

In the Search for a Room of One's Own: Gendered Power Structures in the Council of the European Union

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Introduction

The central thesis of Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (2004/1929) posits that every woman needs a private space for creative work – a privilege historically granted to men. Through this metaphor I examine the call for a dedicated gender equality configuration in the Council of the European Union (Council), a key intergovernmental decision-making body, even though in most policy sectors it acts today as co-legislator with the European Parliament (EP). I also test empirically if the gender mainstreaming (GM) approach introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty (Jacquot 2010, 2015) supports or weakens the claim for a separate gender equality configuration. As of 1998 the only avenue for meetings of ministers in charge of gender equality are informal meetings (often called informal councils) (Jacquot 2015). Using a resistance-centered Feminist Institutionalism (FI) approach (Kantola/Waylen 2024), I explore power dynamics in advancing or hindering gender equality within the European Union (EU). I analyse the formal and informal rules hindering or pushing for a broader institutionalization of gender equality policy promised by the Amsterdam Treaty's GM provision, notably the difficulties of the creation of a dedicated Council formation for gender equality. I combine an accidental ethnography method (Levitan/Carr-Chellman/Carr-Chellman 2017) based on my first-hand experience with an analysis of Council documents such as conclusions and steering notes for policy debates.

My analysis contributes to the broader literature of gendered dynamics within EU institutions and complements existing research on the European Commission (Commission) and the EP (e.g. Ahrens/Meier/Rolandsen Agustin 2023; Elomäki et al. 2023), with insights about the Council, which is the most under-researched among the three key institutions (but see Abels 2020; de Silva/Tepliakova 2024; de Silva 2025). I focus on the leadership role of the Council Presidency in setting the gender equality agenda and the various subtle dimensions of power that organise the Council's work. Abels (2020) identified both as areas needing further study.

I first introduce the Council's setting regarding gender equality policy, followed by discussing my theoretical framework, data and methods. I then present my empirical findings and conclusions.

Unpacking the Council of the EU

While the EU showed strong commitment to gender equality during the 2019-2024 legislature (Abels/Mushaben 2020), this policy area in the Council still lacks the

institutional legitimacy of others. The EP has a dedicated Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM, established in 1979 following the first direct EP elections presided by Simone Veil), and the Commission has a Commissioner responsible for equality (with a unique portfolio between 2019-2024), yet, the Council still lacks a corresponding configuration (Elomäki/ Ahrens 2022).

The Council negotiates and adopts EU legislation. In cases where the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP) applies since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, it is co-legislator with the EP. Both institutions act on the initiative of the Commission. The Council operations are managed by the General Secretariat. Legislative proposals coming from the Commission are first reviewed by national experts in Council working parties chaired by the rotating six-month Council Presidency (Tallberg 2008). Proposals then go to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), i.e. the member states ambassadors to the EU, and compromises are adopted in formal Council meetings by national ministers. As part of the OLP, the Council first adopts a negotiating mandate for the so-called trilogues (i.e. negotiations with the EP and the Commission), and – in case of a political deal on the compromise text – the final decision on the legislative proposal.

The Council's ten configurations address specific policy areas, such as foreign affairs and environment. However, only the General Affairs Council (GAC) with its special coordination role and responsible for institutional, administrative and horizontal matters and the Foreign Affairs Council are mentioned in the EU treaties.

Currently, none of the formal Council configurations explicitly addresses gender equality. The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) includes it partially without exemplifying it in the title. Gender equality and antidiscrimination issues within employment and social policy are reflected in the description of the work on the Council website (Council of the European Union 2025). It can be inferred, and this hypothesis will be further tested in the article, that other aspects of gender equality policy are addressed within different Council configurations, adhering to the principle of GM codified by the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). To respond to this lacuna, several presidencies organised informal meetings of gender equality ministers demonstrating their interest in stronger coordination on this policy.

