

## SPICe Briefing

# The European Union – A Brief History

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This subject profile provides a brief history of the European Union from its development after the Second World War through to the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon.



Image: European Parliament



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# THE EUROPEAN UNION

## WHAT IS IT?

The European Union (EU) is a unique international organisation in that it is not a federation of states like the United States, nor is it simply an organisation for co-operation between governments, such as the United Nations. Instead, it comprises a set of common supranational institutions established by the member states, each of which gives up some of its sovereignty, to make decisions on matters of joint interest at a European level. This pooling of sovereignty is often referred to as "European integration". According to the Maastricht Treaty the fundamental goal of the EU is to create an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe.

### Date of joining the European Union

|                |      |
|----------------|------|
| Belgium        | 1952 |
| France         | 1952 |
| Italy          | 1952 |
| Luxembourg     | 1952 |
| Netherlands    | 1952 |
| West Germany   | 1952 |
| Denmark        | 1973 |
| Ireland        | 1973 |
| United Kingdom | 1973 |
| Greece         | 1981 |
| Portugal       | 1986 |
| Spain          | 1986 |
| Austria        | 1995 |
| Finland        | 1995 |
| Sweden         | 1995 |
| Cyprus         | 2004 |
| Czech Republic | 2004 |
| Estonia        | 2004 |
| Hungary        | 2004 |
| Latvia         | 2004 |
| Lithuania      | 2004 |
| Malta          | 2004 |
| Poland         | 2004 |
| Slovakia       | 2004 |
| Slovenia       | 2004 |
| Bulgaria       | 2007 |
| Romania        | 2007 |

## HISTORICAL ROOTS

The idea of European integration was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War. A pooling of coal and steel production, then the sources of all military power, was proposed as "*the first concrete foundation of a European federation*" by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman in a speech on 9 May 1950. This date is now celebrated annually as 'Europe Day'. Schuman's idea was that if countries shared resources and relied on others for key raw materials they would be less likely (and less able) to go to war with each other.

## MEMBERSHIP

Schuman's idea was taken forward and in 1951 the European Coal and Steel Community was formed. The six founding member countries of the European Coal and Steel Community were: Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. These six member states then signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957 forming the European Economic Community. This created a common market between the countries allowing goods and services to move freely between them.

The United Kingdom, along with Ireland and Denmark, acceded to membership of the European Economic Community in 1973. There were further enlargements in 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004 and 2007. Membership now stands at 27 states with a total population of around 490 million.

There are also a further five countries who have candidate status. This means the countries are in

the process of negotiating their accession to the European Union. The five candidate countries are Croatia, Iceland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey. Croatia and Iceland are the two countries most likely to join in the near future.

## THE TREATIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The rule of law is fundamental to the EU. All EU decisions and procedures are based on the Treaties which constitute its legal basis and which are agreed by all Member States.

**April 1951** – The Treaty of Paris established the European Coal and Steel Community. The Treaty came into force in July 1952 and had a validity period of 50 years. As a consequence the Treaty expired in July 2002.

**March 1957** – The Treaty of Rome established the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community.

**February 1986** – The Single European Act (SEA) provided fresh impetus for an internal European market which had been difficult to achieve in part because of the decision making procedures in place at the time. For instance, the European Council still required unanimity to agree to the harmonisation of legislation. As a result the SEA also introduced measures for qualified majority voting in the Council and gave the European Parliament more powers in the legislative process.

**February 1992** – The Treaty of Maastricht on European Union took the European Union beyond its original economic objectives, towards a greater level of political union.

The Maastricht Treaty created the European Union, which consisted of three pillars<sup>1</sup>:

- the European Communities, consisting of the European Community, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and Euratom,
- Common Foreign and Security Policy allowing Member States to take joint action in the field of foreign policy and;
- Police and Judicial Cooperation in Criminal Matters involving joint action so as to offer European citizens a high level of protection in the area of freedom, security and justice.

The Maastricht Treaty also gave the European Parliament further powers with the introduction of co-decision for some areas of policy and it provided for the establishment of a single currency.

