

# Overview of the European Union

The European Union (EU) was founded in 1957 with the aim of creating 'an ever closer union between the peoples of Europe'. Initially concerned with improving economic co-operation between member states, the EU has expanded its role in recent decades to play a significant part in areas of policy that had traditionally been the reserve of nation states. The EU operates on a mixture of *supranational* and *intergovernmental* models, where nation states pass the right to decide on certain issues to the EU but retain the power for independent action in others.

## Membership

The EU was founded by six countries: France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It has since undergone several waves of enlargement. In 1973, Britain, Ireland and Denmark joined. The 1980s saw the entry of Spain, Portugal and Greece, and in 1995 Austria, Sweden and Finland also became members. After the fall of Communism, many former Communist countries in central and eastern Europe, who began to introduce democracy and market economies, applied to join. Subsequently, on 1 May 2004 ten new countries were admitted: Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus, Malta, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. They were followed by Romania and Bulgaria on 1 January 2007. Turkey, Croatia and Iceland are currently negotiating membership. FYR Macedonia and Montenegro are also candidate countries, but have not yet begun formal membership negotiations. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo are considered potential candidate countries.

## Legal Framework

The EU is based on a series of legal treaties between the member states. The first treaty, which established the European Economic Community (EEC), was signed in Rome in 1957. There have been five subsequent treaties – the Single European Act (1986), the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the Treaty of Nice (2001) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). In 2003, the EU produced a draft Constitution for Europe, which was designed to replace all the existing treaties as the sole legal document governing the operation of the EU. However the EU Constitution was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005. The Lisbon Treaty was drafted as a replacement and signed in 2007, but there was huge controversy when Ireland rejected it in a referendum in 2008. Following a second referendum in Ireland, the Lisbon Treaty was ratified by all member states in 2009.

## Institutions

The EU has a complex government structure made up of bodies known collectively as the EU institutions. They are responsible for making EU laws, managing EU projects, distributing EU money and deciding the future direction of the EU. The Commission is the most

powerful EU body and has many different responsibilities. It is the only institution which has the power to propose EU laws and is also responsible for enforcing them. The European Council is headed by a President and it is made up of the heads of state and government of the member states and the President of the European Commission. It meets for summits four times a year to discuss the direction of EU policy and has a key role in guiding policy alongside the Commission. However, any laws proposed by the Commission are passed to the Council of the European Union, which is made up of government ministers from all the member states, and to the European Parliament. Both institutions must approve a law for it to pass. The European Parliament is the only directly elected EU institution, and consists of 736 members (MEPs) - it is seen as giving democratic legitimacy to the EU, but it cannot propose legislation, only discuss and vote on laws proposed by the Commission. Finally, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) is made up of 27 judges and is responsible for interpreting EU treaties and laws. It is the highest court in the EU.

## Responsibilities

The EU has influence over a very wide range of policy areas. In economic policy, it has sole responsibility for the Euro, external trade negotiations, overseeing the single market, competition policy and the EU budget. It also operates various funds, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). In addition the EU has responsibilities in many areas of justice and home affairs, foreign policy, and social policies, such as working hours, and health and safety. Finally it regulates numerous areas of peoples' lives relating to issues including the environment and consumer protection.

## Hot Topics

- Enlargement and Turkish membership
- Immigration
- Energy and climate change

## Quotations

*'We want European Union, a United States of Europe'*. Helmut Kohl, German Chancellor, 1982-1998

*'[Is] British democracy, parliamentary sovereignty, the common law, our ability to run our own affairs – to be subordinated to the demands of a remote bureaucracy, resting on very different traditions?'* Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979-1990

### Technical Terms

**Supranationalism:** a form of organisation through which decisions are made by international institutions, not by individual states.

**Intergovernmental:** a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.