In sum, the legislative process in the Council involves a network of actors, including national experts, attachés, ministers, and permanent representatives. In the next section I present my theoretical framework to analyse GM and gender equality in the Council.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist institutionalism (FI) examines how institutional rules enable or constrain transformative change toward gender equality shaped by evolving power relations (Weiner/MacRae 2014; Kantola/Dahl 2005). FI reveals the gendered foundations

of institutions and the mechanisms upholding or challenging existing structures (Elomäki et al. 2023; Kantola/Waylen 2024; Chappel/Waylen 2013). The norms can protect existing privileges, with gender policies often diluted or discarded in bureaucratic contexts upholding patriarchal norms (Mergaert/Lombardo 2014; Weiner/MacRae 2014). Naurin, Naurin and Alexander (2019) highlight that policy negotiators, though ostensibly motivated by national or bureaucratic interests, often act on internalized gender stereotypes.

GM is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policymaking (Council of Europe 1998, 12). It often faces tokenism, resistance and undermining, because policy actors may adapt gender mainstreaming to fit organisational demands contrary to gender equality demands (Jacquot 2010; Mergaert/Lombardo 2014; Lombardo/Meier/Verloo 2009). Moreover, the aim of applying GM across policies is also potentially limiting, because it does not per se require allocating specific means, structures and staff (Jacquot 2015) and can serve as an excuse for eliminating specific gender equality policies (Stratigaki 2005). Resistance to gender mainstreaming frequently arises from those responsible for implementing or evaluating policy interventions (Mergaert/Lombardo 2014). Therefore, while some view it as a progressive tool, others misinterpret or undermine it, rendering it counterproductive (Stratigaki 2005; Ahrens/Callerstig 2017). The impact of GM on EU gender equality policy can therefore be paradoxical (Jacquot 2009), which will be explored further down. Distinguishing between formal rules, informal norms, and their practical enactment remains thus critical.

Understanding the implementation of gender equality policies requires a framework that captures both resistance and feminist counterstrategies (Roggeband 2018). Institutional change can be conceptualized as a struggle between opposing forces (Celis/Lovenduski 2018; Ahrens/Meier/Rolandsen Agustín 2023). Gender advocates, often lacking institutional power, must strategically blend confrontation with subtle negotiation (Eyben 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand how change agents strategically exploit institutional “gaps and soft spots” (Kantola/Waylen 2024, 4) to promote gender equality. Collective power becomes essential, allowing actors to form alliances and mobilize “feminist critical friends” (Chappell/Mackay 2020). Additionally, Latour’s (1984) translation model of power underscores the importance of tracing how it is enacted. Power, he argues, results from the successful alignment of actors’ interests throughout the implementation chain. This approach highlights the crucial role of institutional actors in shaping how gender equality goals are realized in practice.

In the Council, support for and resistance to gender equality policies are shaped not only by the national interests (the policy hinterland) but also by the institutional setting of the Council itself and the underlying power relations which are also gendered (van der Vleuten 2016; Abels 2020). The reliance on unwritten conventions and entrenched practices enables personal values and political preferences to influence

legal interpretations and procedural decisions (da Silva/Tepliakova 2024). The importance of tradition reinforces continuity and redistributes power informally, often without direct accountability (Tallberg 2008). This view will be further tested for the Council Presidency which through its agenda setting and brokering role provides an interesting yet understudied perspective to gender equality within the Council.

Methodology and Data

I employ a qualitative research design. It combines analysing formal Council documents such as adopted conclusions and steering notes to the Council's debates from 2015 to 2024 and a reflexive, interpretive approach rooted in Accidental Ethnography (AccE) (Levitan/Carr-Chellman/Carr-Chellman 2017). AccE data is based on my first-hand experience working with the Council in my capacity as an advisor to a national government, including during this country's Council Presidency. My insider perspective provides a unique understanding of public documents and the internal processes and rules of the Council.

The AccE method is a systematic analysis of prior fieldwork which uses data “accidentally” gathered, this means, not collected as part of a predesigned study (Levitan/Carr-Chellman/Carr-Chellman 2017). It values personal experience and institutional memory, demanding reflection and scrutiny. I re-engaged with my past work experience, testing memory against evidence and peer feedback to mitigate potential biases and critically confront my findings with literature (e.g., Abels 2020; Jacquot 2010; Naurin/Naurin/Alexander 2019; van der Vleuten 2016). While limited in generalizability and objectivity, this approach reveals the informal aspects of policymaking that shape formal outcomes.

