



# Panorama of the European Union



## What is the European Union?

A unique economic and political partnership between 27 democratic European countries.

## What are its aims?

Peace, prosperity and freedom for its 498 million citizens — in a fairer, safer world.

## What results so far?

Frontier-free travel and trade, the euro (the single European currency), safer food and a greener environment, better living standards in poorer regions, joint action on crime and terror, cheaper phone calls, millions of opportunities to study abroad ... and much more besides.

## How does it work?

To make these things happen, EU countries set up bodies to run the EU and adopt its legislation. The main ones are:

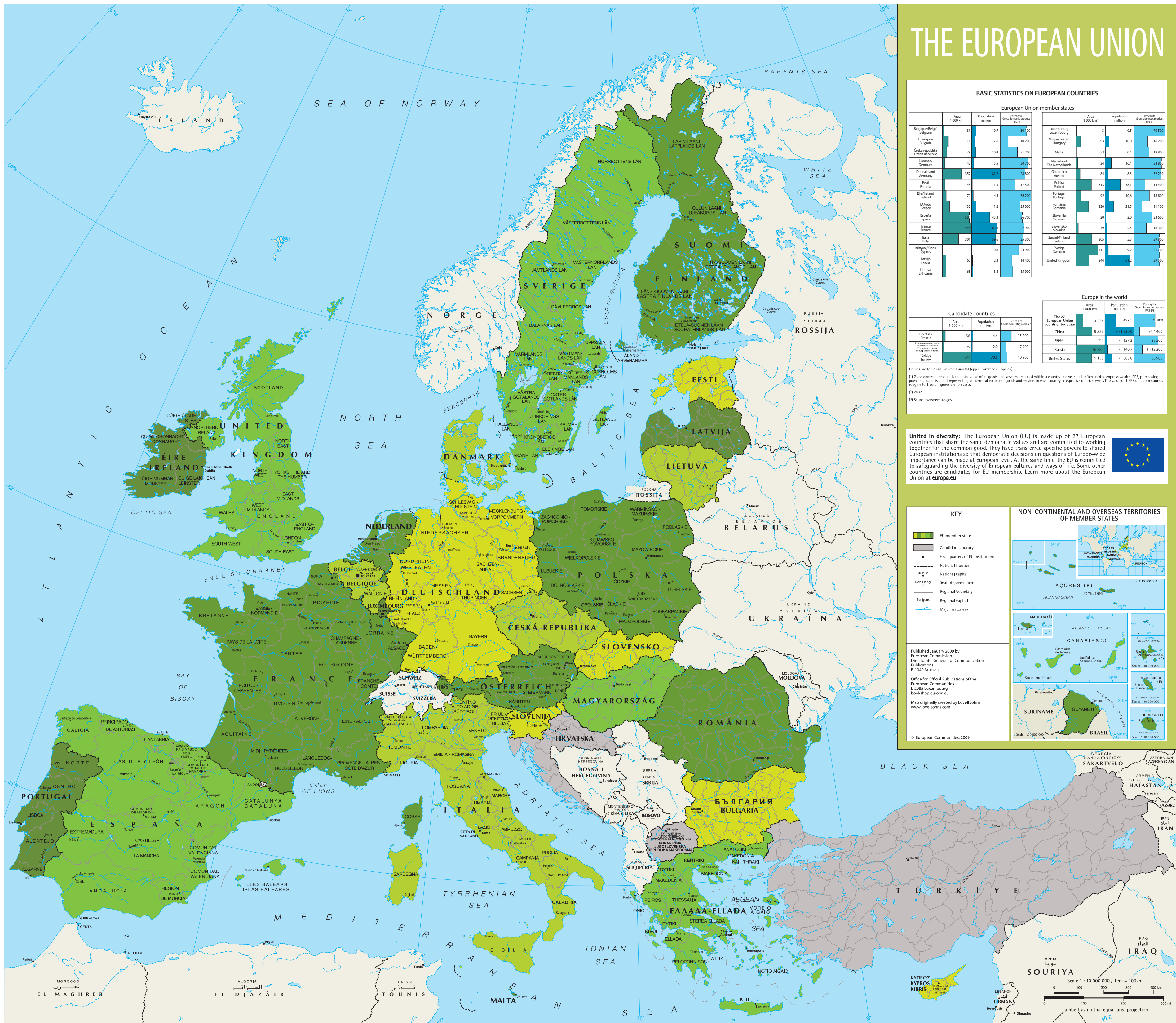
- the European Parliament (representing the people of Europe);
- the Council of the European Union (representing national governments);
- the European Commission (representing the common EU interest).

