

The European Union (EU)

is a political and economic union of 27 member states that are located primarily in Europe. Its members have a combined area of 4,233,255.3 km² and an estimated total population of about 447 million. The EU has developed an internal single market through a standardised system of laws that apply in all member states in those matters, and only those matters, where members have agreed to act as one. EU policies aim to ensure the free movement of people, goods, services and capital within the internal market, enact legislation in justice and home affairs and maintain common policies on trade, agriculture, fisheries and regional development. For travel within the Schengen Area, passport controls have been abolished. A monetary union was established in 1999, coming into full force in 2002, and is composed of 19 EU member states which use the euro currency.

History

Preliminary (1945–57)

After World War II, European integration was seen as an antidote to the extreme nationalism which had devastated parts of the continent. In a speech delivered on 19 September 1946 at the University of Zürich, Switzerland, Winston Churchill went further and advocated the emergence of a United States of Europe. The 1948 Hague Congress was a pivotal moment in European federal history, as it led to the creation of the European Movement International and of the College of Europe, where Europe's future leaders would live and study together.

It also led directly to the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949, the first great effort to bring the nations of Europe together, initially ten of them. The Council focused primarily on values—human rights and democracy—rather than on economic or trade issues, and was always envisaged as a forum where sovereign governments could choose to work together, with no supra-national authority. It raised great hopes of further European integration.

In 1952 six nations decided to go further and created the European Coal and Steel Community, which was declared to be "a first step in the federation of Europe". This community helped to economically integrate and coordinate the large number of Marshall Plan funds from the United States. European leaders Alcide De Gasperi from Italy, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman from France, and Paul-Henri Spaak from Belgium understood that coal and steel were the two industries essential for waging war, and believed that by tying their national industries together, future war between their nations became much less likely. These men and others are officially credited as the founding fathers of the European Union.

Treaty of Rome (1957–92)

In 1957, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany signed the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community (EEC) and established a customs union. They also signed another pact creating the European Atomic Energy

Community (Euratom) for co-operation in developing nuclear energy. Both treaties came into force in 1958.

The EEC and Euratom were created separately from the ECSC and they shared the same courts and the Common Assembly. Euratom was to integrate sectors in nuclear energy while the EEC would develop a customs union among members.

In 1965 an agreement was reached and on 1 July 1967 the Merger Treaty created a single set of institutions for the three communities, which were collectively referred to as the *European Communities*.

In 1973, the Communities were enlarged to include Denmark (including Greenland, which later left the Communities in 1985, following a dispute over fishing rights), Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Norway had negotiated to join at the same time, but Norwegian voters rejected membership in a referendum. In 1979, the first direct elections to the European Parliament were held.

Greece joined in 1981, Portugal and Spain following in 1986. In 1985, the Schengen Agreement paved the way for the creation of open borders without passport controls between most member states and some non-member states. In 1986, the European flag began to be used by the EEC and the Single European Act was signed.

In 1989, the Iron Curtain fell, enabling the Community to expand further. In 1990, after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, the former East Germany became part of the Communities as part of a reunified Germany.

Maastricht Treaty (1992–2007)

The European Union was formally established when the Maastricht Treaty—whose main architects were Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand—came into force on 1 November 1993. The treaty also gave the name European Community to the EEC, even if it was referred as such before the treaty. With further enlargement planned to include the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Cyprus and Malta, the Copenhagen criteria for candidate members to join the EU were agreed upon in June 1993. In 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU.

In 2002, euro banknotes and coins replaced national currencies in 12 of the member states. Since then, the eurozone has increased to encompass 19 countries. The euro currency became the second largest reserve currency in the world. In 2004, the EU saw its biggest enlargement to date when Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined the Union.

Lisbon Treaty (2007–present)

In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania became EU members. The same year, Slovenia adopted the euro, followed in 2008 by Cyprus and Malta, by Slovakia in 2009, by Estonia in 2011, by Latvia in 2014, and by Lithuania in 2015.

On 1 December 2009, the Lisbon Treaty entered into force and reformed many aspects of the EU. In particular, it changed the legal structure of the European Union, merging the EU three pillars system into a single legal entity provisioned with a legal personality, created a permanent President of the European Council and strengthened the position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

From the beginning of the 2010s, the cohesion of the European Union has been tested by several issues, including a debt crisis in some of the Eurozone countries, increasing migration from Africa and Asia, and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU. A referendum in the UK on its membership of the European Union was held in 2016, with 51.9% of participants voting to leave. The UK formally notified the European Council of its decision to leave on 29 March 2017, initiating the formal withdrawal procedure for leaving the EU; following extensions to the process, the UK left the European Union on 31 January 2020, though most areas of EU law will continue to apply to the UK for a transition period lasting until the end of 2020 at the earliest.