

EUROPEAN COURSE

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

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The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why the EU? Scope & Sources

The European Union is in the news constantly and understood remarkably little. People argue about it, vote on it, and complain about it or defend it, often without a clear picture of what it is, what it does, or how it differs from a dozen other European organisations with similar names. This opening chapter sets out what the EU is and is not, explains how this course differs from the politics course that already exists on the site, shows how to handle the many confident claims made about the EU, and lists where to read. Because the EU is a live political argument, the course reports what happened and what each side says, and does not recommend a position.

Why This Course?

The site already has a course on how the EU's institutions work: European Politics Fundamentals. It takes the Commission, the Parliament, the two Councils and the Court in detail, and follows a real law through the system. This course asks different questions. How did a coal and steel agreement between six countries become a union of twenty-seven? What changed at each stage? And what does any of it mean for someone buying a phone charger, crossing a border or studying abroad? Where an institution matters to the story, this course gives a short plain-language description and a pointer to the matching chapter of European Politics Fundamentals, and does not repeat it.

> **The question for the whole course**
>
> The Union is built on a bargain: countries share some decisions so that they can do together what none can do alone, and they keep the rest. Every chapter is, in one way or another, about where that line was drawn, who moved it, and what people noticed when it moved. The final chapter returns to this directly.

A One-Paragraph Version

The European Union (EU) is a political and economic union of independent European states, which at the time of writing has 27 members (check the current number). It grew from the European Coal and Steel Community of 1951 and the Treaties of Rome of 1957 (Chapter 2),

through the common market, the single market and the euro (Chapters 3 and 4), and through successive enlargements (Chapter 6). Its members agree treaties that give common institutions power to make laws in some areas, which apply directly in every member state. It is neither a country nor a loose club of cooperating governments, which is exactly why people describe it so differently. These are the basic facts. Each is developed in a later chapter, with dates checked as they appear.

Five Names That Get Confused

Term	What it is	Not to be confused with
Europe	A continent, with no single government. It includes countries that are not in the EU, such as Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Ukraine	The EU, which covers only part of it
The European Union	The union of 27 states described above	A federal country or an army (it is neither)
The Council of Europe	A much larger human-rights and legal organisation based in Strasbourg, founded in 1949, with around 46 members (check). It created the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights	The Council of the EU or the European Council, which are EU bodies
The eurozone	The EU countries that use the euro, around twenty (check, since it has grown in recent years)	The EU itself, since some members keep their own currency
The Schengen area	Countries that have abolished routine passport checks between them. It includes most EU members and some non-members such as Norway, Iceland and Switzerland (check the current list)	The EU, since some EU members, notably Ireland, are not fully part of it

Other European bodies on this site

The European Space Agency is not an EU body, although the two work closely together (The European Space Agency 1), and the Eurovision Song Contest is run by a broadcasters'

union, not by the EU (The Eurovision Song Contest 1). Many things called "European" are not the EU, and part of understanding the Union is knowing where it stops.

What the Course Covers

Chapters	Theme
2–4	Origins: from the coal and steel community to the single market, Maastricht and the euro (1945–2002)
5–6	Borders and people: Schengen and free movement, then enlargement towards the east
7	Crises from 2008 to the present
8–9	Everyday life: money, shopping and consumers; travel, study, work and place
10	Capstone: what the Union is for

What the course leaves out

This is a history and explanation for general readers, not a law course and not a campaign. It does not recommend a vote or a policy, does not list every directive, and does not rank the EU against other blocs. Recent events change quickly, so where the course describes them it states a cut-off date, and a check is marked wherever a figure or a status might have moved.

Record, Claim and Euromyth

Few subjects produce as many confident statements as the EU, from supporters, critics, governments, newspapers and the institutions themselves. Three kinds of statement need different handling.

Record

Treaty dates, the text of a law, a vote tally, an official figure. These can be checked in the

Claim

"The EU costs us X a week", "the EU has kept the peace for seventy years" or "Brussels

EU's legal database and in reliable reference works.

decides everything". Each may rest on a real fact, but also on a choice of what to count and what to leave out. A claim needs its assumptions examined, not simply a yes or no.

Euromyth

A story about the EU that is false, or true only in a stretched form. The label is itself sometimes used unfairly to dismiss a real complaint, so each case should be judged on its facts.

The Bent Banana Test

The most famous Euromyth is that "Brussels banned bent bananas" or required cucumbers to be straight. The real position is more interesting than either the myth or a flat denial.

- **The record.** The EU did adopt marketing standards that sorted certain fruit and vegetables into quality classes, including bananas and cucumbers, with descriptions such as a minimum quality and, for the best class, being free of abnormal curvature (check the regulations and dates).
- **The stretch.** No ban on selling bent bananas existed. The standards described classes for trade, and produce outside them could still be sold in other ways (check).
- **The later change.** Many of these detailed standards for fruit and vegetables were relaxed or repealed around 2009 (check).

