

# The European Council President and the EU's external representation

## (Inter)action in times of war in Europe

### SUMMARY

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has brought war back to Europe, altering the security equilibrium. The war has placed Ukraine at the centre of the European Council's agenda and debates. The European Council President is in regular contact with the Ukrainian leadership, multiplying visits to Ukraine and references to the war in his speeches delivered abroad. This has also been the approach of the other two key actors in the EU's external representation: the European Commission President, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). However, this has not led to more cooperation or cohesion in the EU's external representation, as the three actors have carried out their tasks individually rather than jointly, and barely ever interact outside international summits.

The Lisbon Treaty allows for parallel action in the EU's external representation, and the resulting reality is often competition between the different actors. Furthermore, the vagueness of the Lisbon Treaty provisions allows the various actors to (re)shape their external representation roles, often at the expense of the others. Mediation, a task the European Council President, Charles Michel, has taken upon himself with the Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogue, is a case in point.

### Background

With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council became an EU institution with a full-time president, elected for a term of 2.5 years, renewable once. According to Article 15(6) of the [Treaty on European Union](#) (TEU) the President chairs the European Council, ensures the preparatory work between and in view of meetings, and ensures the EU's external representation on matters pertaining to the Union's common foreign and security policy (CFSP).

The European Council President's [roles](#) as chair, agenda-setter, consensus-builder and, more recently, [reporting](#) to the European Parliament, have already been extensively analysed. Past research has also considered the key role played by the President during crisis situations. The successive and overlapping crises of the past 15 years have brought the European Council to operate in a quasi-continuous state of crisis and, in practice, to develop, its [crisis management role](#) outside the Treaty framework. In this context, this briefing focuses on an under researched aspect of the European Council President's mandate, namely their role in the Union's external representation; a role shared with the European Commission President and the HR/VP. The analysis focuses on two aspects. First, it considers the existing legal framework enabling the European Council President to represent the Union externally and interact with the other actors with a role in the EU's external representation. Second, it analyses the external action of the European Council President, Charles Michel, during the first year of Russia's aggression on Ukraine and his interaction with the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and HR/VP, Josep Borrell.



# The European Council President and external representation

## Role and mandate

As outlined above, the European Council President's role in the EU's external representation is enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 15(6) TEU). The Treaty grants him or her a mandate to represent externally the EU on matters of CFSP, including common security and defence policy (CSDP). A literal interpretation of Article 15(6) TEU has prevailed thus far, limiting the European Council President's [external representation role](#) to CFSP and CSDP, excluding other external relations areas. This view inspired an [agreement](#) between the first European Council President, Herman Van Rompuy, and the then European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso. It was decided that the European Council President and the European Commission President would represent the EU at international summits, in international organisations and at bilateral summits with third countries, with the European Council President voicing the EU's view when CFSP or CSDP was being discussed and the European Commission President voicing the EU's view when matters falling within the competence of the European Commission, such as international trade, were being considered.

At the time, the agreement clarified the most pressing issue, the EU's post Lisbon Treaty representation at the United Nations (UN), securing for the European Council President the role of addressing the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on a yearly basis. In essence, the agreement recognised that the European Council President was the legal successor of the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU on matters of external representation. In practice, this perpetuated in an updated format a pre-Lisbon Treaty practice according to which the Head of State or Government of the country holding the 6-month rotating presidency and the European Commission President both represented the EU at international summits and in international organisations. The G7 (previously G8) and G20 summits illustrate this practice: at the Sea Island [G8 summit](#) in 2004 for instance the EU was represented by Bertie Ahern, on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, and by Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission. The first G20 summit was held in Washington in November 2008, with the EU [represented](#) by the then French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country held the Council presidency, and Barroso representing the Commission.

The literal interpretation of Article 15(6) TEU confines the European Council President's external representation role to the CFSP and the CSDP, contrasting with their other attributes as European Council chair, agenda-setter and rapporteur for which their action spans the entire spectrum of external relations issues. The Lisbon Treaty neither gives nor denies the European Council President a mandate to represent the Union externally on external relations matters other than CFSP and CSDP, allowing the office holder to shape their role in practice. In other words, the Treaty expressly requires the European Council President to represent the EU externally on CFSP and CSDP matters, without forbidding them from representing the Union on other external relations matters, for which the European Council has competence and on which its President reports to Parliament.

Although it might be tempting for the European Council President to apply a broad interpretation of the Treaty and go beyond CFSP and CSDP issues when representing the EU externally, the power reality of the position they hold might render such an attempt counterproductive, even subject to competition and conflict with the President of the European Commission. For instance, the EU is a key international donor as well as a unitary bloc in international trade. In those areas, power is projected by the European Commission, even though the development field is a shared competence, whereas trade is not, giving the Commission President significant leverage on the international stage. A merger of the two positions, [suggested](#) by the former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, would arguably result in more coherent and unified EU action in the world. In a 2017 [resolution](#), while acknowledging that a merger of the two positions was possible, the European Parliament stressed that this was 'not in the interest of the European Parliament'.

As regards the manner in which the European Council President should exert their external representation mandate, the Treaty specifies that they should ensure the external representation of the EU at their level and 'in that capacity' and 'without prejudice to the power of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy'; but no reference is made to the European Commission President. This has led analysts to express [concern](#) regarding 'the vagueness of the Treaty articles', fearing this could lead to interinstitutional tensions in practice.

## Interaction with actors with an external representation role

The external representation roles of the European Council President and the HR/VP are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Articles 15(6) and 27(2) TEU). Under Article 3(5) of the European Commission's [Rules of Procedure](#), the European Commission President represents the Commission on issues of its competence, which in the area of external relations include international trade, climate change and enlargement. The High Representative is bound by the Commission's rules of procedure for actions undertaken in their capacity as Vice-President of the Commission (Article 18(4) TEU).

