

The European Union: A History and Overview

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The flag of the European Union.

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The European Union (EU) is a unification of [27 member states](#) united to create a political and economic community throughout Europe. Though the idea of the EU might sound simple at the outset, the European Union has a rich history and a unique organization, both of which aid in its current success and its ability to fulfill its mission for the 21st Century.

History

The precursor to the European Union was established after World War II in the late 1940s in an effort to unite the countries of Europe and end the period of wars between neighboring countries. These nations began to officially unite in 1949 with the Council of Europe. In 1950 the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community expanded the cooperation. The six nations involved in this initial treaty were Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Today these countries are referred to as the "founding members."

During the 1950s, the Cold War, protests, and divisions between Eastern and Western Europe showed the need for further European unification. In order to do this, the Treaty of Rome was signed on March 25, 1957, thus creating the European Economic Community and allowing people and products to move throughout Europe. Throughout the decades additional countries joined the community. In order to further unify Europe, the Single European Act was signed in 1987 with the aim of eventually creating a "single market" for trade. Europe was further unified in 1989 with the elimination of the boundary between Eastern and Western Europe - the Berlin Wall.

The Modern-Day EU

Throughout the 1990s, the "single market" idea allowed easier trade, more citizen interaction on issues such as the environment and security, and easier travel through the different countries.

Even though the countries of Europe had various treaties in place prior to the early 1990s, this time is generally recognized as the period when the modern day European Union arose due to the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union which was signed on February 7, 1992 and put into action on November 1, 1993.

The Treaty of Maastricht identified five goals designed to unify Europe in more ways than just economically. The goals are:

- 1) To strengthen the democratic governing of participating nations.
- 2) To improve the efficiency of the nations.
- 3) To establish an economic and financial unification.
- 4) To develop the "Community social dimension."
- 5) To establish a security policy for involved nations.

In order to reach these goals, the Treaty of Maastricht has various policies dealing with issues such as industry, education, and youth. In addition, the Treaty put a single European currency, the [euro](#), in the works to establish fiscal unification in 1999. In 2004 and 2007, the EU expanded, bringing the total number of member states as of 2008 to 27.

In December 2007, all of the member nations signed the Treaty of Lisbon in hopes of making the EU more democratic and efficient to deal with climate change, national security, and sustainable development.

How a Country Joins the EU

For countries interested in joining the EU, there are several requirements that they must meet in order to proceed to accession and become a member state. The first requirement has to do with the political aspect. All countries in the EU are required to have a government that guarantees democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as protects the rights of minorities. In addition to these political areas, each country must have a market economy that is strong enough to stand on its own within the competitive EU marketplace.

Finally, the candidate country must be willing to follow the objectives of the EU that deal politics, the economy, and monetary issues. This also requires that they be prepared to be a part of the administrative and judicial structures of the EU. After it is believed that the candidate nation has met each of these requirements, the country is screened, and if approved the Council of the European Union and the country draft a Treaty of Accession which then goes to the European Commission and European Parliament ratification and approval. If successful after this process, the nation is able to become a member state.

How the EU Works

With so many different nations participating, the governance of the EU is challenging, however, it is a structure that continually changes to become the most effective for the conditions of the time. Today, treaties and laws are created by the "institutional triangle" that is composed of the Council representing national governments, the European Parliament representing the people, and the European Commission that is responsible for holding up Europe's main interests.

The Council is formally called the Council of the European Union and is the main decision making body present. There is also a Council President here and each member state takes a six month turn in the position. In addition, the Council has the legislative power and decisions are made with a majority vote, a qualified majority, or a unanimous vote from member state representatives.

The European Parliament is an elected body representing the citizens of the EU and participates in the legislative process as well. These representative members are directly elected every five years.

Finally, the European Commission manages the EU with members that are appointed by the Council for five year terms- usually one Commissioner from each member state. Its main job is to uphold the common interest of the EU. In addition to these three main divisions, the EU also has courts, committees, and banks which participate on certain issues and aid in successful management.

The EU Mission

As in 1949 when it was founded with the creation of the Council of Europe, the European Union's mission for today is to continue prosperity, freedom, communication and ease of travel and commerce for its citizens. The EU is able to maintain this mission through the various treaties making it function, cooperation from member states, and its unique governmental structure.