The lesson is a method and not a verdict: find the original text, see what it actually required, see what changed, and then decide whether the story was fair. The same test is applied to claims throughout the course.

Where to Read

- **EUR-Lex.** The EU's legal database, where treaties, regulations and directives can be read in full. It is the place to check what a law actually says.

- **The EU's own site and institutions' pages.** Good for facts and official explanations, and an official source with a natural interest in presenting the Union well.
- **Eurostat and Eurobarometer.** The EU's statistics office and its opinion surveys, useful for figures about the economy, trade and what people think (check the survey date).
- **National newspapers and broadcasters.** Coverage varies a great deal by country, which is itself part of the story.
- **Histories and academic studies.** Look for histories of European integration, which set events in context and often disagree with each other.
- **Think tanks and campaign groups.** Valuable for argument, and each has a position, so read them as advocates and confirm important figures elsewhere.

A note on accuracy

Dates, names and figures in this course are given from general knowledge and flagged "check" where they might be wrong or out of date. Treaty names, article numbers and membership counts change, so check anything you plan to quote against EUR-Lex or the EU's own site. The habit of separating record from publicity and memory is the same one used in The European Space Agency 1.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a sentence each how the EU differs from (a) Europe, (b) the Council of Europe, (c) the eurozone and (d) the Schengen area.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Sort these into record, claim or Euromyth, and say why: (a) the Treaties of Rome were signed in 1957; (b) "the EU has kept the peace in Europe for seventy years"; (c) "Brussels has banned bent bananas".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one thing you believe the EU requires, write it down, then look for the original text on EUR-Lex or the EU's site. Note whether the source agreed with you, corrected you or showed the rule had changed.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **EU:** a union of 27 independent states, sharing some decisions through common institutions
- **Roots:** the Coal and Steel Community (1951) and the Treaties of Rome (1957)
- **Not the same:** Europe, the Council of Europe, the eurozone, the Schengen area
- **Companion course:** European Politics Fundamentals, for how the institutions work
- **Handling claims:** separate record, claim and Euromyth; go back to the original text
- **Best first check:** EUR-Lex, read alongside the EU's own pages with their interest in mind
- **Check:** membership numbers, the Schengen list and the banana-standards dates

Next chapter: From Coal and Steel to Rome: 1945–1957, which looks at how and why six countries first agreed to pool part of their sovereignty.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · From Coal and Steel to Rome: 1945–1957

The European Union did not begin with a grand plan for a united continent. It began with a proposal about two industrial materials, made by a French government that was worried about Germany. This chapter follows the twelve years from the end of the Second World War to the Treaties of Rome: the reasons Europeans looked for a new kind of cooperation, the Schuman Declaration and the Coal and Steel Community, a defence project that failed, and the treaties that created the common market. Dates and names are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Europe in 1945

In 1945 much of the continent was in ruins, millions had died, and the same two neighbours, France and Germany, had fought three wars in seventy years (1870, 1914 and 1939, check). The old answer to such problems had been alliances and a balance of power, and it had failed twice. Three pressures pushed people towards something new.

- **Peace.** How could France and Germany be bound together so that another war between them became unthinkable?
- **Recovery.** American aid under the Marshall Plan from 1948 encouraged European countries to cooperate on how to spend it, and led to a body to coordinate it (check).
- **The Cold War.** A divided Germany and a threatening Soviet Union made a strong western Europe, with a recovering West Germany inside it, seem urgent.

> **Not one idea but several**
>
> Some wanted a federation, with a European government. Some wanted only cooperation between governments. Winston Churchill spoke in Zurich in 1946 of "a kind of United States of Europe", but he did not say Britain would be part of it (check the wording). The same split, between sharing power in common institutions and cooperating while keeping control, runs through the whole history of the Union.

The Council of Europe: A First Try

In 1949 ten countries founded the Council of Europe, in Strasbourg (check). It was a forum for cooperation on human rights, law and culture, and it produced the European Convention on Human Rights (Chapter 1). It had no power to make binding laws on economic matters, and its limits convinced some people that a more ambitious structure was needed. It is not part of the EU and should not be confused with it.

The Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950

The turning point came from France. Jean Monnet, a planner and official who had worked on pooling Allied supplies in both world wars (check), drew up a proposal. It was presented by the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, on 9 May 1950, a date now celebrated as Europe Day.

The idea

Place the whole of French and German coal and steel production under a common authority, in an organisation open to other European countries.

The reasoning

Coal and steel were the raw materials of armies. If both countries' production were pooled, war between them would become, in the declaration's words, not merely unthinkable but materially impossible (check the wording).