Three elements are crucial when it comes to understanding the interaction between the European Council President, the European Commission President and the HR/VP. These are: how the external representation mandate is carried out and implemented, the level at which representation takes place, and the relationship between the different actors. Each is key to defusing tension.

## Implementation of the external representation mandate

According to the Lisbon Treaty, it is up to the High Representative/VP to 'conduct political dialogue with third parties on the Union's behalf and ... express the Union's position in international organisations and at international conferences', including at the UN Security Council (UNSC) (Articles 27(2) and 34(2) TEU). No similar indication is given regarding the European Council President – neither in the Treaty nor in the European Council's [rules of procedure](#). This allows the office-holder to shape their role, including by fostering political dialogue with third countries and international organisations. Similarly, the European Commission's rules of procedure do not specify how the President should exercise their external representation role.

Visits to and by foreign representatives, as well as attendance of international conferences and summits, are the vehicle used to facilitate political dialogue with third parties and express the EU's position. They are the visible parts of external representation, requiring daily preparatory work as well as communication between the supporting structures, namely the European External Action Service (EEAS), European Commission services, the Council secretariat as well as the private offices of the European Council President, the European Commission President and the HR/VP.

Another key element in the implementation of the external representation mandate is the establishment of diplomatic relations. In this area, a [tradition](#) pre-dating the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty was continued. In fact, the European Council and European Commission Presidents co-sign the letters of credence of future EU ambassadors to third countries and international organisations, and are both presented with the letters of credence of the ambassadors appointed to the EU. The [Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations](#) of 1961 indicates that letters of credence at ambassador level are signed and received by the head of state, whereas letters of credence of lower ranking diplomats are exchanged at ministerial level. The unique nature of the EU as an international organisation has led scholars to argue about the extent to which the provisions of the 1961 Vienna Convention might, in practice, [apply](#) *mutatis mutandis* to EU [delegations](#) and to the EU ambassadors conferring [diplomatic status](#) on them. The question that then arises is whether the European Council President and the European Commission President, who are members of the European Council and co-sign EU ambassadors' letters of credence, could or should, as a matter of courtesy, be greeted at head of state level when representing the EU individually and/or jointly during visits abroad and/or at international summits.

## Level of representation

The level of representation can dispel tensions, as the different actors with a role to play in the EU's external representation generally operate in parallel arenas. This is the case with the European Council President and the HR/VP who, most of the time, operate in different arenas: the former encounters primarily heads of state or government, while the latter usually meets foreign counterparts at ministerial level or below. Tensions can still occur when one of the two actors departs from their pre-assigned arena and enters the arena of the other.

Tensions are more likely to arise between actors operating in the same arena, particularly if one attempts to push the boundaries of their mandate. Tensions can also arise when one actor is deprived of the possibility of playing their role optimally in their arena and at their level of representation, as was the case with the [Sofagate](#) incident in 2021. This can lead to competition, parallel action, interinstitutional tensions and, ultimately, the duplication of individual visits. Analysts [argue](#) that relations between European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen are increasingly prone to competition and conflict, as both are largely operating in the same arena, and often seen as trying to out-do one another.

## Relationship between the different actors

In addition to the mandate and the level of representation, it is equally important to consider the relationship between the different actors with a role in the EU's external representation. In other words, to examine if there is a tasking and reporting relationship, if they are in a vertical (hierarchical) type of relationship, or if they operate in parallel and no hierarchical relationship exists.

The HR/VP is bound by the European Commission's rules of procedure for actions undertaken in their capacity as Vice-President of the European Commission. This places them in a subordinate position to the President of the European Commission, for the Commission-related part of their mandate. In her [mission letter](#) to Borrell, Ursula von der Leyen indicated that as HR/VP he was to coordinate the EU's overall external action and she tasked him with chairing the Commissioners' group on 'a stronger Europe in the world'. She extended her support to him 'in his role as Commission Vice-President in charge of coordinating the external action of the European Union' while also clarifying that he was to help her coordinate the external dimension of the Commissioners' work and strive to improve the link between internal and external aspects of EU policies.

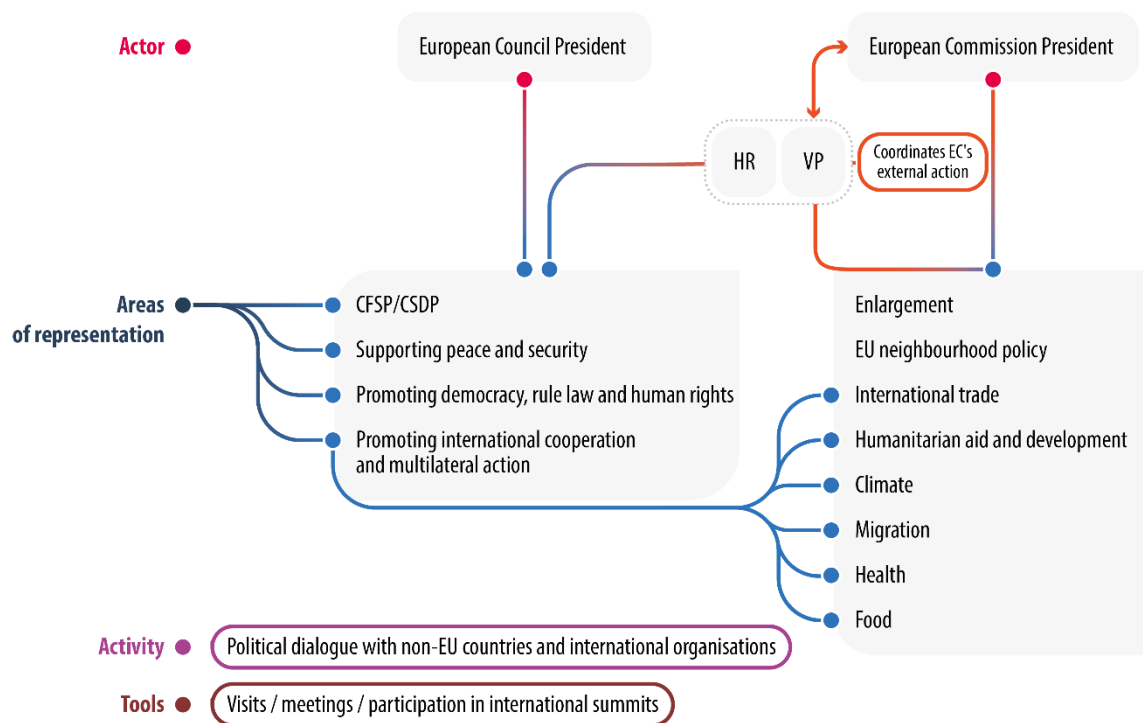
No similar relationship of subordination exists between the High Representative and the European Council President on CFSP and CSDP matters. On this matter, the Lisbon Treaty operated a U-turn in comparison with the [Nice Treaty](#). In fact, under the Nice Treaty provisions, the then High Representative for the common foreign and security policy also held the position of Secretary-General of the Council. In the latter capacity, he was to assist the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU in its external representation role. The holder of the High Representative position was to act 'on behalf of the Council at the request of the Presidency', by 'conducting political dialogue with third parties' (Articles 18 and 26 Nice Treaty).