I use a longitudinal sample of official documents from 2015 to 2024, enabling a robust temporal perspective on the evolution of GM in Council configurations and public debates during two legislative cycles. I conducted a qualitative analysis to identify the scope and themes, its frequency and the Council configuration in charge. The document analysis is complemented by a hybrid use of materials from my private archive, i.e. informal notes, which are cross-referenced with public records (e.g., press releases, stakeholders' positions and Council agendas, translations of council conclusions) to verify claims and ensure analytical triangulation.

Formal and Informal Resistances

As explained, equality policy in the Council suffers from lacking a firm institutional setup. It therefore depends on political leadership to push it forward. I argue that efforts to implement GM and elevate the status of gender equality often depend on informal networks, strategic alliances, and subtle forms of influence.

I explore how institutional path-dependency – through both formal and informal rules – shapes outcomes over time and demonstrate how ostensibly gender-neutral rules

generate gendered effects, contributing to prolonged and, so far, unsuccessful pursuit of a formal gender equality Council configuration. I also highlight the inherent challenges of promoting GM within a consensus-driven and diplomatic institutional culture, the tactical use of procedural ambiguities, and the emergence of indirect resistance from actors who are typically not associated with opposition to equality goals.

Formal Council Procedures: a Prolonged Fight for a Council Configuration

The demand for a dedicated gender equality Council configuration is a longstanding one of civil society organisations. For instance, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) has consistently lobbied for stronger EU mechanisms to promote gender equality and women's rights, including the dedicated Council configuration which was issued again in the EWL's 2024 EU election manifesto (European Women's Lobby 2024). In another 2024 joint statement, 143 civil society organisations urged the EU leadership to establish a Council configuration on equality, claiming this would provide a platform for high-level political debates and concrete solutions, ensuring greater institutional balance within the EU's legislative institutions (ILGA Europe et al. 2024). Moreover, such a configuration would send a powerful political signal about the Council's commitment to strengthen equality and combat discrimination in the EU (ILGA Europe et al. 2024; EIGE 2022; Olczak 2024).

Other supranational actors visibly supported the claim (Bonetti et al. 2020, PES Women 2020). In 2020, the EP adopted a resolution, calling to create a specific Council configuration on equality (2020/2896 (RSP)). Even the President of the European Council back then, Charles Michel, expressed openness to the proposal in 2021 – likely not accidentally after the highly medialized ‘Sofagate’ incident in Turkey – yet, without taking any further steps (Agence Europe 2021). This moment also marked the beginning of widespread media coverage of the issue. While seemingly technical given its link to the Council's internal structures, such issues benefit rarely from media coverage; yet, the core is essentially political (de Silva/Tepliakova 2024).

Interestingly, GM is sometimes used as argument against creating a gender equality Council configuration. Similar to discussions on the future of the FEMM Committee (Kantola/Waylen 2024), according to my first-hand experience, gender equality is seen by some Council actors as an element integrated in all policy areas and therefore not suitable to be confined to one institutional structure. However, this argument overlooks the persistent challenges of embedding gender equality in Council deliberations. Gender equality measures are often added as a “layer” to existing policy frameworks without substantially altering power dynamics, making them vulnerable to reversal or dilution (Celis/Lovenduski 2018).

To test the real implementation of GM in the Council and the argument of its transversal application, I analysed the frequency, the subjects, and the configurations which put it in Council conclusions and formal policy debates between 2015 to 2024. If the argument holds, the documents should show gender equality across configurations.

As part of the review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), EU member states and institutions assess progress toward its goals. Since 2011, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) prepares an annual report on the EU’s BPfA follow-up as the basis for Council conclusions. This annual exercise is done by EPSCO and covers therefore a restricted number of areas such as equal pay and working conditions (Table 1).

My analysis shows that beyond the recurring Gender Action Plan (GAP) on the EU’s external policy conclusions in the General Affairs Council, gender equality was explicitly referenced in only four additional cases – in EPSCO and in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (EYCS) (see Table 1). No other Council configurations issued dedicated conclusions addressing gender dimensions within the studied timeframe.