## How can I have my say?

The EU is not perfect — it is an evolving project and constantly has to be improved.

What do you want the EU to do and not to do? Have your say!

- Contact your local MP — EU policies are part of national politics.
- Contact your MEP and cast your vote at the European Parliament elections — the European Parliament enacts EU laws: [europarl.europa.eu](http://europarl.europa.eu)
- Contact the NGOs (consumer associations, environmental pressure groups, etc.) — they work with the EU on shaping policies.
- Find out more about the EU on the [europa.eu](http://europa.eu) website and get the answers to your questions about the EU by calling the Europe Direct freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11.



# THE EUROPEAN UNION

## BASIC STATISTICS ON EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

European Union member states			Candidate countries		
Country	Area (1 000 km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (million)	Area (1 000 km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (million)	Per capita Gross domestic product (PPS) (€)
Belgium/Belgie	31	10.7	30	10.7	30 100
Bulgaria	111	7.6	10	10.200	16 200
Czech Republic	79	10.4	21	21 200	19 800
Denmark	43	5.5	30	30 700	33 800
Germany	357	82.2	28	28 800	32 250
Estonia	45	1.3	17	17 500	14 400
France	640	65.0	27	27 900	18 800
Greece	132	11.2	25	25 000	11 100
Spain	505	45.3	26	26 700	23 600
Italy	301	61.6	25	25 300	18 300
Latvia	65	2.3	14	14 400	29 000
Lithuania	65	3.4	15	15 900	31 700
Poland	312	38.1	30	30 500	29 000
Portugal	92	10.6	29	29 000	29 000
Romania	230	21.5	21	21 500	29 000
Slovenia	20	2.0	20	20 000	23 600
Slovakia	49	5.4	49	49 000	18 300
Sweden	45	9.2	45	45 000	31 700
United Kingdom	244	61.2	24	24 000	29 000

Europe in the world			
Region	Area (1 000 km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (billion)	Per capita Gross domestic product (PPS) (€)
The 27 European Union countries together	4 224	497.5	25 900
China	9 327	1 330.0	14 400
Japan	376	127.3	28 000
Russia	3 959	140.7	12 200
United States	9 159	303.8	39 000

Figures are for 2008. Source: Eurostat ([ec.europa.eu/eurostat](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat)).  
 (1) Gross domestic product is the total value of all goods and services produced within a country in a year. It is often used to express wealth, purchasing power standard, a unit representing an identical volume of goods and services in each country, irrespective of price levels. The value of 1 PPS unit corresponds roughly to 1 Euro, figures are forecasts.  
 (2) 2007.  
 (3) Source: [www.eurostat.gov](http://www.eurostat.gov)

**United in diversity:** The European Union (EU) is made up of 27 European countries that share the same democratic values and are committed to working together for the common good. They have transferred specific powers to shared European institutions so that democratic decisions on questions of Europe-wide importance can be made at European level. At the same time, the EU is committed to safeguarding the diversity of European cultures and ways of life. Some other countries are candidates for EU membership. Learn more about the European Union at [europa.eu](http://europa.eu)

### KEY

- EU member state
- Candidate country
- Headquarters of EU institutions
- National frontier
- National capital
- Seat of government
- Regional boundary
- Regional capital
- Major waterway

### NON-CONTINENTAL AND OVERSEAS TERRITORIES OF MEMBER STATES

Published January 2009 by European Commission Directorate-General for Communication Publications 61 049 Brussels  
 Office for Official Publications of the European Communities L-2985 Luxembourg [bookshop.europa.eu](http://bookshop.europa.eu)  
 Map originally created by Lovell Johns, [www.lovejohns.com](http://www.lovejohns.com)  
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## > Fewer frontiers, more opportunities

You can travel across most of the EU without a passport and without border checks.

You can shop in another country where goods are cheaper without restrictions or additional taxes, as long as what you buy is for your own use. The single currency, the euro, allows you to compare prices directly in all the countries that use it. Travel between euro countries is easier because the costs and inconvenience of changing money have disappeared.