As argued above, with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council President replaced the rotating Presidency of the Council in representing the EU externally on CFSP and CSDP matters at international summits and in international forums. The decoupling of the High Representative's position from the position of Secretary-General of the Council ended the relationship of subordination existing prior to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty between the High Representative and the rotating Presidency. [Analysts](#) have considered this development to be a reassuring sign for smaller Member States, which had feared that a European Council President with direct authority over the High Representative could become too powerful. In this way, the High Representative was now 'to conduct political dialogue' with third parties and in international forums on behalf of the Union (Article 27(2) TEU). This provision made the High Representative accountable, but not subordinate, to the European Council, the appointing body and the body defining the

Union's strategic guidelines and overall policy orientations (Articles 18(2) and 26(1) TEU) in the field of CFSP and CSDP.

Figure 1 provides a schematic visualisation of EU's external representation, taking into account the different areas of EU external action, the actors tasked with representing the Union externally and the arenas in which they operate. It shows how the existing institutional architecture allows the different actors to act in parallel when exerting their external representation roles. Communication and close coordination are key to avoiding duplication and allowing the EU to speak with one voice.

Figure 1 – Schematic diagram of the EU's external representation



Source: EPRS, based on the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty.

In practice however, in the absence of clear cut rules, cooperation and coordination is largely determined by the personalities of the different office holders. European Council President Herman van Rompuy and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso established and maintained the [practice](#) of holding weekly meetings to discuss issues on the agendas of their respective institutions, including external relations issues. Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker continued this practice during their mandates, although not with the same regularity. At the start of their mandates, Michel and von der Leyen renewed this practice, although the element of regularity was missing. More recently, this practice has been all but abandoned, while analysts [point](#) at a 'dysfunctional relationship at the heart of the EU'.

The relationship between Van Rompuy and High Representative Catherine Ashton was assessed as '[running smoothly](#)', but there was 'no regular consultation mechanism' and their [meetings](#) were 'driven by events rather than structured and systematic'. For most of his mandate, Van Rompuy focused on economic and financial issues, and to a lesser extent on foreign policy, while the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, focused on setting up the EEAS. Furthermore, Ashton attended only the foreign policy debates in the European Council, an approach that changed with her successor, Federica Mogherini, who started attending the European Council meetings in their entirety. In this context, scholars expressed the [hope](#) that Tusk and Mogherini might develop a structured working relationship, including joint external representation efforts aimed at expressing a united EU position externally. Despite early mandate [attempts](#) at convergence, Tusk and Mogherini conducted their external representation roles independently.



Early in their mandates, Michel and Borrell met with foreign counterparts jointly. This was the case with [Fayez al-Sarraj](#), Chairman of the Presidency Council of the Government of National Accord of the State of Libya, on 8 January 2020. Several days later, on 19 January 2020, Michel, von der Leyen and Borrell all attended the [Conference on Libya](#) organised in Berlin. In his post conference [statement](#), Michel stressed that 'High Representative Borrell and I have worked to support the conclusion of a ceasefire and for the relaunch of the peace process', underlining the joint cooperative effort. This development may have sparked hope for more convergence in the EU's external action, reflected in the good cooperation at technical/administrative level between the Council and Commission structures as well as with the EEAS. However, from an external communication perspective, the overall outcome was far from ideal in terms of coordination and ability to speak with one voice. Michel put forward his own statement, while von der Leyen and Borrell issued a [joint statement](#). This was an early indication of what would progressively become an increasingly [competitive relationship](#) between the various actors responsible for representing the EU externally.

## The European Council's attention to external relations during the first year of Russia's war against Ukraine

With the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the European Council was yet again called upon to exercise its crisis management role, with EU leaders meeting nine times during the first year of the war. Ukraine was the main agenda item discussed at each meeting, with debates also focusing on sanctions, international justice and accountability for war crimes. In addition, as shown in Figure 2, EU leaders discussed the [Western Balkans](#), enlargement, transatlantic relations, the southern neighbourhood, security and defence, [food security](#), energy security, climate diplomacy, and EU-China relations. During that year, they granted candidate country status to Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and gave Georgia a 'European perspective'. They also called for progress in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, facilitated by Borrell – who considers it a '[central part](#)' of his mandate. In [June 2022](#), EU leaders supported the initiative of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, to launch a European Political Community (EPC), which has met twice to date, in [Prague](#), Czechia (2022), and in [Bulboaca](#), Moldova (2023).

