

The history of the European Union

The modern-day European Union is a direct result of a determination among European politicians to prevent future violent conflicts in Europe after World War II. The original aim was to tie countries together by forging closer industrial and economic cooperation. Since then, the EU's responsibilities have grown in response to new challenges and many more countries have joined.

- 1950: French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposes integrating the coal and steel industries of Western Europe. This leads to the Treaty of Paris, creating the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), in 1951, with six members: Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany.
- 1957: The same six countries sign the Treaties of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). They begin removing trade barriers between them and move towards creating a 'common market'.
- 1967: The institutions of the EEC, ECSC and EURATOM are merged to form a single set of institutions: the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament (with members selected initially by national parliaments).
- 1973: Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom join the European Community.
- 1979: The first direct elections to the European Parliament take place, with voters in each EU Member State electing the members.
- 1981: Greece joins the European Community (EC).
- 1986: Portugal and Spain join the European Community.
The Single European Act is signed by EU governments, providing for the creation of a single market in which people, goods, capital and services can move freely around the EC.
- 1992: The Treaty of Maastricht is signed, creating the European Union and introducing new forms of cooperation between Member State governments – for example, on defence and justice and home affairs issues.
EU leaders also agree to create an Economic and Monetary Union, with a single currency managed by a European Central Bank, within a decade.
The Single Market is formally completed, but much work remains to be done to make the promise of free movement of people, goods, capital and services a reality.
- 1995: Austria, Finland and Sweden join the European Union (EU).
- 1999: Europe's single currency – the euro – is officially launched and 11 EU Member States adopt it as their official currency, forming what is known as the euro zone.

- 2001: Greece joins the euro zone.
The Treaty of Nice is signed, introducing reforms to the EU's institutions to prepare for the expansion of the Union with the admission of ten new Member States in 2004.
- 2002: The euro becomes a reality on 1 January, when euro notes and coins replace national currencies in 12 of the 15 countries which are members of the EU: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.
A 'convention on the future of Europe' is launched, with 105 members representing national governments and parliaments in the Member States and countries waiting to join the EU, the European Commission and the European Parliament.
- 2003: The convention ends and submits its draft 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for the European Union' to EU leaders. Member State governments begin negotiations on the proposals.
- 2004: Ten new countries join the EU, including eight from eastern and central Europe. They are: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
EU leaders reach agreement on the Constitutional Treaty, which brings all the previous EU Treaties together in one document and introduces changes to the way the Union works. EU leaders argue these changes are needed to ensure that the Union can continue to operate effectively as it grows.
Member States are given two years to ratify the Constitutional Treaty. As with all EU Treaties, it can only come into force if it is approved by all 25 Member States.
- 2005: Referenda are held on the Constitutional Treaty in four countries: Luxembourg and Spain vote in favour, but France and the Netherlands vote against. EU leaders launch a 'period of reflection' to consider how best to proceed in the light of the No votes.
- 2006: By June 2006, 15 of the EU's 25 Member States have ratified the Treaty. The European Council agrees a timetable for deciding what to do next. It calls for:
- EU leaders to adopt a political declaration setting out Europe's values and ambitions and confirming their shared commitment to deliver them, at a ceremony to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the EU on 25 March 2007.
 - Germany, which holds the Presidency of the Union in the first half of 2007, to present a report to EU leaders at the June European Council assessing the state of the discussions on the Constitutional Treaty and exploring possible options for the future.
 - A final decision on how to proceed to be taken by the end of 2008.