The Europa website describes the Treaty on European Union as significant because:

“The Maastricht Treaty represents a key stage in European construction. By establishing the European Union, by creating an economic and monetary union and by extending European integration to new areas, the Community has acquired a political dimension.”

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<sup>1</sup> Europa website - Treaty of Maastricht on European Union  
[http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/economic\\_and\\_monetary\\_affairs/institutional\\_and\\_economic\\_framework/treaties\\_maastricht\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/economic_and_monetary_affairs/institutional_and_economic_framework/treaties_maastricht_en.htm)

**June 1997** – The Treaty of Amsterdam was a rationalising treaty that amended pre-existing constitutive European Treaties. Amsterdam dealt with a number of issues that had been left over from negotiations on the Treaty of Maastricht. A primary concern was to improve the effectiveness of EU institutions and procedures in preparation for EU enlargement. Its main features were:

- New provisions on social policy, employment and anti-discrimination
- A new objective for the EU to maintain and develop the Union as an “Area of Freedom, Security and Justice”
- Moving into the Community pillar, Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) issues. This move meant the European Commission and European Parliament were able to contribute to decisions in the JHA area whereas before they had been solely a matter for member state governments.
- Incorporation of the ‘Schengen’ agreement. The Schengen Agreement abolished internal borders, enabling passport-free movement between 24 European Union member states.
- Endorsement of “the progressive framing of a common defence policy”
- Provision of closer co-operation between sub-groups of member states (‘enhanced co-operation’/‘flexibility’), except on foreign policy
- Simplification and extension of the co-decision procedure that allows joint decision-making between the European Parliament and the Council
- Extension of qualified majority voting to 16 new and existing policy areas
- Introduction of separate protocols on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and on the role of national parliaments in the EU.

**December 2000** – The Treaty of Nice was used by member states to prepare the European Union for future enlargements. The Treaties were revised in four key ways; the size and composition of the European Commission was changed, the number of votes each member state had in the European Council was adjusted and qualified majority voting was extended to more policy areas. The Treaty made provision for membership of the European Union to be increased to up to 27 member states.

**December 2009** – The Treaty of Lisbon amended the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community. The Treaty Establishing the European Community was re-named the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. According to the European Commission the Treaty of Lisbon had four key effects<sup>2</sup>

- **A more democratic and transparent Europe**, with a strengthened role for the European Parliament and national parliaments, more opportunities for citizens to have their voices heard and a clearer sense of who does what at European and national level.
- **A more efficient Europe**, with simplified working methods and voting rules, streamlined and modern institutions for a EU of 27 members and an improved ability to act in areas of major priority for today's Union.

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<sup>2</sup> Europa website – The Treaty of Lisbon at a Glance [http://europa.eu/lisbon\\_treaty/glance/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/glance/index_en.htm)

- **A Europe of rights and values, freedom, solidarity and security**, promoting the Union's values, introducing the Charter of Fundamental Rights into European primary law, providing for new solidarity mechanisms and ensuring better protection of European citizens.
- **Europe as an actor on the global stage** will be achieved by bringing together Europe's external policy tools, both when developing and deciding new policies. The Treaty of Lisbon gives Europe a clear voice in relations with its partners worldwide. It harnesses Europe's economic, humanitarian, political and diplomatic strengths to promote European interests and values worldwide, while respecting the particular interests of the Member States in Foreign Affairs

## SOURCES

Europa website – Treaty of Maastricht on European Union [Online] Available at: [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/economic\\_and\\_monetary\\_affairs/institutional\\_and\\_economic\\_framework/treaties\\_maastricht\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/economic_and_monetary_affairs/institutional_and_economic_framework/treaties_maastricht_en.htm) [Accessed 1 June 2011]

Europa website – Treaty of Lisbon, the Treaty at a glance [Online] Available at: [http://europa.eu/lisbon\\_treaty/glance/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/glance/index_en.htm) [Accessed 1 June 2011]

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