Figure 2 – Number of meetings at which the European Council discussed external relations-related topics between February 2022 and February 2023



\*Enlargement (including reference to individual countries)

\*\* Western Balkans (region & individual countries)

Source: EPRS.

## European Council President's external action

The European Council President attends international summits, receives representatives of non-EU countries and international organisations, takes visits abroad and receives the letters of credence of ambassadors appointed to the EU, an attribute shared with the European Commission President. In order to understand President Michel's external action during the first year of Russia's war in Ukraine, it is important to consider all these elements, his main messages abroad as well as his interaction with President von der Leyen and HR/VP Borrell.

## Agenda of the European Council President

The public agenda of President Michel takes the form of a weekly schedule listing domestic and external engagements. For the period examined (24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023), President Michel took on 401 engagements, 281 of which were external. Figure 3 shows the different types of engagements taken on, showing that in-person meetings prevailed over other types of engagements, representing 39 % of his agenda. Telephone diplomacy came second, representing 24 % of the agenda, followed by video-conferences with EU and foreign counterparts (10 %).

Figure 3 – Charles Michel's agenda by type of engagement (24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023)

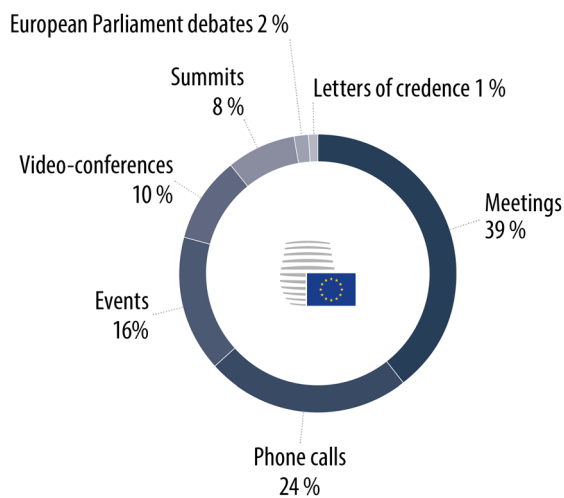


Figure 4 – Charles Michel's external and internal engagements (24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023)



Source: EPRS.

A further distinction is needed between external and domestic engagements. Figure 4 gives an overview of Michel's external and domestic engagements per type of engagement. The data show that bilateral meetings with foreign representatives prevail over meetings with EU representatives, the ratio being nearly four to one in favour of external engagements. The same is true of phone calls, with a two to one ratio in favour of external action. A change of pattern can be observed in the case of video-conferences. The number of video conferences organised with groups of EU Heads of State or Government ahead of European Council meetings is five times higher than that of video-conferences held with foreign counterparts. Video-conferences were developed as a useful tool during the pandemic with a view to allowing preparatory work ahead of (virtual or in-person) European Council meetings. They replaced the tour of capitals, which had been introduced as a working method by Van Rompuy and continued by Tusk. The aim of the tour was to help build consensus, ahead of European Council meetings, on the items on the agenda. It remains to be seen if in the long term video-conferences will continue to be used at preparatory stages, or if the tour of capitals will make a come-back as a working method.

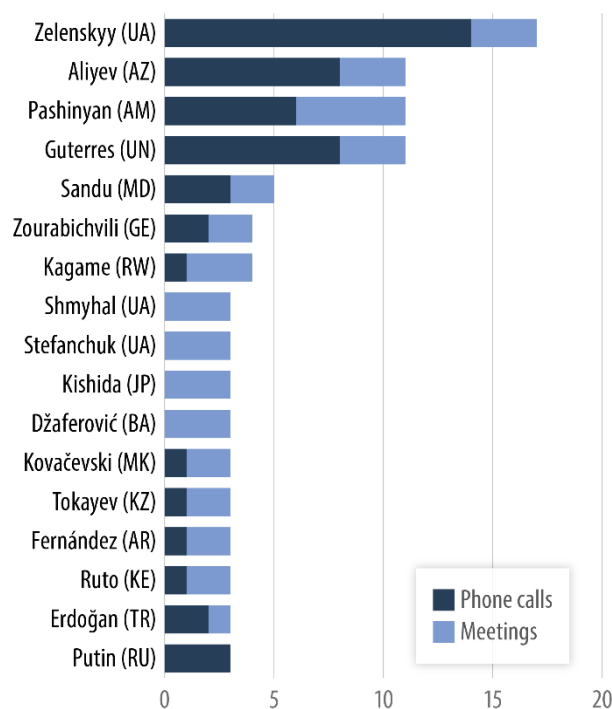
### In-person meetings and phone diplomacy

Charles Michel's external action between February 2022 and February 2023 mainly took the form of in-person meetings with foreign counterparts. Phone diplomacy was another key component of his activity during the first year of the Ukraine war. In most cases, phone calls were used to prepare or follow up on in-person meetings.

Figure 5 shows the foreign counterparts with whom Michel interacted most frequently in person and/or by phone. The data shows that Michel interacted most frequently with leaders in the EU's neighbourhood. This is particularly the case with the Ukrainian leadership, but also with the

leadership of [Moldova](#) and [Georgia](#), two countries that have experienced increased destabilisation and disinformation attempts in the first year of Russia's war on Ukraine. Michel also spoke on the phone (March and [April 2022](#)) with Vladimir Putin, focusing on Ukraine, but also on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. [Michel](#) hosted the US President, Joe Biden, for a [joint US-European Council session](#) on transatlantic relations and the war in Ukraine in March 2022.