Table 1: Number of Council Conclusions on Gender Equality per Council Configuration, 2015-2024

Council Configuration	Policy Theme and Year
EPSCO	gender pension gap and gender pay gap, wealth gap (2015, 2019, 2020, 2024); decision-making (2015); Gender Equality Strategy (2016); poverty (2016); skills (2017); gender segregation on the labour market (2017); youth (*2018, 2022); gender equal economies (2019); care (2020, 2023); Covid-19 (2021); Gender Mainstreaming (2021, 2023); work-life balance (2024); mental health (2024); AI (2021, 2025)
GAC	GAP II (2019); GAP III (*2020); Women, Peace and Security (2022)
EYSC	gender equality, youth and digitalisation (*2018); gender equality and culture (*2020); women and equality in Sport (2023)
Council of the EU	Women, Peace and Security (2018)

The * marks Presidency conclusions, which are issued if there is no member state consensus. The document then states how many member states ultimately supported the text, without naming the countries that supported or rejected the compromise.

Source: Compiled by author.

Additionally, my analysis of public documents illustrates that only seven policy debates in the Council were devoted exclusively to gender equality, six of them in EPSCO and only one in ECYS (see Table 2).

Table 2: List of public policy debates on (gender) equality, 2015-2024

Council Configuration	Policy Theme and Date
EPSCO	Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 – Exchange of views (4/12/2015)
EPSCO	Closing the gender pay gap: contributing to the achievement of the goals of the European Pillar of Social Rights (15/03/2018)
EPSCO	The future gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in the EU (10/12/2019)
EPSCO	Towards a Europe of Equality (06/12/2021)
EPSCO	Combating discrimination in recruitment and promoting diversity in the world of work: tools and experiences (14/03/2022)
EPSCO	Women in public life (during the first formal EPSCO Council on Equality) (07/05/2024)
EYCS	Attracting female talent to science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) disciplines (23/11/2023)

Source: Compiled by author.

This limited and content-bound engagement underscores the structural constraints of GM in the absence of a dedicated Council configuration as well as the lack of mainstreaming gender effectively across Council formations. Gender equality remains confined to EPSCO remits, where ministers responsible for equality meet only informally.

Creating a new Council configuration or changing its name are both administratively and politically challenging. To modify or add a configuration, the Council President must call for a reinforced qualified majority vote to amend the list annexed to Decision 2009/878/EU, which establishes the Council configurations (Article 236 TFEU). The configurations can be changed and modified by a special procedure that requires a reinforced qualified majority, i.e. at least 72 % of the Council members comprising at least 65 % of the EU population need to vote in favour. The last revision took place in 2010, when sport was added to the EYCS configuration, and space to the Competitiveness (Internal market, Industry, and Research; COMPET) configuration.

In 2020, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia were the first to formally attempt to change the institutional setup in favour of gender equality. The Trio Presidency proposed to alter the title of the EPSCO configuration by adding Gender Equality (Presidency Trio, 2020), yet to no avail. To avoid discussions on the term “gender” which some member states considered contentious, the Belgian Presidency proposed in 2024 the neutral term “equality” during the informal meeting of ministers and formally at the EPSCO Council on 7 May 2024. It was officially supported at the public session by ministers from Denmark, Italy, Estonia, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria and Poland (Council of the EU 2024). Despite this progress, the pro-

posal has not yet reached the General Affairs Council which, according to the formal procedure, must prepare this as decision item for the European Council.

In theory, Council configurations should evolve to reflect the political and legal importance of policy areas, especially those grounded in EU treaties. However, in my experience, the process is complex due to multiple priorities and cautious institutional approaches based on the Council consensus-machine (Heisenberg 2005) and the fear that failed initiatives could hinder the gender equality agenda. This contrasts with minimal resistance when less contentious policy areas like youth or space were integrated into EYCS and COMPET.

Informal and Formal Council Rules: The Power of a Precedent

One core mechanism for institutional change is establishing a precedent. The administrative and procedural decision-making dimensions play a crucial role in shaping institutional practices, often holding as much weight as formal legal provisions. In practice, the Council operates within a framework where treaties and agreements provide broad directions, while procedural traditions and past practices define the actual implementation of policies. Thus, altering procedural norms can serve as powerful instrument for shaping political responses and institutional dynamics.