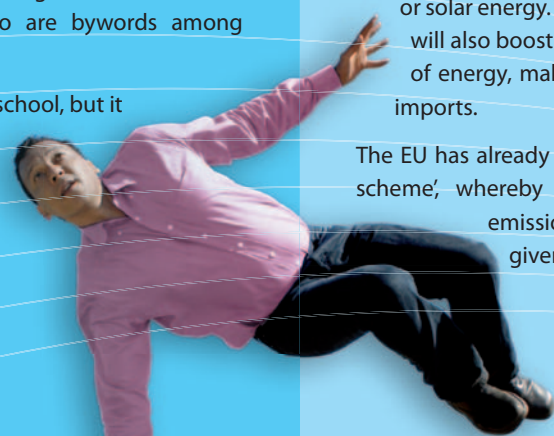
Competition introduced by the frontier-free single market has driven quality up and prices down. Phone calls, Internet access and air travel are cheaper. As consumers, EU rules protect you from faulty or substandard products whether you buy locally or in another country. The EU also sets the highest standards for food safety.

EU citizens can live, work, study and retire in another EU country. Temporary restrictions for workers from the 12 newest member states are gradually being removed.

## > Going abroad to learn

More than two million young people have already used EU programmes to study or train in another European country. As a result, the EU schemes for educational exchanges and trans-border partnerships like Erasmus and Leonardo are bywords among students and other learners.

The EU does not decide what you learn in school, but it does work to ensure that your educational and professional qualifications are properly recognised in other EU countries.



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## > A greener Europe

A healthy environment is a big issue for Europeans and their governments. This is why the EU is spearheading world efforts to protect the environment and fight climate change.

As pollution knows no borders, EU member states have taken joint action in many areas. It is not surprising then that Europe's rivers and beaches are cleaner, vehicles pollute less, and there are strict rules for waste disposal. Dangerous waste from Europe can no longer be dumped in poor countries. There are also tough EU rules to ensure that chemicals used by companies are safe for people and the environment.

The EU wants key activities like transport, industry, agriculture and tourism to be organised in such a way that they can be developed without destroying our natural resources — in short 'sustainable development'.

## > Fighting climate change

In an effort to put an end to climate change, EU leaders have agreed on tough measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 % by 2020.

Energy represents the cornerstone of the EU's long-term climate change policy and the EU has set binding targets to increase the use of clean, renewable energy sources such as wind, hydropower or solar energy. This will not only help fight climate change, but will also boost the economy and ensure a more stable supply of energy, making Europe less reliant on foreign oil and gas imports.

The EU has already put into place an innovative 'emission trading scheme', whereby energy-intensive companies that cut their emissions are rewarded and those that exceed the given limits are penalised.

## > Euros in your pocket

The euro (€) is probably the EU's most tangible achievement. The single currency is shared by 16 countries (2009), representing over two thirds of the EU population. Others will follow once their economies are ready.

All euro notes and coins can be used in the countries where the euro is accepted. Each note is the same, while the coins have a common design on one side and a national emblem of their country of origin on the other side.

These EU countries use the euro: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.



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## > Equal chances

Our society is fairer and more efficient when we do not discriminate against fellow human beings because of their nationality, gender, handicap, race or other factors. That is why EU law bans discrimination.

As long ago as the 1950s, the first EU treaties contained a clear-cut rule that men and women must have equal pay for equal work. This has given the EU a pioneering role in the fight for women's rights, which are now an integral part of all EU policies.

## > Freedom, security and justice for all

To tackle cross-border crime and terrorism, EU countries have taken steps to ensure full cooperation between their police and customs officers, immigration services and law courts.

One practical step has been to introduce a European arrest warrant, to make it easier to transfer suspected criminals from the country where they have been arrested to the country where they are wanted for questioning or to stand trial. EU countries are also coordinating asylum policies and tightening controls at the EU's external frontiers.

Since EU citizens are free to live in any member country, they must have equal access to justice everywhere in the EU. Member governments have to ensure that they all apply EU laws in the same way, and that court rulings in one country can be enforced in another. The EU has done a lot to make it easier to solve cross-border legal problems involving marriage, separation, divorce and the custody of children, as well as other kinds of civil disputes.

## > Jobs and growth

The European Union has contributed to our prosperity over the years by creating a single market and single currency, and by removing other obstacles to trade and mobility.

This helped limit the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis on Europe. EU leaders worked together to stabilise banks and other financial institutions in Europe, as well as to develop a strategy for renewed economic growth.

In today's competitive world, Europe needs new jobs and a skilled workforce. New jobs can come from research and development. EU leaders plan to increase research spending substantially, the goal being 3 % of gross national product by 2010. New skills are needed too, and we must all spend more time learning throughout our lives.