Figure 5 – Charles Michel's interaction with foreign counterparts (minimum three interactions), between February 2022 and February 2023



Source: EPRS.

Most interactions in the period concerned were with Ukrainian officials. Michel kept in regular contact with Zelenskyy by phone; meeting him three times in Kyiv in 2022/2023 and, more recently, in Brussels on the occasion of the [special European Council](#) meeting held on 9-10 February 2023. In addition, Michel met with the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Denys Shmyhal, three times, twice in Ukraine (Odessa and Kyiv) and once on the margins of the UN General Assembly high-level week, held in New York in September 2022. During his two visits to Kyiv, Michel met with the speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, Ruslan Stefanchuk, once [addressing](#) the Ukrainian Parliament. He also met with Stefanchuk in Strasbourg in June 2022. It should come as no surprise that most of Michel's interactions were with the Ukrainian leadership, as Ukraine was the main external relations topic of the nine European Council meetings held during the first year of the war.

Charles Michel engaged in sustained dialogue with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia on the normalisation of relations and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, an issue which was last on the [agenda](#) of the

European Council in 2020. His [mediation](#) efforts led to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict being discussed in quadrilateral format (Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan) during the [European Political Community](#) (EPC) meeting in Prague in 2022. A [statement](#) was then adopted recognising the parties' commitment 'to the Charter of the United Nations and the [Alma Ata 1991 Declaration](#) through which both recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty'. The parties committed to having the border delimitation commissions abide by the principles of the Alma Ata Declaration in their [work](#). [Michel](#) continued to urge the two parties to take steps towards a sustainable and stable solution to a conflict that has regional destabilising potential. A follow-up meeting, this time in an expanded format including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, [took place](#) during the EPC meeting in Moldova on 1 June 2023. Michel announced that the same group of leaders have decided to meet again in Brussels on 21 July 2023 and in the autumn, on the margins of the EPC summit in Granada, Spain.

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, was also among those with whom Charles Michel interacted most. This confirms that multilateralism remains at the core of the EU's external action at a time when health concerns regarding future pandemic risks are high, climate change requires a joint international response, food (in)security is growing and no peace talks are in sight in Ukraine.



## Level of representation

It is equally important to consider who Michel's counterparts were during his visits. Figure 6 shows that most of the foreign representatives President Michel has met were either heads of state or heads of government. The meetings with representatives of international organisations took place at the level of the head of the organisation. On a few occasions counterparts were, in addition to the head of state or government, ministers of foreign affairs or energy, which was the case in particular during the visits to

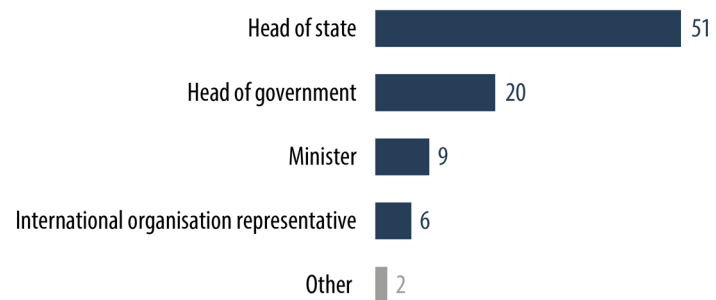
Algeria, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. When addressing the [UN Security Council](#) the audience were the ambassadors of the 5 permanent and 10 non-permanent members of the Security Council. These findings confirm that the primary arena the European Council President operates in when representing the EU externally is that of heads of state or government; and only rarely do interlocutors hold a ministerial or other position.

Four ceremonies for the presentation of letters of credentials took place during the year, allowing President Michel to meet with the newly appointed third-country ambassadors. In striking contrast to the rest of his agenda, which is rather detailed, e.g. on phone diplomacy, the names of the ambassadors having presented their letters of credence to President Michel are not mentioned. The EEAS maintains a [list](#) with the missions and diplomatic personnel accredited to the EU which presents scattered information dating back to June 2022 (last consulted on 2 May 2023).

It is difficult to compare the agenda of Charles Michel to the agendas of Ursula von der Leyen or Josep Borrell, as the information available barely allows for it. For instance, the public agenda of von der Leyen (last accessed on 2 May 2023) mentions the foreign counterparts the president has received in Brussels, but does not systematically detail whom she met with abroad. Regarding the meetings held in Brussels, the agenda shows that von der Leyen met with 10 heads of state, including the US President Joe Biden with whom she discussed energy on the margins of the [March 2022 European Council](#) where he was a guest for a joint session on Ukraine and transatlantic relations. She has also met in Brussels with five prime ministers, the US Secretary for the Treasury, Janet Yellen, and three heads of international organisations, including the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg. When it comes to meetings abroad, the agenda is less detailed, just mentioning that von der Leyen 'Participate[d] in the 2022 NATO summit', that she had 'Travel[ed] to' and then the name of the country (for example, Egypt, Israel or North Macedonia) or that she made an 'official visit' and then the name of the city (for example, Tirana). On a few occasions the names of the foreign counterparts were mentioned. This was the case with the trips to Ukraine and Moldova where the names of Zelenskyy and Maia Sandu (President of Moldova) were mentioned specifically. Two ceremonies for the presentation of the letters of credence of non-EU countries' ambassadors featured on the agenda, but the ambassadors' names were not provided.

The HR/VP's [agenda](#) is more detailed on individual meetings held both in Brussels and abroad, including 19 meetings at head of state level, 14 at head of government level and 37 at ministerial level (29 of them being ministers of foreign affairs). Borrell's agenda refers to bilateral meetings held on the margins of international summits and conferences, but without mentioning the names of the foreign counterparts with whom he has met. In contrast to Charles Michel's agenda, there is no mention of phone diplomacy, which in this case may reflect a willingness to ensure a certain degree of confidentiality regarding day-to-day diplomatic activity.