Several Council Presidencies attempted to advance gender equality by organising informal meetings of ministers and state secretaries. Their recurrence since 1998, and last organised by Austria 2019, Germany 2020, France 2021, Belgium 2024, and Poland 2025, demonstrates how established practices can influence Council operations. The informal meetings depend on political leadership of the Presidency as is visible from their irregular frequency: not organised every six months or even every second presidency; no informal council in 2022 or 2023. They can also not take formal decisions nor discuss policy files under negotiation. However, Presidency efforts to institutionalize gender equality changed recently.

Notably, in 2025, the Belgian Presidency's initiative to organise the first formal EPSCO Council exclusively dedicated to equality (within the EPSCO configuration) set an important precedent (Council 2025). The Presidency decided this within a broader aim to strengthen the institutionalization of gender equality. Repeating such a precedent can contribute to institutionalization, turning informal and ad-hoc practices into an accepted tradition.

Similarly, the first Trio Declaration on gender equality, signed in 2007, by Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia, exemplifies the impact of sustained commitments within the Trio Presidency system. Since 2007 this declaration is signed at an informal meeting of ministers or a conference. Hence, until today the declarations remain outside formal Council structures and are not officially linked to the 18-months Trio Presidency programmes. Yet, its 18-months perspective allows for a longer time span of common objectives and ensures at least some continuity in the commitment between the short periods of Council Presidencies. However, as Mergaert and Lombardo (2014, 1) high-

light, traditions not enshrined in treaties or procedural frameworks remain vulnerable to discontinuation and can be “filtered out”, subject to the priorities of successive presidencies.

Informal Alliances: The Leverage of Like-minded Groups

Council actors often rely on strategic networks and alliances to navigate decision-making. This is because EU policies lack a clear centre of power, with authority being constantly redistributed among the 27 member states and the rotating Presidency. Strategic networks facilitate information exchange, mutual support, and collective bargaining among member states. This collaboration is particularly valuable in buffering against domestic political shifts and ensuring a coherent approach to policy implementation at the supranational level. Moreover, when technical-level relationships are reinforced by ministerial meetings at the political level, the policy influence of these networks is significantly amplified.

Progressive member states, often referred to as “like-minded countries” (de Silva/Tepliakova 2024, 7) engage in coordinated action to bolster their positions and avoid political isolation. Recently, however, I observed similar coordination among states with opposing views on gender equality alliances (e.g. the gender equality declarations of Hungary, Bulgaria or Poland), suggesting an effort to consolidate influence and counter progressive stances.

Moreover, shifts in gender equality discourse are regularly driven by far-right movements, leading to reframing the topic (da Silva/Tepliakova 2024). Instead of being recognized as an integral component of fundamental rights, gender equality is increasingly treated as a selective policy domain, where specific aspects can be emphasized or omitted based on ideological preferences. These are developments that I have also observed in my position. This has resulted in a policy discourse that, while still incorporating language on work-life balance or women’s economic empowerment, simultaneously challenges certain concepts, such as gender identity, LGBTIQ rights or intersectionality, reflecting broader ideological struggles within the EU policy landscape. This creates more ad hoc alliances than before with fundamental rights being subject to selective behaviour (Ahrens/Gaweda/Kantola 2022; Kantola/Lombardo 2021).

Navigating Indirect Resistance: Actors and their Spheres of Power

Identifying the key actors who either resist or support implementing gender equality policies within the Council is a complex task. The distinction between individual and institutional resistance is often blurred, making it difficult to pinpoint opposition within the Council’s structures. While political resistance is more visible in inter-governmental negotiations, subtle forms of institutional resistance operate through administrative and procedural mechanisms.

EU institutions take pride in upholding norms of appropriate conduct and procedural neutrality. However, in analysing my experience, a distinct challenge arises in the perception of policy work: while engagement in technical domains such as telecommunication is rarely explicitly politicized, efforts to advance equality are often framed as political activism rather than a commitment to fundamental rights and EU treaty values. This disparity reflects broader tensions in the institutional treatment of equality policies, where advocating for non-contentious issues is seen as administrative work, whereas promoting equality is often perceived as ideological.

