

Europe's borders and its role in the world

How the EU has grown

The European Union has grown steadily in size since it was founded in 1957. It began with just six member countries and now has 25, which joined on the following dates:

1957: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands

1973: Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom

1981: Greece

1986: Spain and Portugal

1995: Austria, Finland and Sweden

2004: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Bulgaria and Romania are set to join the EU in either January 2007 or January 2008, and membership negotiations with two other countries – Turkey and Croatia – began in October 2005. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has also applied for membership, but has not yet begun negotiations.

In 1993, the EU laid down a set of economic and political conditions which countries that wished to join would have to meet. They must:

- 1) Be a stable democracy, respecting human rights, the rule of law and the protection of minorities.
- 2) Have a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union.
- 3) Be able to adopt and enforce the common rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law.

Negotiations on EU membership start with a screening process to assess how much the candidate country needs to do to meet these conditions, and the European Commission continues to monitor the country's progress carefully throughout the negotiating process, which can take many years.

Relations with the EU's neighbours

When ten new countries joined the EU in May 2004, the resulting changes to the Union's borders meant that it acquired new neighbours and moved closer to old ones.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed to try to prevent new dividing lines emerging between the expanded EU and its neighbours. It is aimed at building a closer relationship with countries on the Union's borders and, in the words of the European Commission, creating "a zone of stability, security and well-being for all".

The EU offers its neighbours a privileged relationship based on a mutual commitment to common values such as the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, the principles of the market economy and sustainable development.

The EU draws up tailored-made programmes with each country for increased cooperation in a range of areas, from economic and social issues to justice and home affairs, and sectors from transport to energy. In return for progress on reforms in such areas, partner countries are promised greater integration into EU programmes, more financial assistance and increased access to EU markets.

Originally, the policy was only intended to apply to the EU's immediate neighbours, but it was later extended to include countries which share borders with states that are candidates for EU membership.

EU foreign and defence policies

The 'Common Foreign and Security Policy' was launched as part of the changes to the EU's rulebook agreed by Member State governments in the negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. It aims to coordinate the foreign policies of the EU's 25 Member States where possible.

Decisions in this area are taken by governments, with the European Commission playing only a limited role.

Prime Ministers and Presidents agree on common strategies and goals in areas where EU countries have shared interests. Those which do not wish to participate in a particular foreign or security policy initiative can choose not to, but this does not stop the rest from going ahead.

The EU has a foreign policy chief – known as the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy - who is responsible for implementing decisions taken by EU governments in this area and represents the Union on the world stage.

The EU has taken many initiatives under this policy, particularly in the former Yugoslavia, launching diplomatic efforts to achieve peace, sending monitors to troubled areas and providing peacekeeping troops.

The 'Common Security and Defence Policy' was launched in 1999, with the aim of giving the EU the ability to carry out operations by developing a rapid reaction force of up to 60,000 troops, deployable within 60 days and able to remain in the field for up to a year.

The force is drawn from the standing armies of the Member States, and its exact size and make-up, including the military equipment provided by national defence authorities, depends on the nature of the mission being undertaken, which can involve peacekeeping, humanitarian and rescue tasks, and combat forces for crisis management.

Trade

The EU's 25 Member States are home to just 7% of the world's population, but they account for more than 20% of global imports and exports.

Trade was one of the first areas where EU countries decided that they could get a better deal and maximise their influence on the international stage by working together.

The European Commission is responsible for negotiating trade deals with non-EU countries and in multilateral bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO) on behalf of all 25 EU Member States. The Member States themselves are, however, consulted regularly and their trade ministers take the key decisions on the direction of EU policy.

In addition to its role in the WTO, the Union has developed a network of bilateral trade agreements with individual countries and regions across the world.

As EU Member States removed tariffs on trade within the Union, they also agreed common tariffs on goods imported from outside the EU. This means that the import duties paid on products entering the Union are the same throughout the EU.

The EU's trade policy is linked to its development policy (see below).

Development

The EU's development policy is based on two 'pillars': aid and trade.

The Union and its Member States pay out more than 30 billion euro a year in aid to developing countries. This is nearly half of all the money spent on helping poor countries, making the EU the world's biggest aid donor.

About 6 billion euro of this money is channeled through the European Commission, with the rest coming directly from national governments. Over the years, the EU has funded thousands of projects across the world, with the emphasis not only on boosting economic development, promoting self-help and eradicating poverty, but also on helping to build democratic institutions, carry out reconstruction work and promote human rights.

Increased trade can also boost economic growth in the poorer nations of the world. The EU has therefore reduced or removed tariffs and eliminated quotas on most of its imports from developing countries.