Figure 6 – Charles Michel's foreign counterparts by rank



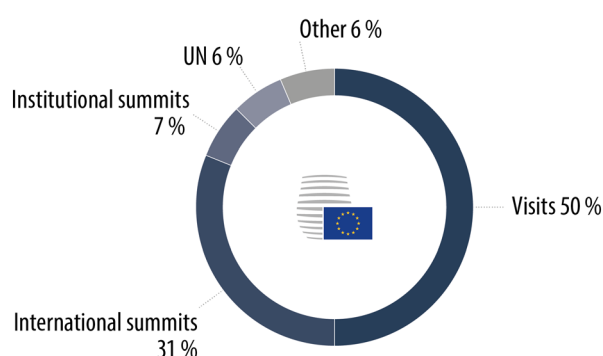
Source: EPRS.

There is uneven information on the agendas of Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell concerning their interactions with each other outside international summits and conferences. Bilateral meetings appear to be rare and irregular. Michel's agenda mentions only one meeting with von der Leyen and two meetings with Borrell, but does not disclose the topics discussed. When it comes to engagements carried out jointly, von der Leyen's agenda shows that she and Michel met jointly with the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, during the UNGA high-level week, and that she was joined by the HR/VP on her first trip to Kyiv in April 2022. Michel and von der Leyen held a [joint meeting](#) with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg followed by a [press conference](#) on 24 February 2022 at which they condemned Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and expressed EU and NATO unity. Nearly a year later, on 10 January 2023, the three co-signed the [third EU-NATO declaration](#), which seeks to deepen cooperation between the two organisations.

## Travel and engagements outside the EU

Charles Michel travelled abroad for summits, visits to partner countries and to represent the EU at the UN. He also attended foreign leaders' funerals; such events are included under 'Other' in Figure 7.

Figure 7 – Charles Michel's trips outside the EU by type of event



Source: EPRS.

Of the 281 external engagements taken on by Michel during the period examined, 127 engagements were carried out during his travel abroad. This shows that most of his external representation activity took place in Brussels or within the EU, as was the case, for example, with the high-level donors' international conference for Ukraine he attended in Warsaw on 5 May 2022.

Michel used the opportunities provided by summits, international conferences and, in particular, the UNGA high-level week to schedule bilateral meetings with foreign counterparts. For example, during the year, he met regularly with the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and/or with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, on the margins of international events such as the

UNGA high-level week in New York and the Francophonie Summit in Djerba. He also met with the leaders of Canada and Australia on the margins of the NATO and the G7 and/or G20 summits. His visits to Africa and Latin America were mainly connected with the international summits he was attending, enabling him to schedule side-meetings.

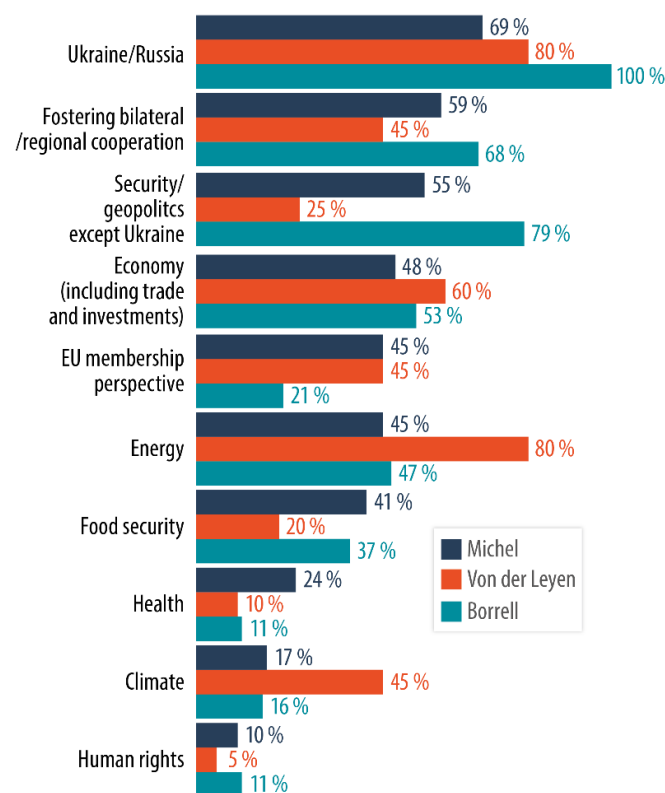
Of Michel's external representation activities conducted abroad, 50 % concerned visits to partner countries. Michel's first external visit after the outbreak of the war was to Ukraine on 20 April 2022. He also visited Moldova and the six Western Balkan countries, showing convergence between his agenda and the foreign policy topics, in particular enlargement, discussed by the European Council. Although Michel did not visit Georgia, the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, was the first foreign leader with whom he met in person in Brussels after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Michel also made visits to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and to central Asia, where the focus was on energy security, a recurrent item on the European Council agenda during the period examined, and one that overlaps with von der Leyen's portfolio (see Figure 2). He also visited China weeks after a [discussion](#) on EU-China relations held at his [request](#) by the European Council. During his trip to China, Michel's discussions with the Chinese leadership covered Ukraine, trade and multilateralism, including the future pandemic treaty, an initiative that he [proposed](#) in 2020 and [has been championing](#) since.