The solely administrative Council General Secretariat (GSC) is responsible for ensuring continuity, legal and procedural coherence, and providing technical support to member states, not least the presidency. Although it does not engage in explicit political decision-making, its influence on agenda-setting, legal interpretations, and procedural norms can indirectly shape policy outcomes. This extends to gender equality and equality policy, where the GSC's role in structuring discussions and framing legal texts can either facilitate or impede progressive policy developments.

Reflecting on my work, I came across a subtle, yet significant influence exerted by lawyer-linguists, who translate negotiated texts into national languages. While working parties composed of national experts negotiate documents primarily in English, the translation process introduces an additional layer of interpretation. Discussions surrounding gender equality terminology are especially contentious, with some member states objecting terms such as “gender equality” and “gender”. Once finalized, the English text is translated by lawyer-linguists whose choices can then impact the meaning and emphasis of key concepts. Even if the translations are formally approved by member states, tight deadlines and the workload of experts can lead to crucial elements of gender equality policy being lost in translation. For example, using “equality between women and men” instead of “gender equality” loses all the effect of the negotiation effort in translation. The term gender mainstreaming is also inconsistently translated. For example, in French as a “dual approach, consisting of targeted measures to achieve *equality between women and men*, combined with reinforced integration of the dimension women-men into all policies” in the Council Conclusions 15976/24 versus as a “dual approach to *gender equality* (*l'égalité de genre*), implementing specific policies and measures in favour of gender equality, while systematically integrating the gender perspective into all policies” in the earlier Council Conclusions 8957/24.

Contrary to the analysis of Mergaert and Lombardo (2014), resistance does not always originate from key stakeholders but can emerge through what Latour (1998, 268) describes as a “chain effect,” in which the cumulative actions of various agents – each driven by different objectives – ultimately result in exerting power over policy outcomes. It remains to be studied how GSC administrators, while largely responding to political will and hierarchical lines, have internal capacity

to advancing or stalling gender equality and also to explore further how resistance strategies are highly context dependent. As shown by Naurin, Naurin and Alexander (2019, 467) even in case of career diplomats or career administrators, gender stereotypes are not primarily constructed at the international level, but “brought to the negotiation table by diplomats given their deeply rooted predispositions from home”.

Conclusion

Resistance to gender equality policies in the Council is multifaceted, involving both direct and indirect opposition. It is thus rather difficult to unpack the impact of individual actors, because the boundaries between individual and institutional resistance are often blurred. Similarly, actors’ efforts to advance gender equality are also complex, layered and hampered by the very strict definition of neutrality in the Council.

The struggle to establish a formal body within the Council illustrates the underlying political power dynamics where gender equality faces resistance across political, administrative, and technical levels. Institutional reforms in this area remain slow and heavily depend on informal mechanisms including the important role of precedents. Here, the Presidency plays a key role in keeping gender equality discussions alive and setting new goals. Despite ongoing challenges – such as resistance to altering Council configurations – new precedents like the EPSCO Council on Equality continue to emerge. Whether the precedent of formal meetings of equality ministers (the Danish Presidency 2025 announced a Council on Equality) will endure or will be sidelined in the pursuit of administrative efficiency remains to be seen.

In the absence of a formal structure, member states also rely on strategic alliances and networks to push their agendas which recently resulted in forming new counter-progressive alliances. Selective approaches to gender equality, shaped by political preferences, further strain network stability.

While consensus-driven culture in the Council does not permit an open conflict, the opposition is more overt in the EP, where political divides are openly contested (Ahrens/Meier/Rolandsen Agustín 2023; Kantola 2022). By contrast, resistance in the Council often takes the form of procedural objections. The rotating Presidency system where priorities shift every six months, facilitates postponing long-term commitments. Lost momentums further complicate efforts to institutionalize gender equality. The 18-months gender equality perspective of a Trio Presidency is one of the counterbalance forms. Yet, the discrepancy between a strong treaty basis and lack of visibility within the Council persists.

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