

# WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Valdis Pētersons

Researcher

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is a geopolitical entity that covers much of the European continent. It is a unique economic and political association in the world, made up of 28 countries. Since the 1960s, Brussels has established itself as the capital of the EU, where most of the EU institutions are concentrated and where most officials and officials live. The EU has a single currency, a flag, an anthem and Europe Day, which is celebrated every 9 May.

In 1951, when the European Coal and Steel Community was formed (key elements for the war), the six founding countries - Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands - began an economic, political project. and social that has generated peace, stability and prosperity for more than half a century.

The EU has helped raise the standard of living of Europeans, created a single currency and is now progressively building a single market in which people, goods, services and capital (the four fundamental freedoms of the EU) move between Member States. with the same freedom as if they did so within the same country. What began as a purely economic union has evolved into an active organization on all fronts, from development aid to environmental policy.

The EU actively promotes human rights and democracy, and has the world's most ambitious emission reduction targets to fight climate change. Thanks to the abolition of border controls between EU countries, you can now travel freely through most of their territory. It is also much easier to live and work in another EU country.

Following several enlargements, the EU has gone from six to twenty-eight member states since the accession of Croatia in 2013 and there are several candidate countries (Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, FYROM and Iceland). Each treaty admitting a new member requires the unanimous approval of all Member States. The European Union is open to any European country that meets the democratic, political and economic criteria of accession, called the Copenhagen criteria.

## 2. MAIN IDEAS

The euro is the single currency of the European Union. Twelve of the then fifteen Member States adopted it for non-monetary transactions in 1999 and banknotes and coins were issued in 2002. Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom did not participate in this monetary union.

The European Union is governed by an internal system of representative democracy. Its institutions are seven:

The European Parliament. Members of the European Parliament are directly elected and represent European citizens. Parliament and the Council exercise legislative power on equal terms, taking joint decisions.

The European Council is the Union's main decision-making body and its role is to give the EU political impetus on key issues and set the EU's overall priorities. The Council exercises functions of general political orientation and external representation, and appoints the heads of the high constitutional institutions.

The Council of the European Union represents the governments of each of the Member States, which share their Presidency on a rotating basis (with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, the figure of the Trio of Presidencies was established).

The European Commission, or College of Commissioners, represents the common interest of the EU, and is the main executive body. It applies Union law, monitors compliance with it and implements its policies, and is exclusively responsible for legislative initiative before Parliament and the Commission; its members are appointed by national governments.

The Court of Justice of the European Union exercises supreme jurisdictional functions in the Community legal order.

The Court of Auditors supervises and controls the proper functioning and proper administration of Community finances and funds.

The European Central Bank directs and implements the single monetary policy of the euro area.

The EU also has other interinstitutional institutions and bodies with specialized functions: the European Economic and Social Committee represents civil society, the business sector and employees; the Committee of the Regions represents regional and local authorities; the European Investment Bank finances EU investment projects and helps small businesses through the European Investment Fund; the European Ombudsman investigates allegations of maladministration by the EU institutions and bodies; the European Data Protection Supervisor protects the privacy of citizens' personal data; the Publications Office publishes information on the EU; the European Personnel Selection Office hires staff from the EU institutions and other bodies; the European School of Management offers training in specific areas to EU staff; the European External Action Service (EEAS) assists the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council and directs the Common Foreign and Security Policy, while ensuring coherence and coordination of EU external action.

In short, Europe's mission in the 21st century can be said to be: to bring peace, prosperity and stability to its citizens; overcoming divisions on the continent; ensure that its citizens can live safely; to promote balanced and sustainable economic and social development; addressing the challenges of globalization and preserving the diversity of the peoples of Europe; to defend the values shared by Europeans, such as sustainable development and care for the environment, respect for human rights and the social market economy, and to gain international visibility and speak with one voice in the main international forums and bodies.

### **3. HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION WORK?**

The European Council, which brings together European national leaders, sets out the EU's overall priorities.

Members of the European Parliament, elected directly by the citizens, represent European citizens.

The European Commission, whose members are appointed by national governments, promotes the interests of the European Union.

The Council of the European Union, in which the Member States are represented through their ministers, has, together with the European Parliament, legislative and budgetary functions. In it, governments defend the national interests of their respective countries.

The Member States of the European Union<sup>2</sup> are the sovereign countries that are part of this organization.<sup>2</sup> Their number has increased from the six founding states to the twenty-seven that make up the union today: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania and Sweden.<sup>3</sup> This increase is due to the fact that the community has undergone successive enlargements that have extended its borders to cover most of the continental territory today under the common governance of the European Union.

All Member States are parties to the treaties that make up the organization, which are the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). However, these countries differ from each other in their history, culture, population, geography, political and territorial model of government, and even form of state (twenty-one republics and six monarchies),<sup>4</sup> although they are linked by political commitment, economic and legal process resulting from the process of European integration undertaken by all in the framework of the founding treaties.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Any European country that meets the Copenhagen criteria, which establishes the obligation for the state to have a democratic and free market government, can be part of the Union, in addition to recognizing the rights and freedoms of citizens, among other requirements.<sup>5</sup> However, the flag of the European Union (circle of twelve yellow stars on a blue background) was adopted by the then European Economic Community in 1985, and its number of stars has been and will invariably be twelve, ie it has no relation to the number of states of the Union.

Moreover, since the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, any Member State wishing to do so can request withdrawal from the EU. Thus, the United Kingdom government, following the 2016 referendum, made preparations to invoke Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, which formally initiated the process for the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Brexit). became effective on 1 February 2020. However, Greenland, as a territory, had already withdrawn from the European Community following a process in the mid-1980s to achieve greater autonomy for a Member State (Denmark) .<sup>6</sup>

There are also a number of countries that have established strong links with the European Union in a similar way to even certain aspects of membership as a Member State. Such is the case of Norway and Iceland, which are in the European Economic Area (EEA), are part of the Schengen area, and participate in several of the EU's programs, institutions and activities.<sup>7</sup> Something similar happens with Switzerland, which also belongs to the Schengen area.<sup>8</sup> However, these countries have rejected their accession in various votes.

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