During the period under examination, Michel made 27 trips abroad to 39 destinations, outdoing both von der Leyen and Borrell (see Annexes 1 and 2). They all travelled to the Western Balkans and Moldova individually. In the case of Ukraine, von der Leyen travelled with the HR/VP for her first trip to Kyiv in April 2022. A joint meeting of the [College of Commissioners](#) with the Ukrainian government took place in early 2023 and was followed by an EU-Ukraine summit attended by Michel and Zelenskyy. Michel and von der Leyen also jointly attended EU summits with [China](#), [Japan](#) and [Ukraine](#) and the [EU-Australia leaders' meeting](#). They represented the EU at the UN Climate Change Conference ([COP 27](#)), the [G7/G20](#) summits and the [NATO summit](#). Michel did not make joint visits with EU leaders during the period in question but there were events that he attended, such as the Francophonie summit and the [Bilderberg Meeting](#), where EU leaders were also in attendance.

## Main topics addressed abroad

Visits abroad come with opportunities for speeches and press conferences. The analysis of 30 interventions (speeches and press conferences) by Charles Michel, 20 interventions by Ursula von der Leyen and 19 interventions by Josep Borrell shows that the most recurrent topic mentioned during the period was the war in Ukraine, while the least mentioned item was human rights. Borrell mentioned the war in Ukraine in all his interventions whereas von der Leyen did so in 80 % of her interventions and Michel did so in 69 % of his (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 – Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell: top 10 topics of statements made abroad



Source: EPRS.

The second and third most frequently mentioned topics by both Michel and Borrell were fostering bilateral and regional cooperation, and security and geopolitics, reflecting the core of their external representation mandates, namely CFSP and CSDP. Energy and the economy, the two topics at the core of the European Commission's action featured in second and third places in von der Leyen's interventions, showing convergence with the Commission's mandate.

A closer look at Michel's interventions abroad shows that they were tailored for each audience and for the purpose of the visit. For example, references to enlargement prevailed in the speeches held in aspiring countries. References to geopolitics and geopolitical challenges were frequent in the 'Global South', where mentions of the war in Ukraine were scattered. Conversely, references to energy and trade were frequent in Michel's interventions in the MENA region, Central Asia and Latin America.

Topics such as EU unity and leadership and strategic autonomy appeared in Michel's speeches for EU audiences. The speech delivered at [Sciences Po](#) in Paris a month after the outbreak of the war was largely dedicated to the concept of strategic autonomy, indicating that it relies on three pillars: 1) EU values, 2) prosperity and 3) capacity to act together. Similarly, the [address](#) at the annual EU ambassadors' conference stressed

the importance of EU unity, and outlined that the EU's path towards strategic autonomy required speedy action on energy policy as well as on security and defence.

## The way forward

The outbreak of the war placed Ukraine at the centre of the European Council's debates along with energy security, enlargement and the Western Balkans. The data show that there is convergence between the topics addressed by EU leaders and the messages delivered abroad by Michel, von der Leyen and Borrell. The high number of visits to the Western Balkans and the EU's neighbourhood confirms that these regions are a priority for the EU. These visits were mostly undertaken individually, however, showing duplication rather than coordination.

The examination of the agendas shows that the three actors rarely meet each other outside the context of (international) summits, where they represent the EU jointly. It shows discontinuity with previous practice, in particular the weekly meetings introduced in his time by Herman Van Rompuy to exchange with José Manuel Barroso on ongoing issues. The data also show that the different actors tend to stay within their pre-defined arenas and engage with foreign counterparts at their respective levels of representation. In the case of Michel, there is a tendency to reach out to other audiences and to go beyond CFSP and CSDP topics while remaining within the European Council's remit, as was the case with the address to the UN Security Council or the energy tour in the MENA region and in Central Asia. Michel's mediation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was a self-appointed task, and one that represented a transgression into the arena of the HR/VP. This sets a precedent that the incoming European Council President may build on if so inclined, in order to (re)shape their role after 2024.

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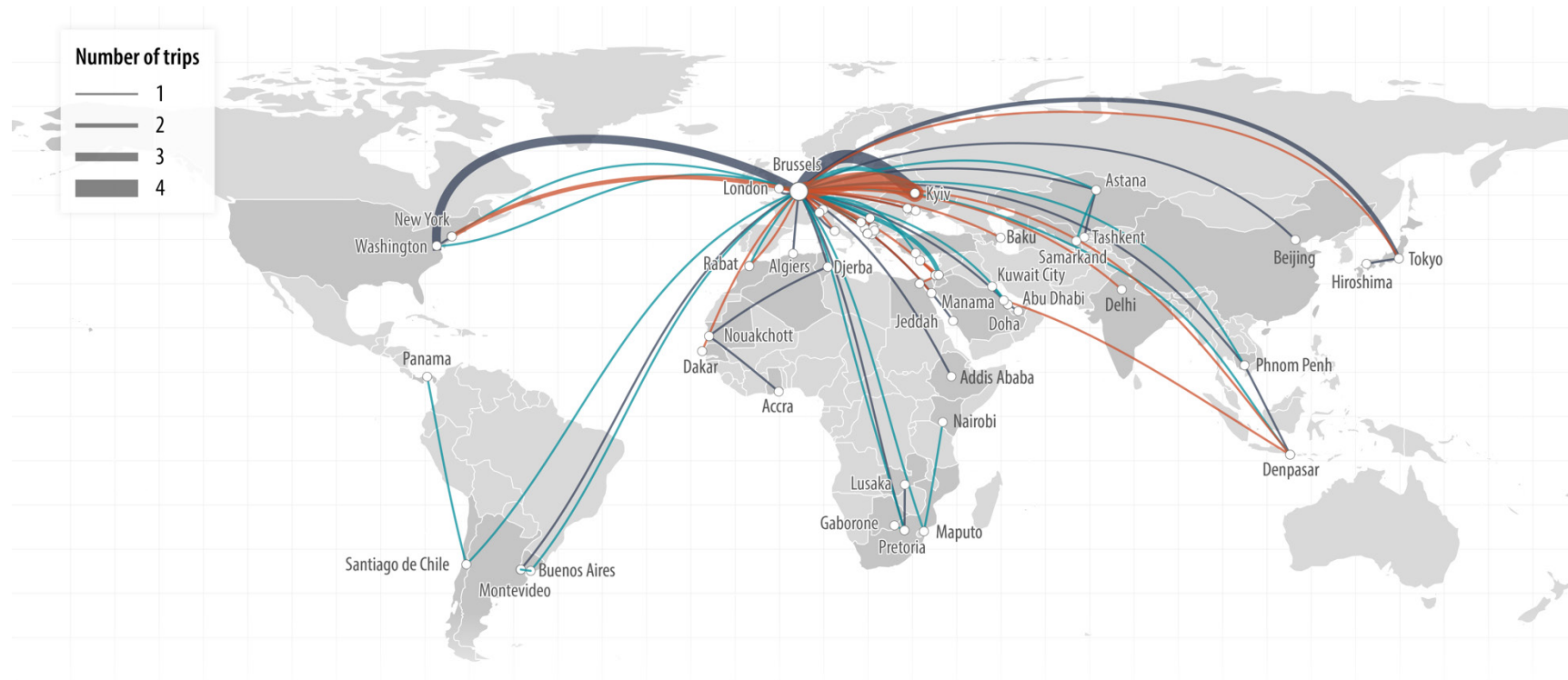
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## Annex I: Overview of visits abroad by Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell, from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023 (world map)