One third of the EU's €130-billion-a-year budget is spent on attracting investment and creating jobs in disadvantaged regions, and training unemployed or under-qualified workers.

Thanks to EU support, people in countries like Ireland and Spain are much better off than they were 25 years ago. Now growth is highest in the new member countries in the eastern part of the EU.

## > Exporting peace and stability

War between EU countries is now unthinkable, thanks to the unity that has been built up between them over the last 50 years. Given this success, the EU is now working to spread peace and stability beyond its borders.

The best way to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place is to create greater prosperity worldwide. As the world's largest trading power, the EU is using its influence to establish fair rules for world trade. It wants to make sure that globalisation also benefits the poorest countries. The EU already provides more humanitarian assistance and development aid than anyone else.

The EU sends military and police missions as peacekeepers to trouble-spots such as the Balkans, for example. This is part of the defence aspect of the EU's common foreign and security policy.

The European Union shows how democratic countries can successfully pool economic and political resources in the common interest, serving as a possible model to be followed in other parts of the world.



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## > A place in the Union

Since its creation by six founding members over 50 years ago, the European Union has attracted a constant stream of newcomers, culminating in its historic expansion from 15 to 27 in 2004 and 2007, which united a continent split by the Cold War for 45 years.

Any European country can join, provided it has a stable democracy that guarantees the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities. It must also have a functioning market economy and a civil service capable of applying EU laws in practice.

Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey are candidates to join. The EU gives substantial economic and practical assistance to candidate countries to help prepare for membership.

Up to 10 years or more can pass from the time a country submits an application to its actual date of entry. Once a membership treaty is agreed, it must be ratified by the European Parliament and by the national parliaments of the candidate country and of all EU member states.

## > Embracing a continent

EU members and when they joined:

**1952** Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands

**1973** Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom

**1981** Greece

**1986** Portugal, Spain

**1995** Austria, Finland, Sweden

**2004** Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia

**2007** Bulgaria, Romania

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## The European Parliament: Voice of the people

The European Parliament is elected every five years by the people of Europe to represent their interests.

The main job of Parliament is to pass European laws on the basis of proposals presented by the European Commission. Parliament shares this responsibility with the Council of the European Union. Parliament and Council also share joint authority for approving the EU's €130 billion annual budget.

Parliament has the power to dismiss the European Commission.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not sit in national blocks, but in Europe-wide political groups. These include parties such as the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), socialists, liberals, greens and others. Between them, MEPs represent all views on European integration, from the strongly pro-federalist to the openly Eurosceptic.

The main meetings of the Parliament are held in Strasbourg (France), others in Brussels (Belgium). Like all other EU institutions, the Parliament works in all the 23 official EU languages.

The Parliament elects the European Ombudsman, who investigates citizens' complaints about maladministration by the EU institutions (ombudsman.europa.eu).

> [europarl.europa.eu](http://europarl.europa.eu)

## The Council of the European Union: Voice of the member states

The Council of the European Union — formerly known as the Council of Ministers — is the EU's principal decision-taking body. It shares with Parliament the responsibility for passing EU laws. It is also in charge of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies, and is responsible for key decisions on justice and freedom issues.

The Council consists of ministers from the national governments of all the EU countries. Meetings are attended by whichever ministers are responsible for the items to be discussed: foreign ministers, ministers of the economy and finance, ministers for agriculture and so on, as appropriate. Every six months, a different member state assumes the so-called presidency of the EU, meaning that it chairs these meetings and sets the overall political agenda.

Each country has a number of votes in the Council broadly reflecting the size of its population, but weighted in favour of smaller countries. Most decisions are taken by majority vote, although sensitive issues in areas like taxation, asylum and immigration, or foreign policy, require unanimity.

Several times a year the presidents and/or prime ministers of the member states meet as the European Council. These 'summit' meetings set overall EU policy.

> [consilium.europa.eu](http://consilium.europa.eu)

## The European Commission: Promoting the common interest

The European Commission is the EU's executive organ. It represents and upholds the interests of Europe as a whole.

It drafts proposals for new European laws, which it presents to the European Parliament and the Council. It manages the day-to-day business of implementing EU policies and spending EU funds. The Commission also makes sure that everyone abides by the European treaties and laws. It can act against rule-breakers, taking them to the Court of Justice if necessary.

The Commission consists of 27 men and women — one from each EU country. They are assisted by about 24 000 civil servants, most of whom work in Brussels.

