

THE EUROPEAN UNION

How did the integration process take place in Europe?

"United in diversity" is the motto of the European Union.

It signifies how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent's many different cultures, traditions and languages.

The European integration process did not take place in a linear fashion, but it developed in multiple phases, depending on historical circumstances and other factors (of economic and geopolitical nature). Like any regional organisation, also the European Union has moved on two main fronts: deepening and enlarging. The first refers to the deepening of the integration process, namely the extension of cooperation among States by granting additional powers to the Union, while the second is the process whereby States join the organisation.

The 2004 enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States is the most important in the history of the EU. Subsequently, and at different times, Romania, Bulgaria and, most recently, Croatia have joined the European Union.

In order to find the right balance between the two aspects, so that deepening does not take place at the expense of enlargement or vice versa, today the European Union aims at making membership of other countries conditional upon verification of current members' capacity to absorb and integrate other States.

Despite the geographical limits of the continent and in view of the new political tendencies of enlargement, the EU is establishing increasingly close relations with "third" countries worldwide, with which it concludes new agreements almost on a daily basis.

For further information, please see also the answers to the next question "**What are the Member States of the European Union?**". To answer the question "**Why do States conclude Association Agreements with the EU?**", please see the relevant section.

What is the European Union?

The EU is a **voluntary association of European States** in both **economics and politics**, to maintain peace in Europe and to promote economic and social progress. The European Union was created by the Treaty on European Union (**TEU**), signed in Maastricht on 7 February 1992 and entered into force on 1 November 1993. It is the result of a process started in 1951 with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (**ECSC**).

The European Union **is not a State**, but it carries out typical functions of a State. It can nevertheless be said that it is a hybrid and ever changing entity, which is always in progress. It is not a federation like the United States, because its Member States remain independent sovereign nations. It is not even a purely intergovernmental organisation like the United Nations, because its members delegate some of their sovereignty in order to gain power and influence that none of them could have on its own.

It is not even an international organisation and it is the most advanced example of the evolution of an international organisation into a supranational entity. Jacques Delors defined it a "Federation of Nation States", that is to say an entity which, though being different from a federal State, has developed into more than an international organisation.

But what makes it particularly different and raises the question whether it can still be considered an international organisation is the increasingly close relations established with

the citizens of its Member States, transforming them into “its own” citizens. The fundamental idea on which the Union is based is indeed that “**We are not forming coalitions of States, we are uniting people**”, as Jean Monnet said in 1952. The Union grants to nationals of the Member States the Union citizenship, which determines a *status civitatis* that is independent and separate from national citizenship, because it confers on individuals a series of subjective rights protected by the European Union.

As is well described in the work by Prof. Klaus-Dieter Borchardt, it is neither an international organisation in the usual sense nor an association of States, but rather an autonomous entity somewhere in between the two, even if the term ‘supranational organisation’ is often used to refer to it (source: The ABC of European Union law, the EU, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2011, especially pages 31 and 25).

Rather than destroying national sovereignty, the constituent parts of the European Union, after more than 60 years since the start of the European integration process, continue to be individual nation States, which, in a decisive way, define what the EU can or cannot do.

What are the Member States of the European Union?

The EU Member States are currently 28: (**Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom**).

Six other States (**Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, Albania and Iceland**¹) are candidate countries for EU membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo² are considered as potential candidate countries.

In addition, there are **third countries** which are not part of the European Union but have concluded important agreements with the EU. These countries also include small States such as Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, still belonging to the European Economic Area (EEA), consisting of the 28 EU Member States and the three other small States.

These, together with Switzerland, are still part of the European Free Trade Association (**EFTA**), which is a project of economic integration established in 1960 on the initiative of countries not belonging to the then European Economic Community (**EEC**) as an alternative and counterbalance to the latter.

The aim of the organisation is the promotion of free trade and economic integration among the member countries, as well as the signing of free trade agreements with third countries. In this context, **EFTA** has put two agreements in place: the **EFTA** Free Trade Agreement, which regulates the relations with other countries, and the Agreement on the European Economic Area (known as EEA), which allows members of the organisation to participate in the EU common market. The only exception is Switzerland, which has decided to maintain bilateral relations with the European Union. At present, the two partners are negotiating a comprehensive agreement to provide bilateral relations with a new and more solid basis.

1 Although the latter has recently withdrawn its application for EU membership.

2 As defined in UNSCR 1244.

What is the European Union for?

The six founding States established the European Communities in order to strengthen economic cooperation in Europe, thus ensuring peace and prosperity among Nations, in the conviction that the atrocities and suffering of two World Wars should not happen again. From this perspective, the EU has demonstrated its capacity to ensure to Western Europe the longest period of peace in its history.

It creates jobs and prosperity through the opportunities guaranteed by the common market, which allows the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons and is the main economic engine of the EU.

Thanks to the abolition of border controls among Member States, people can now move freely across most of the continent.

The Union has helped to raise living standards and introduced a single European currency, the euro.

The European Union is founded on the principle of the rule of law: all its powers are based on the European treaties, signed voluntarily and democratically by the Member States. These binding agreements also set the EU's objectives in its many areas of activity. For further information on this topic, please see the relevant section on the functioning of EU bodies.

One of the main objectives of the EU is the protection of human rights, both within the EU and in the rest of the world. Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and respect for human rights are the fundamental values of the EU.

Finally, in order to compete economically with other States, the European Union seeks to maintain high technological standards. Through its environmental policy, it contributes to the environmental sustainability of the economy, as well as to the protection of the health and quality of life of people living in Europe.