**Charles Michel**

President of the European Council  
Trips: 27 (39 destinations)



**Ursula von der Leyen**

President of the European Commission  
Trips: 20 (28 destinations)



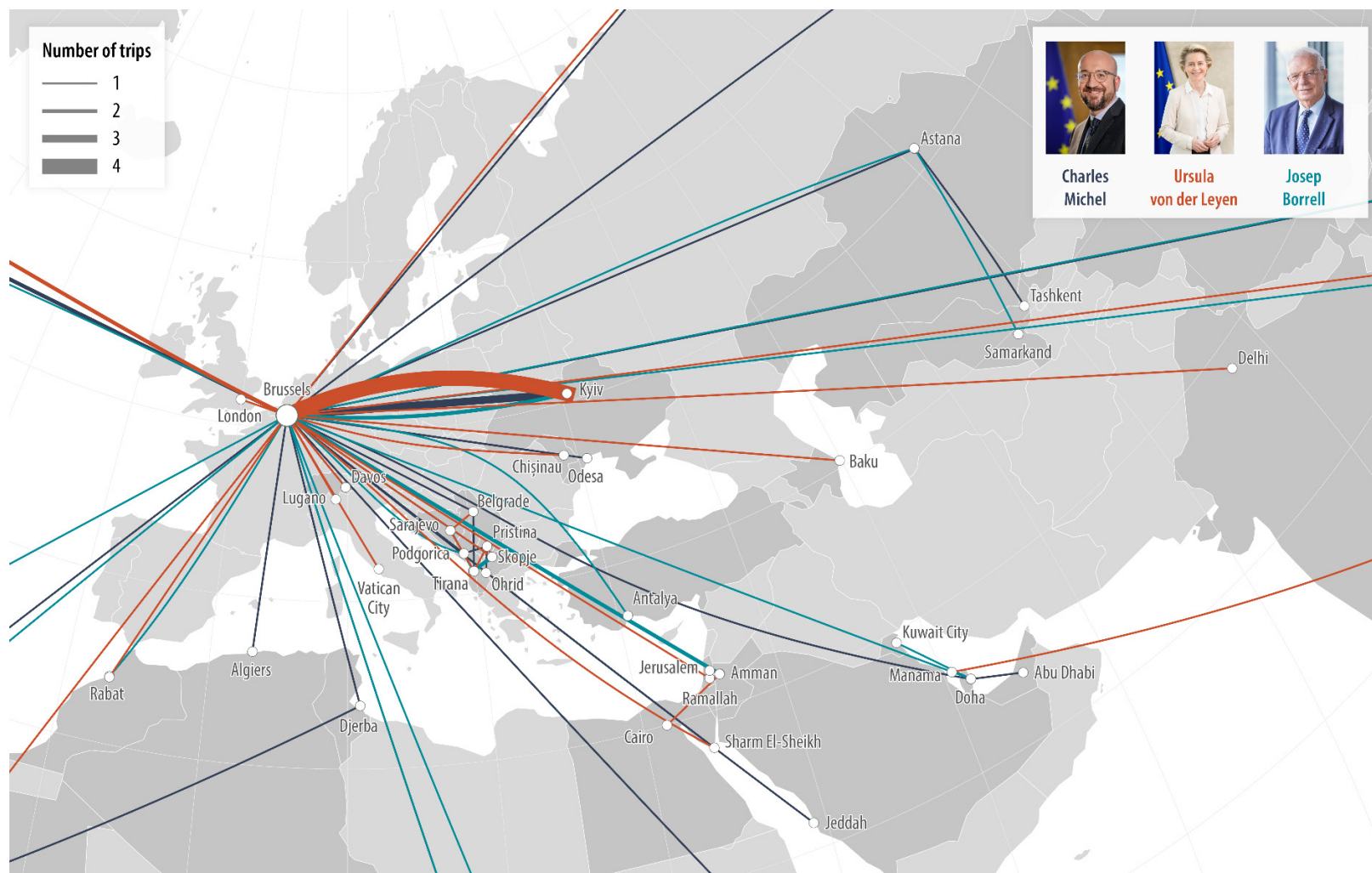
**Josep Borrell**

High Representative for Foreign Affairs  
Trips: 19 (27 destinations)





## Annex II: Overview of visits abroad by Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell, from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023 (Europe (non-EU) and the Middle East)



N.B. These two maps have been put together on the basis of the information available and do not claim to give an entirely accurate picture.  
Source: EPRS.