025) presented its position early in its term on [11 July 2025](#). Following the publication of a Council position in [November 2025](#), which focuses on risk assessment and mitigation, the Council can start negotiations with the European Parliament with a view to agreeing on a final regulation, which is expected to start in 2026. Notably, some EU Member States and stakeholders are especially [sceptical](#) about mandatory automatic scanning of private chats, with some arguing this this would pose a threat to the privacy and security of citizens' communications, effectively undermining end-to-end encryption.

Financial Services

It is also the case that many financial services firms have their EU headquarters in Ireland (e.g. Citibank, Barclays, Paypal) or carry out significant activities in the country (e.g. BNY, Mastercard, JP Morgan). Thus matters of financial services will always be of interest and concern for any Irish Government.

It is highly likely that there will be progress on the development of a [digital euro](#) during the 2026 Irish Presidency. The digital euro is a digital form of central bank money issued and backed by the European Central Bank (ECB) that will operate as an electronic equivalent to physical euro banknotes and coins. As such, the digital euro is intended to complement banknotes and coins and not replace them.

In October 2021, the Eurosystem launched an [investigation phase](#) to explore technical and policy options that could inform the design and specificities of a digital euro. This investigation considered how the digital euro could be distributed and used, as well as the potential impact it may have on the European economy and society.

In October 2025, the Governing Council of the ECB decided that the Eurosystem will [continue its preparations](#) for the digital euro and move to the next phase of the project. In the same month, European leaders expressed their desire to accelerate progress towards the digital euro at the [Euro Summit](#). It is highly possible that the legal framework for the digital euro might be finalised in the first half of 2026, in the run up to the Irish Presidency.

In a policy area of major interest to Irish companies and companies doing business in Ireland, Commissioner McGrath is also responsible for introducing a [28th regime for companies](#). The 28th regime is a proposed optional EUwide legal framework for innovative or highgrowth companies that would coexist alongside national regimes. The regime would provide a single set of rules in certain defined legal fields and would obviate the need to deal with 27 different national systems. This could relate to aspects of company law, labour law, and tax policy – a historically sensitive matter touching jealously-guarded aspects of national sovereignty.

In 2025, the Commission initiated a process of stakeholder [consultation](#) on this and in 2026, the Commission is expected to put forward a legislative text (i.e. a regulation or directive) for the 28th regime, that will be debated in the European Parliament and Council.

Meanwhile, as part of the Communication of the [EU's Savings and Investments Union](#), the Commission has pledged to organise [financial literacy](#) thematic meetings with experts and leaders to coordinate efforts relating to national financial literacy initiatives. Notably, the theme of financial literacy also featured in the [ECOFIN Council conclusions in May 2024](#). The first meeting is scheduled to be organised in the first months of 2026 and the Commission has committed to work with stakeholders to define thematic priorities and share best practices with a view to designing and implementing financial literacy initiatives starting in the final quarter of 2026, coinciding with the Irish Presidency.

Justice and Home Affairs

[Magnus Brunner](#), Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration, is leading the Commission initiative to present a new regulatory framework to underpin and strengthen Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation. Europol is the EU's law enforcement agency and is tasked with helping to make Europe safer by supporting the work of law enforcement authorities across EU member countries. The Commission has launched a [consultation](#) on the existing Europol Regulation and the Commission plans to present a new legislative proposal in the first half of 2026.

Relating the [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), Ireland is scheduled to [implement its National Implementation Plan](#) for the Pact by mid-2026. This will require the introduction of new domestic legislation, such as the provision of a new International Protection Act. During its presidency, it is likely that Ireland will have to manage a debate on the Pact, including relating to the need for smoother cooperation on external border control, increasing the efficiency of procedures, and greater EU-wide coordination (for example on screening and returns). It is important to note Ireland's specific relationship with matters of Justice and Home Affairs under [Protocol 21](#) to the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which affords Ireland the opportunity to 'opt-in' to matters of EU Justice and Home Affairs without obliging the country to do so.

Social Policy

Roxana Mînzatu, executive vice-president and commissioner for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness, has committed to developing a [Quality Jobs Roadmap](#) for European workers. The [EU's plan for competitiveness and decarbonisation](#) as part of the EU's Clean Industrial Deal affirmed that the Quality Jobs Roadmap, which is to be prepared with the involvement of the [EU social partners](#), will aim to support Member States and industry in promoting decent working conditions, high standards for health and safety, access to training and retraining, and collective bargaining, with a view to contributing to the competitiveness of European industries and to the EU as a whole. In her [State of the Union address in September 2025](#), President von der Leyen highlighted that the Commission would publish a Quality Jobs Act as part of the Quality Jobs Roadmap in 2026.

Environmental Policy

Amid the global and regional tumult, it is the case that the role of the EU as an environmental policy trendsetter, and the EU's Green agenda as a whole, has been [put at risk](#). The EU still has an opportunity to lead in the field of climate change mitigation and the Irish Presidency will have the opportunity to promote some key green initiatives.

To take one example, the main driver of deforestation globally is the expansion of agricultural land linked to the production of commodities including cattle, wood, cocoa, soy, palm oil, and coffee. As a major consumer of these commodities and their derivatives, the EU is partly responsible for this problem. In June 2023, the [EU Regulation on Deforestation-free Products \(EUDR\)](#) entered into force. Under the Regulation, operators must be able to prove that the products they trade do not originate from deforested land or have contributed to forest degradation.

In September 2025, the Commission [announced its plan](#) to postpone EUDR compliance to 30 December 2026, following an earlier year-long delay [agreed previously](#) between the EU institutions, to December 2025 for large companies and mid-2026 for micro and small enterprises. It is likely that the new obligations will create considerable administrative burdens for companies to meet their obligations, and for the EU institutions to assess compliance, the details of which are likely to become known in the latter half of 2026.

Intervening Variables and Concluding Thoughts

Any EU Presidency is shaped as much by the bloc's legislative agenda as by politics and context. Famously, the priorities of the most recent [German Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020](#) were almost completely set aside by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, inevitably, whether a Member State is able to advance its priorities during a presidency is ultimately determined by the backdrop against which it takes place.

Thus, in addition to the ongoing legislative machine, some parts of which have been discussed above, other, exogenous and endogenous developments will intervene that will risk thwarting or obscuring anything that the Irish Presidency might hope to achieve during its time in office. This includes the negotiations around the finalisation of the EU's seven-year budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which is due to be completed in 2027. Given the enormity of the MFF, as the EU continues to grapple with the war in Ukraine and other matters, it is possible that the EU's energies and attention will be turned in the direction of the MFF to the detriment of other policies. Relatedly, preparation for future enlargement (as discussed), and the potential need for institutional reform that could attend this debate, could overtake anything else that the Irish Presidency might hope to achieve. Finally, depending on a whole range of factors, it is possible that the Irish Presidency will coincide with the next phase of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, an EU candidate country. Time will tell if this will involve the EU providing support for Ukraine's defence or for the country's reconstruction, should peace break out in the coming months.

However, regardless of what any individual presidency achieves or cannot achieve, each rotation affords an opportunity for each Member State to be at the centre of things for a period, which in turn helps to highlight the culture and essence of the EU. The ability for the EU to embody its motto of 'in varietate concordia' ('united in diversity') in this way, in a world that is increasingly defined by polarisation and division, is more important than ever, and is a reminder of how far the European project has come in its first 75 years.

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