



European Union

# Europe in Brief

All About Europe  
in EU Info Centre

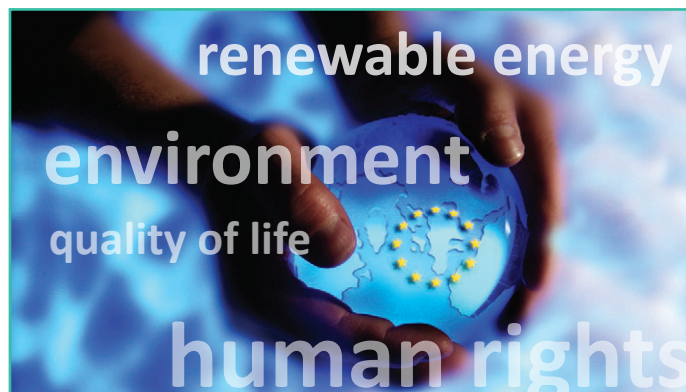
## HISTORY

The European Union (EU) is an economic and political union of 27 European countries. The cooperation between countries begun in the 1950s, when six states (France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Economic Community (EEC). The name "European Union" was introduced following the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. The Lisbon Treaty in 2009 clarified which powers belong to the EU. In the meantime, the European Union grew in size in several waves of enlargement (1973, 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004 and 2007) and almost all countries in Europe have joined the European Union. Serbia together with the whole region of the Western Balkans has a European perspective.

**Treaties for the future:** The EU was created through a series of treaties among the Member States. The first one was signed in Rome in 1957, when the European Economic Community (EEC) was established. Other important treaties followed: Single European Act (1986), Maastricht Treaty (1992), Amsterdam Treaty (1997), Nice Treaty (2001) and Lisbon Treaty (2007). A draft Constitution was developed in 2003 with a view to replacing all the previous treaties as a single constitutional legal act. As it was never ratified, it was replaced by the Lisbon Treaty, which was ratified by all Member States by 2009.

## WHAT IS DECIDED AT EU LEVEL

The EU's standard decision-making procedure is known as 'codecision.' This means that the directly elected European Parliament has to approve EU legislation together with the Council of the European Union (representatives of the governments from the 27 EU countries). The European Commission drafts and implements EU legislation and the policies concerning areas including development aid, competition, trade and agricultural policy. These policies have an impact on many areas of life. In the area of economic policy, the EU is responsible for the euro, EU external trade, the internal market, competition policy and the EU budget. It is also responsible for various EU funds, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The EU also has an impact on other areas including the judiciary, foreign policy, social policy, health and the environment. But many decisions are made on national, regional or local level, such as culture related policy-decisions. This follows the idea of subsidiarity. This means that the European Union does not take action (except on matters for which it alone is responsible) unless EU action is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level.



## EU INSTITUTIONS AND BODIES

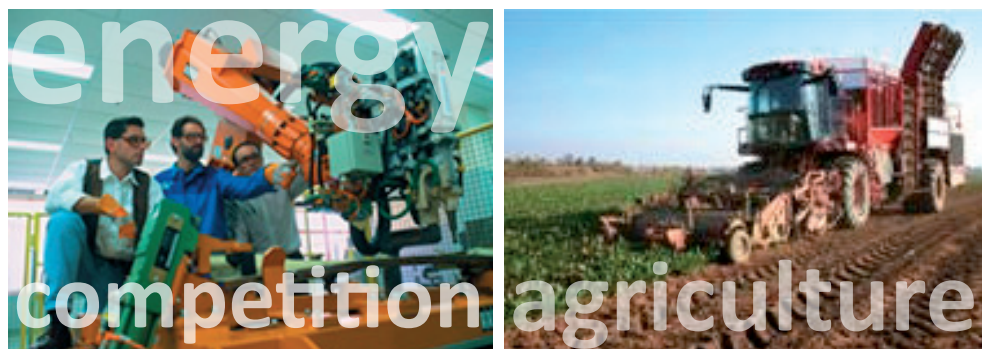
The **European Parliament** has 736 members elected directly by European citizens for a term of five years and it enables the EU to function in a democratic way. It has four main roles: it debates and passes European laws with the Council of the European Union; controls the European Commission's supervisory powers; it adopts the EU's budget with the Council; and gives its approval to the accession of new Member States. The **European Council** is an institution of the EU that comprises the heads of EU Member States. Whilst it has no formal legislative powers it defines broad political priorities, major initiatives, the general political direction and priorities of the EU during summits which are held four times a year. The **Council of the European Union** passes EU laws; coordinates the broad economic policies of the EU Member States; signs agreements between the EU and other countries; approves the annual EU budget; develops the EU's foreign and defence policies; and coordinates cooperation between the courts and police forces of the Member States. The **European Commission** is one of the main institutions of the European Union. It represents and upholds the interests of the EU as a whole; therefore it is called the guardian of the Treaty. It drafts new European laws and, as the executive body of the EU, ensures their implementation. These legislation proposals are approved by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. Finally, the **Court of Justice of the European Union** with its 27 judges is also an important institution. It interprets EU law to make sure it is applied in the same way in all EU countries. It also settles legal disputes between EU governments and EU institutions. Individuals, companies or organisations can also bring cases to the Court of Justice if they feel their rights have been infringed by an EU institution. Beside these main institutions, there are other institutions, which include:

- the **European Economic and Social Committee**, which represents civil society, employers and employees;
- the **Committee of the Regions**, which represents regional and local authorities;
- the **European Court of Auditors**, which checks the financing of the European Union activities;
- the **European Ombudsman**, which investigates complaints about maladministration by EU institutions and bodies; and
- the **European Investment Bank**, which finances EU investment projects, and helps small businesses via the European Investment Fund.



## EU Member States

	Belgium
	Bulgaria
	Czech Republic
	Denmark
	Germany
	Estonia
	Ireland
	Greece
	Spain
	France
	Italy
	Cyprus
	Latvia
	Lithuania
	Luxembourg
	Hungary
	Malta
	Netherlands
	Austria
	Poland
	Portugal
	Romania
	Slovenia
	Slovakia
	Finland
	Sweden
	United Kingdom



## MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE EU

The EU strives to improve living standards by protecting the environment, encouraging job creation, reducing regional disparities and connecting formerly isolated areas by developing cross-border infrastructure. Standards of living can be compared by measuring the price of a range of goods and services in each country relative to people's income.

### Internal Market

The Internal Market is one of the biggest achievements of European integration. It enables free movement of people, goods, services and capital. The most important treaty regarding free movement is the Schengen Agreement, which allows people to move visa-free within the EU.

The European Union has a population of over 500 million inhabitants and is one specific, large and powerful union. With 12 new Member States since 2004, the EU's GDP (output of goods and services) of €11 785 474.9 in 2009 was bigger than the US' GDP.

### Euro (€)

The euro is the single currency currently shared by 17 EU Member States. The introduction of the euro in 1999 was a major step to European integration. It has also been one of its major successes; around 330 million EU citizens now use it as their currency and enjoy its benefits, which will spread even more widely as other EU countries adopt the euro.

### Competition

In a free market, business is competitive and as a result consumers benefit from lower prices, better quality of products, more choices and more innovation in products and services. The Internal Market opens up the opportunity for free trade within the European Union. When trade barriers are removed and national markets are opened up, more organisations can compete against each other. This means lower prices and more choice for the consumer. Organisations have unrestricted access to nearly 500 million consumers across the European Union. The European Union strives to improve the quality of life for its' citizens. Standards of living can be compared by measuring the price of a range of goods and services in each country relative to people's income.

### Consumer rights

Every citizen is a consumer and the European Union takes great care to protect their health, safety and economic wellbeing. It promotes their rights to information and education, takes steps to help them safeguard their interests, and encourages them to set up and run self-help consumer associations.

### Environment

The EU has some of the highest environmental standards in the world, which have been developed through the decades to address a wide range of issues. Today the main priorities are combating climate change; preserving biodiversity; reducing health problems from pollution and using natural resources more responsibly. While these goals are aimed at protecting the environment, they can also contribute to economic growth by fostering innovation and enterprise. The EU is protecting the environment whilst reducing regional disparities, by doing this it's raising the standard of living for EU citizens.

### Agriculture

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy ensures that farming and preserving the environment go hand-in-hand. It helps to develop the economic and social fabric of rural communities and plays a vital role in confronting new challenges such as climate change, water management, bioenergy and biodiversity. Farms and forests cover most of Europe's land and are vital for our health and economy.



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