

## SPICe Briefing

# The European Union – A Brief History

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This subject profile provides a brief history of the European Union from its development after the Second World War through to the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon.



Image: European Parliament



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# THE EUROPEAN UNION

## WHAT IS IT?

The European Union (EU) is a unique international organisation in that it is not a federation of states like the United States, nor is it simply an organisation for co-operation between governments, such as the United Nations. Instead, it comprises a set of common supranational institutions established by the member states, each of which gives up some of its sovereignty, to make decisions on matters of joint interest at a European level. This pooling of sovereignty is often referred to as "European integration". According to the Maastricht Treaty the fundamental goal of the EU is to create an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe.

## HISTORICAL ROOTS

The idea of European integration was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War. A pooling of coal and steel production, then the sources of all military power, was proposed as "*the first concrete foundation of a European federation*" by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman in a speech on 9 May 1950. This date is now celebrated annually as 'Europe Day'. Schuman's idea was that if countries shared resources and relied on others for key raw materials they would be less likely (and less able) to go to war with each other.

## MEMBERSHIP

Schuman's idea was taken forward and in 1951 the European Coal and Steel Community was formed. The six founding member countries of the European Coal and Steel Community were: Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. These six member states then signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957 forming the European Economic Community. This created a common market between the countries allowing goods and services to move freely between them.

The United Kingdom, along with Ireland and Denmark, acceded to membership of the European Economic Community in 1973. There were further enlargements in 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013. Membership now stands at 28 states with a total population of around 500 million.

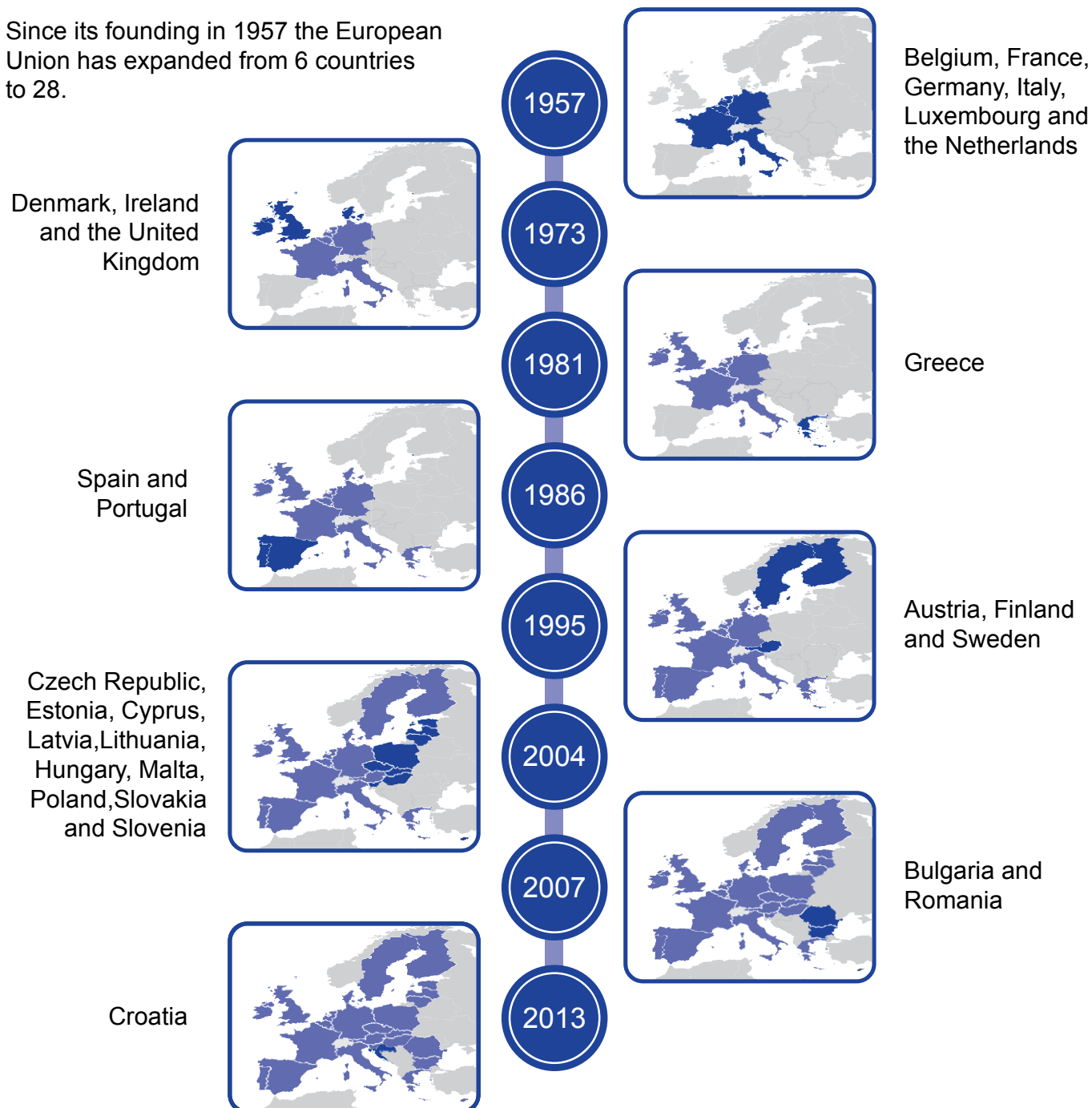
There are also a further five countries who have candidate status. This means the countries are in the process of negotiating their accession to the European Union. The five candidate countries are Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

