



# THE HISTORY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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European integration began at the end of World War II, but the creation of the EU may have its roots in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Ancient Greek and Roman Empires. It is not the history of an international organisation, hostage to the different wishes of the member countries that created it. Rather, it shows how contemporary European countries have struggled to shape a changing international system by creating supranational institutions and policies.

After World War II, European countries faced unprecedented challenges to rebuild their economic and physical infrastructure, their domestic and international political order. Having founded international order for most of the modern era, they had to adapt to a new balance of power where the USA and the USSR were the victorious powers.

They also wanted to understand the success of totalitarian regimes that had used nationalism to generate consensus. Although the UK and France were not to blame for fascism, they had to process the traumatic end of their empires and the legacy of colonialism.

For Western European countries, integration was a new world order based on a market economy and liberal democracy. In 1944 they created the World Bank, in 1945 the International Monetary Fund and in 1948 they signed the Treaty of Brussels, a first step towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The path to integration may now seem linear, but it was characterized by uncertainty due to the different objectives and resources of the member countries. On May, 9 1950, the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed a common coal and steel market with Germany and possibly with other Western European countries. The Schuman Declaration, celebrated every year in the European Day, became the basis of the European Coal and Steel Community, which began with the signing of the 1951 Treaty of Paris. Influenced by Jean Monnet, Schuman wanted to create unity by bringing together the strategic coal and steel industries in a common market under a

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common High Authority. For France and Germany, then Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, this was the first step towards closer economic cooperation. For others, it was the beginning of a political union.

The history of Europe is said to have begun with the rise of the Roman Empire. However, the Treaties of Rome signed on March, 25 1957 are considered the start of the institutional history of the current EU. It was a turning point for the six founding countries that wanted to expand the cooperation already proposed within the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to form the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). Historians, political scientists and political leaders disagree over the intentions of the signatories of the Treaty of Rome. However, it embraced unity in Europe and supported France's strategy to avoid another conflict with Germany. Germany and Italy also consolidated their position as legitimate liberal democratic partners for a stable Europe: the small Benelux countries were now able to sit at the table with the large countries; the Netherlands was guaranteed economic security thanks to free trade. Economic integration was seen by all as a source of stability, capable of merging diverging interests.

The first major crisis was in 1965. Walter Hallstein, President of the Commission, presented some proposals for financing the Common Agricultural Policy. France objected and withdrew its delegation for six months. This impasse was resolved with the Luxembourg Compromise, which stipulated that a member State could demand a compromise if it felt that its national interests were threatened.

The 1970s saw a growing concern about the pressures of rapid social change and the end of the post-war economic boom. Increased public spending and devaluation would not solve the problem, although they could cure some of the symptoms of economic stagnation. The new awareness was that politics within the member countries and international developments, such as the war in the Middle East, as well as financial instability were obstacles to integration.

However, there were significant developments in the evolution of the EU. In 1973, Denmark, Ireland and the UK brought the number of member countries to nine. The second development was the agreement to strengthen the powers of the European Parliament, leading to direct universal suffrage in 1979. The third development was the European Monetary System, set up in 1979 to offer greater coordination between the central banks of the member countries. Fourthly, regular consultation between foreign ministries and ministers brought closer cooperation in foreign policy matters.

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The election of Margaret Thatcher as British Prime Minister in 1979 and François Mitterrand as President of the French Republic in 1981 reflected the erosion of the consensus that had characterized most European countries in the post-war period regarding the role of the state. First seen as a tool for political and social modernisation, political parties in all European member states then tried to diminish the power of the state. This vision led to two major reforms: the Single European Act in 1986 and the Economic and Monetary Union in 1992. Meanwhile, Greece entered in 1981, and Spain and Portugal in 1986.

The institutional changes decided in Maastricht radically reorganized the powers of the European institutions and how decisions were made. The Maastricht Treaty, signed on February 7, provided the EU 12 with a new institutional architecture based on three pillars: the European Community, which covered almost all sectors of economic activity, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Justice and Home Affairs. The Maastricht Treaty took the step that led to the birth of the Euro within a decade. The UK and Denmark, however, never accepted the single currency.

Austria, Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995. The end of the Cold War brought the hope that the international order could be extended to the East. However, there was uncertainty due to the diverse interests of the numerous member countries. Used to authoritarian rule and a centrally planned economy, the Warsaw Pact countries and the Baltic States faced social, political and economic challenges likely to create social and political tensions. Member states had to bring stability to their new democratic neighbours. The EU reacted to these new challenges by promoting several new treaties. In particular, in 1997 the EU leaders signed the Treaty of Amsterdam, strengthening the role of the European Parliament in the legislative process, and in 2001 they approved the Treaty of Nice, extending the use of qualified-majority voting in the Council to new policy areas.

In 2004 the EU grew from 15 to 25 members, 8 of which were once considered opponents of Western Europe. Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007 and Croatia in 2013, bringing the total number of member countries to 28.

However, the way toward a more supranational EU was also paved with difficulties and crises. The most important was the failure of the so-called European Constitution in 2005. The four treaties drawn up one after the other between 1986 and 2001 did not succeed in resolving all the questions on the leaders' agendas. Part of the problems, it was said, originated by traditional approach of convening an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) for the revision of the treaties, which made the negotiations on the finalisation of each Treaty difficult and produced a tendency to defer the resolution of certain points. As a result, a forum, known as the European

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Convention, was convened after the European Council meeting held in Laeken on 14 and 15 December 2001. The representatives from 28 countries (15 Member States, 12 candidate countries and one country which had applied for accession to the Union), the representatives of the Commission and of the European Parliament worked together to present proposals to the European Council on the necessary reforms and with preparing the work of the future IGC. They successfully drew up a draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, which was adopted in 2003. In 2004, the Brussels European Council settled the outstanding matters still in dispute and reached agreement on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, which was signed in Rome on 29 October 2004. However, the failure of the referenda in two EU founding member states, France and the Netherlands, in May/June 2005 brought the ratification process to an end. The consensus of the citizens toward the increasing EU integration could not be taken for granted anymore.

After years of political stalemates, the new Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009. Prominent changes included the move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in several policy areas in the Council of the EU, a change in calculating such a majority, a more powerful European Parliament, a consolidated legal personality for the EU and the creation of a long-term President of the European Council and a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

However, a global financial crisis exploded in 2008-2009 led member countries to uncertain and sometimes contradictory decisions. The euro crisis became a new political and institutional challenge for the EU, together with the Immigrant crisis of 2015. Moreover, in 2016, in a referendum, 52% of British voters decided to abandon the EU. This happened in January 2020 after long negotiations that risked reversing the integration process.

All these crises did not imply the end of the EU integration, but they made it more complicated because in these crises emerged the different views the Member states had on the EU meaning. As previously said, the history of EU integration is strictly linked to the history of the role of the state. Many EU founders saw integration as a way of modernising the state without sacrificing its centrality. Others saw it as a way of replacing nation states with United States of Europe. Even if these opposing views are still far from been conciliated, the EU has managed to integrate more than any other form of regional organisation shaping every aspect of European life.

### Useful links:

[https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en)

[https://europa.eu/learning-corner/eu-timeline/overview\\_en](https://europa.eu/learning-corner/eu-timeline/overview_en)

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