The president of the Commission is chosen by EU governments and endorsed by the European Parliament. The other commissioners are nominated by their national governments in consultation with the incoming president, and must be approved by the European Parliament. They do not represent the governments of their home countries. Instead, each of them has responsibility for a particular EU policy area.

The president and members of the Commission are appointed for a period of five years, coinciding with the period for which the European Parliament is elected.

> [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu)

## The Court of Justice: The rule of law

The job of the Court of Justice is to make sure that EU law is interpreted and applied in the same way in all EU countries, thereby ensuring that the law is equal for everyone. It ensures, for example, that national courts do not give different rulings on the same issue. The Court also makes sure that EU member states and institutions do what the law requires them to do. The Court is located in Luxembourg and has one judge from each member country.

> [curia.europa.eu](http://curia.europa.eu)

## The Court of Auditors: Getting value for your money

The Court of Auditors checks that the EU's funds, which come from the taxpayers, are spent legally, economically and for the intended purpose. The Court is based in Luxembourg and has the right to audit any organisation, body or company which handles EU funds.

> [eca.europa.eu](http://eca.europa.eu)

## The European Economic and Social Committee: Voice of civil society

The 344 members of the European Economic and Social Committee represent a wide range of interests: from employers to trade unionists, from consumers to ecologists. The Committee is an advisory body which must be consulted on proposed EU decisions about employment, social spending, vocational training, etc.

> [eesc.europa.eu](http://eesc.europa.eu)

## The Committee of the Regions: The local perspective

The Committee of the Regions is consulted on upcoming EU decisions with a direct impact at the local or regional level in fields such as transport, health, employment or education. Its 344 members are often leaders of regional governments or mayors of cities.

> [cor.europa.eu](http://cor.europa.eu)

## The European Central Bank: A stable currency

Based in Frankfurt (Germany), the European Central Bank is responsible for managing the euro, principally by setting interest rates. Its prime concern is ensuring price stability so that the European economy is not harmed by inflation. The Bank takes its decisions independently of governments and other bodies.

> [www.ecb.eu](http://www.ecb.eu)

## The European Investment Bank: Lending a helping hand

The Bank lends money for projects of European interest, particularly in the less well-off regions. It finances infrastructure projects, such as rail and road links or environmental schemes. It also provides credit for investments by small businesses and lends to candidate states and developing countries. Because it is owned by EU governments, the Bank can raise capital and provide loans and credit at favourable rates.

> [www.eib.org](http://www.eib.org)

## > The EU symbols

**The European flag**  
The 12 stars in a circle symbolise the ideals of unity, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe.

**The European anthem**  
The melody comes from the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven. When this music is used as the European anthem, it has no words.

**Europe Day, 9 May**  
The ideas behind what is now the European Union were first put forward on 9 May 1950 in a speech by the then French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman. Each year, 9 May is celebrated as the EU's birthday.

**United in diversity**  
This is the motto of the EU.



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## > Getting in touch with the EU

**ONLINE**  
Information in all the official languages of the European Union is available on the Europa website: [europa.eu](http://europa.eu)

**IN PERSON**  
All over Europe there are hundreds of local EU information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you on this website: [europedirect.europa.eu](http://europedirect.europa.eu)

**ON THE PHONE OR BY MAIL**  
**Europe Direct** is a service which answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service by freephone: **00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11**, by payphone from outside the EU: **(32-2) 299 96 96** or by electronic mail via the Europe Direct website: [europedirect.europa.eu](mailto:europedirect.europa.eu)

**READ ABOUT EUROPE**  
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> United Kingdom Office 8 Storey's Gate, London SW1P 3AT Tel. (44-20) 79 73 19 92 Fax (44-20) 79 73 19 00 10 Internet: <a href="http://www.ec.europa.eu/uk">www.ec.europa.eu/uk</a>	> United Kingdom Office 2, Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA Tel. (44-20) 72 27 43 00 Fax (44-20) 72 27 43 02 Internet: <a href="mailto:www.europarl.org.uk">www.europarl.org.uk</a> E-mail: <a href="mailto:epLondon@europarl.europa.eu">epLondon@europarl.europa.eu</a>
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There are European Commission and Parliament representations and offices in all the countries of the European Union. The European Commission also has delegations in other parts of the world.

European Commission  
Directorate-General for Communication  
Publications  
B-1049 Brussels

Manuscript completed in February 2009  
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