**Figure 1 – Expansion of the European Union**



Expansion of the European Union

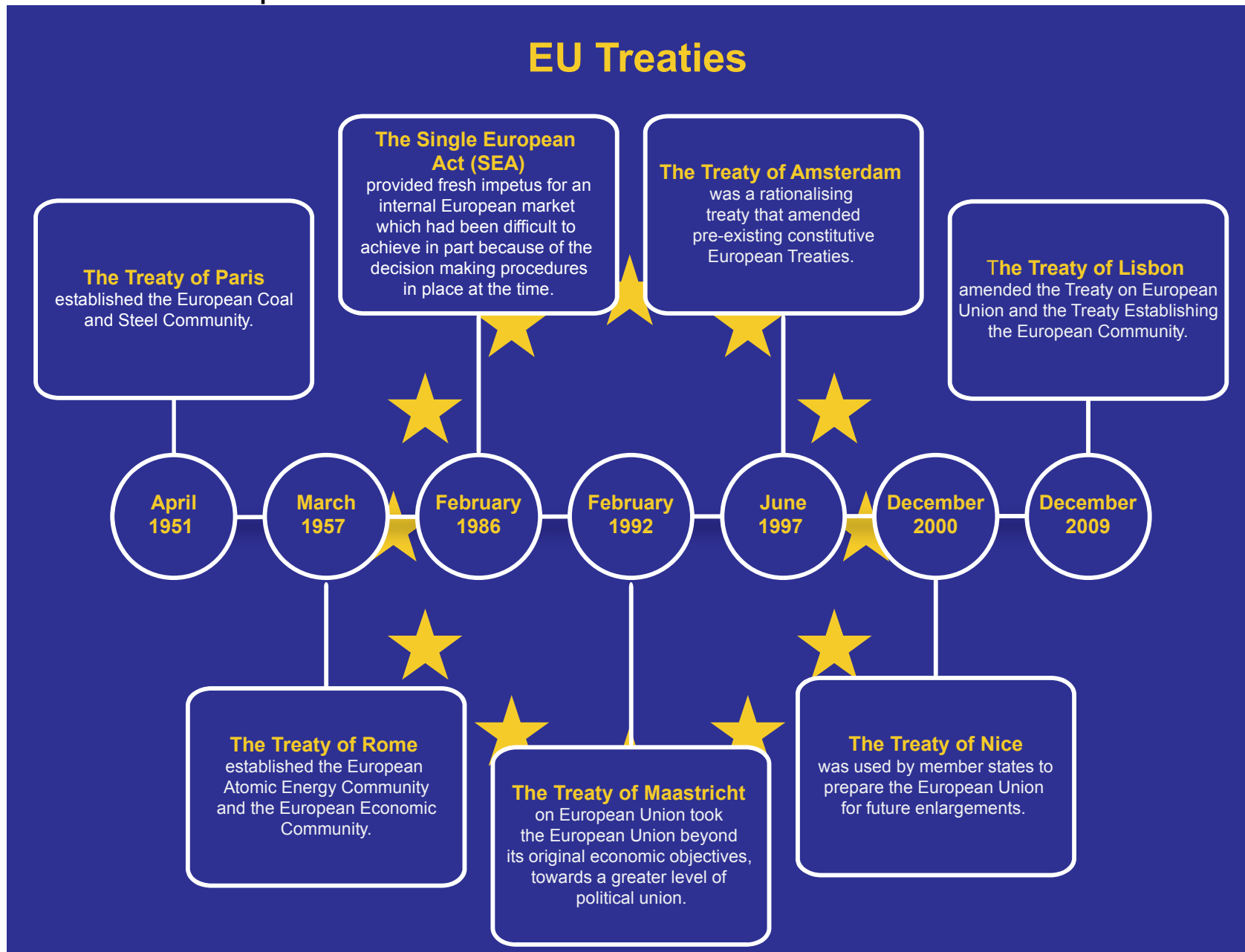
Since its founding in 1957 the European Union has expanded from 6 countries to 28.



