

The predecessor of the EU was created in the aftermath of the Second World War. The first steps were to foster economic cooperation: the idea being that countries that trade with one another become economically interdependent and so more likely to avoid conflict. The result was the European Economic Community, created in 1958 with the initial aim of increasing economic cooperation between six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Since then, 22 more countries joined (and the United Kingdom left the EU in 2020) and a huge single market (also known as the 'internal' market) has been created and continues to develop towards its full potential. What began as a purely economic union has evolved into an organisation spanning many different policy areas, from climate, environment and health to external relations and security, justice and migration. A name change from the European Economic Community to the European Union in 1993 reflected this. The EU has delivered more than half a century of peace, stability and prosperity, helped raise living standards and launched a single European currency: the euro. More than 340 million EU citizens in 19 countries now use it as their currency and enjoy its benefits. Thanks to the abolition of border controls between EU countries, people can travel freely throughout most of the continent. And it has become much easier to live and work in another country in Europe. All EU citizens have the right and freedom to choose in which EU country they want to study, work or retire. Every EU country must treat EU citizens in exactly the same way as its own citizens when it comes to matters of employment, social security and tax. The EU's main economic engine is the single market. It enables most goods, services, money and people to move freely. The EU aims to develop this huge resource to other areas like energy, knowledge and capital markets to ensure that Europeans can draw the maximum benefit from it. The EU remains focused on making its governing institutions more transparent and democratic. Decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizen. More powers have been given to the directly elected European Parliament, while national parliaments play a greater role, working alongside the European institutions. The EU is governed by the principle of representative democracy, with citizens directly represented at EU level in the European Parliament and Member States represented in the European Council and the Council of the EU. European citizens are encouraged to contribute to the democratic life of the EU by giving their views on EU policies during their development or by suggesting improvements to existing laws and policies. The European Citizens' Initiative empowers citizens to have a greater say on EU policies that affect their lives. Citizens can also submit complaints and enquiries concerning the application of EU law. As enshrined in the Treaty on European Union, 'the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail'. These values are an integral part of the European way of life. Human dignity must be respected, protected and constitutes the real basis of fundamental rights. Being a European citizen also means enjoying political rights. Every adult EU citizen has the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in elections to the European Parliament, whether in their country of residence or country of origin. Equality is about equal rights for all citizens before the law. The principle of equality between women and men underpins all European policies and is the basis for European integration. It applies in all areas. The EU is based on the rule of law. Everything the EU does is founded on treaties, which are voluntarily and democratically agreed by its member countries. Law and justice are upheld by an independent judiciary. The EU countries have given final jurisdiction in matters of EU law to the European Court of Justice, whose

judgments have to be respected by all. Human rights are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data, and the right to get access to justice. In 2012, the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for advancing the causes of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe. EU Member States and institutions At the core of the EU are the 27 Member States that belong to the EU, and their citizens. The unique feature of the EU is that, although the Member States all remain sovereign and independent states, they have decided to pool some of their 'sovereignty' in areas where it makes sense to work together. In practice, this means that the Member States delegate some of their decision-making powers to the shared institutions they have created, so that decisions on specific matters of common interest can be made democratically at EU level.