

Europe



Reasons for existing

The **European Union (EU)** is a family of 28 democratic European countries, committed to working together for peace and prosperity. It is not a State intended to replace existing states, but it is more than any other international organisation. The EU is, in fact, unique. Its Member States have set up common institutions to which they delegate some of their sovereignty so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level. This pooling of sovereignty is also called **European integration**.

Unity in diversity

Europe is a continent with many different traditions and languages but also with shared values. It fosters co-operation among the peoples of Europe, promoting unity while preserving diversity and ensuring that decisions are taken as close as possible to the citizens.

The European Union has delivered half a century of stability, peace and prosperity. It has helped to raise living standards, built a single Europe-wide market, launched the single European currency, the euro, and strengthened Europe's voice in the world.

Member states

- 1952: Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Luxemburg and Netherlands
- 1973: Denmark, Ireland and the United kingdom
- 1981: Greece
- 1986: Portugal and Spain
- 1995: Austria, Finland and Sweden
- 2004: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia
- 2007: Bulgaria and Romania
- 2013: Croatia
- 2016: Brexit – nearly 52% of the UK population voted to leave the European Union in a referendum. The following year the UK committed itself to leaving the EU by 29 March 2019 (two years after the formal decision notified to the European Council)

The Single Market

In 1985, the Schengen Agreement paved the way for what would become reality with the Maastricht Treaty a few years later: the Single Market. With old barriers gone, people, goods, services and money move around Europe as freely as within one country. In 1993, the single market was the EU's greatest achievement.

Firms selling in the single market have unrestricted access to more than 500 million consumers in the enlarged European Union; they can achieve economies and efficiencies of scale, which translate in turn into lower prices. The single market also provided a useful springboard for European firms to expand into today's globalised markets.

The Euro

The euro is the name of the single European currency that was put into circulation on 1 January 2002. The symbol of the euro is €. It is administered by the European System of Central Banks (ESCB).



Having a single currency makes it easier to travel and to compare prices and it provides a stable environment for European business, stimulating growth and competitiveness. Moreover, it strengthens Europe's role in international organisations like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The euro is a symbol of common identity, shared values and the success of European integration in bringing the peoples and nations of Europe together.

EU Institutions

There are seven EU institutions, each playing a specific role:

- European Council (setting the general political directions and priorities)
- European Parliament (elected by the peoples of the Member States)
- Council of the European Union (representing the governments of the Member States)
- European Commission (driving force and executive body)
- Court of Justice (ensuring compliance with the law)
- Court of Auditors (controlling sound and lawful management of the EU budget)
- European Central Bank (implement the use of the common currency and keeping the financial system steady).

The European Council

The European Council is based in Brussels.

It is a summit of all the Heads of State, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission.

It aims at sustaining the development of the Union and setting its general objectives and priorities. However, it does not legislate.

The European Parliament

The European Parliament works in France, Belgium and Luxembourg.

The monthly plenary sessions, which all MEPs attend, are held in Strasbourg (France) – the Parliament's "seat". Its members are elected every five years.

The Parliament has three main roles:

1. it shares with the Council the power to legislate. It exercises democratic supervision over all EU institutions, and in particular the Commission
2. it has the power to approve or reject the nomination of Commissioners, and it has the right to censure the Commission as a whole
3. it shares with the Council authority over the EU budget and can therefore influence EU spending. At the end of the procedure, it adopts or rejects the budget in its entirety.

The Council of the European Union

The Council is the EU's main decision-making body. It represents the member states, and its meetings are attended by one minister from each of the EU's national governments.



Which ministers attend which meeting depends on what subjects are on the agenda. If, for example, the Council has to discuss environmental issues, the meeting will be attended by the Environment Minister from each EU country and it will be known as the “Environment Council”.

The Council has six key responsibilities:

1. to pass European laws. In many fields it legislates jointly with the European Parliament
2. to co-ordinate the broad economic policies of the member states
3. to conclude international agreements between the EU and one or more states or international organisations
4. to approve the EU’s budget, jointly with the European Parliament
5. to develop the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, based on guidelines set by the European Council
6. to co-ordinate co-operation between the national courts and police forces in criminal matters.

The European Commission

The Commission is the politically independent institution that represents and upholds the interests of the EU as a whole. It is the driving force within the EU’s institutional system. The “seat” of the Commission is in Brussels (Belgium).

The European Commission has four main roles:

1. to propose legislation to Parliament and the Council
2. to manage and implement EU policies and the budget
3. to enforce European law (jointly with the Court of Justice)
4. to represent the European Union on the international stage, for example by negotiating agreements between the EU and other countries.

A new Commission is appointed every five years, within six months of the elections to the European Parliament. The Commission President is designated by the member state governments.

The Court of Justice

The Court of Justice of the European Communities (often referred to simply as “the Court”) was set up in 1952 under the Treaty of Paris (establishing the European Coal and Steel Community).

The Court is composed of one judge per member state, so that all the EU’s national legal systems are represented. Even after enlargement there will still be one judge per member state, but for the sake of efficiency the Court will be able to sit as a “Grand Chamber” of just 11 judges instead of always having to meet in a plenary session attended by all the judges.

Its job is to ensure that EU legislation is interpreted and applied in the same way in each member state. The Court has the power to settle legal disputes between member states, EU institutions, businesses and individuals.

The European Court of Auditors

The Court of Auditors checks that all the Union’s revenue has been received and all its expenditure incurred in a lawful and regular manner and that the EU budget has been managed soundly. The Court was established in 1977. It has one member from



each EU country, appointed by the Council for a renewable term of six years. Even after enlargement there will still be one member per EU country but, for the sake of efficiency, the Court can set up “chambers” (with only a few members each) to adopt certain types of report or opinion.

The European Central Bank

The ECB is based in Frankfurt. Together with the national central banks, it determines the monetary policy of the Eurozone, by ensuring price stability and controlling the money supply.

Milestones

- 1948: the Hague Congress – creation of the European Movement International and the College of Europe
- 1952: Treaty of Paris – creation of the European Coal and Steel Community
- 1957: Treaty of Rome – first step towards the creation of a joint community in Europe. It created the European Economic Community (EEC) and established a customs union
- 1957: Creation of the European Atomic Energy Community
- 1967: Merger Treaty – creation of a set of common institutions for the Euratom and the EEC
- 1979: first direct elections to the European Parliament
- 1985: Schengen Agreement – to gradually abolish border checks and allowing free circulation across borders
- 1986: European flag
- 1992: Maastricht Treaty – formal establishment of the European Union which comprised three pillars (European Communities, Common Foreign and Security Policy and Police and Judicial Co-operation in Criminal Matters)
- 1993: adoption of the Copenhagen criteria, birth of the single market
- 1997: Treaty of Amsterdam – to foster better intergovernmental collaboration between member states
- 2001: Treaty of Nice – to improve the decision-making process of the EU
- 2002: adoption of the new common currency, the Euro
- 2009: Lisbon Treaty – fusion of the three pillars into a single legal identity with a legal personality, the President of the European Council
- 2012: Nobel Prize to the EU for having “contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy, and human rights in Europe”.