**THE TREATIES**

The operation and competencies of the European Union are underpinned by the Treaties which constitute its legal basis and which are agreed by all Member States. A brief description of each of the Treaties is provided in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The Treaties of the European Union



## THE TREATY OF LISBON

Signed in December 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon saw the most recent amendments to the EU Treaties. The Treaty of Lisbon amended both the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community. The Treaty Establishing the European Community was re-named the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). According to the European Commission, (2009) the Treaty of Lisbon had four key effects

- **A more democratic and transparent Europe**, with a strengthened role for the European Parliament and national parliaments, more opportunities for citizens to have their voices heard and a clearer sense of who does what at European and national level.
- **A more efficient Europe**, with simplified working methods and voting rules, streamlined and modern institutions for a EU of 28 members and an improved ability to act in areas of major priority for today's Union.
- **A Europe of rights and values, freedom, solidarity and security**, promoting the Union's values, introducing the Charter of Fundamental Rights into European primary law, providing for new solidarity mechanisms and ensuring better protection of European citizens.
- **Europe as an actor on the global stage** will be achieved by bringing together Europe's external policy tools, both when developing and deciding new policies. The Treaty of Lisbon gives Europe a clear voice in relations with its partners worldwide. It harnesses Europe's economic, humanitarian, political and diplomatic strengths to promote European interests and values worldwide, while respecting the particular interests of the Member States in Foreign Affairs

Following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, the TFEU includes the areas of competence for action at either member state or EU level. In relation to member state competence, the Treaty does not define whether competence is at national, regional or local level.

At the time, the House of Commons Library (2007) produced a research paper which included a definition of competence:

“Competence’ is the term used to define whether the Union or the member states has the responsibility under the EC Treaties to make decisions on a particular policy. Competence at regional or local level is not specified in the Lisbon Treaty. In defining whether the EC or the member states have competence in any particular area or for a specific task, the terms “spheres of competence”, “shared competence”, “Community competence” and “exclusive competence” are terms used in the present Treaties, but these do not list areas of exclusive or shared competence.”

Articles 3 to 6 of the TFEU set out at which level competences sit. These articles have been reproduced in Box 1 below for information.

## Box 1 – Areas of European Union Competence

### Areas of Exclusive Competence

Article 3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union details the areas of Union exclusive competence as:

- Customs union
- Competition rules for the functioning of the internal market
- Monetary policy, for the member states which have adopted the euro
- Conservation of marine biological resources under the common fisheries policy
- Common commercial policy

### Areas of Shared Competence

Article 4(2) is on 'shared competence', where the Union and the member states are both able to act.

The main areas of shared competence are as follows:

- (a) internal market;
- (b) social policy, for the aspects defined in this Treaty;
- (c) economic, social and territorial cohesion;
- (d) agriculture and fisheries, excluding the conservation of marine biological resources;
- (e) environment;
- (f) consumer protection;
- (g) transport;
- (h) trans-European networks;
- (i) energy;
- (j) area of freedom, security and justice;
- (k) common safety concerns in public health matters, for the aspects defined in this Treaty.

Article 4(3) also states that "in the areas of research, technological development and space, the Union shall have competence to carry out activities, in particular to define and implement programmes; however; the exercise of that competence shall not result in member states being prevented from exercising theirs".

Article 4(4) adds that "in the areas of development cooperation and humanitarian aid, the Union shall have competence to carry out activities and conduct a common policy; however; the exercise of that competence shall not result in member states being prevented from exercising theirs".

### Areas of Supporting Competence

Article 6 sets out a category of areas of supporting, coordinating or complementary action:

- (a) protection and improvement of human health;
- (b) industry;
- (c) culture;
- (d) tourism;
- (e) education, youth, sport and vocational training;
- (f) civil protection;
- (g) administrative cooperation.

Action in these areas must not supersede the competence of member states to act and must not entail the harmonisation of national laws.

## **SOURCES**

European Commission (2009) Treaty of Lisbon, The Treaty at a Glance. [Online] Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/archives/lisbon\\_treaty/glance/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/archives/lisbon_treaty/glance/index_en.htm) [Accessed 17 May 2016]

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