The novelty

The common authority would have real powers over its members, instead of being a conference of governments. It was an early example of the supranational approach.

The European Coal and Steel Community

Six countries accepted: France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. They signed the Treaty of Paris in 1951, and the Community began work in 1952 (check). The Treaty of Paris was set for fifty years, and it expired in 2002 (check).

- **A High Authority.** An independent body with power to make binding decisions about coal and steel, led by Monnet as its first president (check). It was the ancestor of today's

European Commission, which is covered in European Politics Fundamentals 2.
- **An Assembly.** Representatives from national parliaments, the ancestor of the European Parliament (European Politics Fundamentals 3).
- **A Council of Ministers.** Representing the governments (European Politics Fundamentals 4).
- **A Court.** To settle disputes about the treaty (European Politics Fundamentals 5).

Most of the institutional shape of the later Union is visible here in small. The United Kingdom was invited to take part and declined (check), which began a long history of British distance from the project (Chapter 3).

> **Peace project or economic project?**
>
> Defenders of the "peace project" reading point to Schuman's own words. Critics of that reading note that the practical motives included French industrial interests and the wish to control the Ruhr, and that the deal also suited West Germany by returning it to equal status. The evidence supports both: the declaration was about peace, and it also served the interests of those who signed it. The history is stronger for admitting both.

A Defence Community That Failed

The success of the Coal and Steel Community encouraged a bolder plan. After the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the United States pressed for West German rearmament, which alarmed France. The French answer, the Pleven Plan, proposed a European Defence Community, with a joint European army including German units (check). The six signed a treaty in 1952, and the plan was to be accompanied by a political community.

It failed. In August 1954 the French National Assembly refused to ratify the treaty (check). The reasons included fear of rearmament, objection to giving up control of the French army, and disagreement across the political spectrum. The episode shows a pattern that recurs: integration advances when it is practical and limited, and stalls when it touches the core symbols of national sovereignty, such as armies.

Messina and the Treaties of Rome

After the defence failure, supporters returned to economics.

- **Messina, 1955.** The foreign ministers of the six met in Sicily in June 1955 and agreed to study a wider economic union (check). The British government took part in early discussions and withdrew (check).
- **The Spaak Report, 1956.** A committee chaired by the Belgian politician Paul-Henri Spaak produced the plan that became the basis of the treaties (check).
- **Rome, 25 March 1957.** The six signed two treaties: one creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and one creating Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community (check). They came into force on 1 January 1958.

The EEC treaty set out a common market in which goods, people, services and capital would eventually move freely, a customs union with a common external tariff, common policies on agriculture and transport, and a timetable. The 1957 Treaty of Rome is the founding text of what is now the EU, and its descendants still govern the Union (European Politics Fundamentals 1).

Year	Event
1946	Churchill's Zurich speech on a "United States of Europe"
1949	The Council of Europe founded
1950	The Schuman Declaration (9 May)
1951–52	The Treaty of Paris; the Coal and Steel Community begins work
1952–54	The Defence Community treaty is signed, then rejected by France
1955–56	Messina conference and the Spaak Report
1957–58	The Treaties of Rome are signed and come into force

Check the details

The sequence above is firm. The exact signing and entry-into-force dates, the quotations and the account of the British position are from general knowledge and should be confirmed in a reliable history of European integration.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the idea behind the Schuman Declaration, naming the people who devised and announced it, and say what was new about the common authority it proposed.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Name the six founding states and the four institutions of the Coal and Steel Community, and say which later EU body each resembles.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Defence Community failed in 1954 while the Treaties of Rome succeeded in 1957, and say what this suggests about how the Union grows.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Motives:** peace between France and Germany, recovery, the Cold War
- **9 May 1950:** the Schuman Declaration (Monnet's plan), now Europe Day
- **1951–52:** the Coal and Steel Community; the six are France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg
- **Institutions:** High Authority, Assembly, Council of Ministers, Court
- **1954:** the Defence Community rejected by France
- **1957:** the Treaties of Rome create the EEC and Euratom (in force 1958)
- **Pattern:** practical economic steps succeed; touching armies and sovereignty stalls
- **Check:** exact dates, quotations and the British position

Next chapter: The Common Market Years: 1958–1986, which follows the new Community through its first crises and enlargements.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Common Market Years: 1958–1986

After the excitement of the Treaties of Rome, the Community entered a long period that is easy to forget and important to understand. It built a customs union, created a farm policy that is still its biggest single cost, survived a walkout by France, and took in new members. It also stalled in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the economic shocks of those years made many people doubt that the project was going anywhere. This chapter follows the years from 1958 to 1986, which is the period in which the United Kingdom joined. Dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Building the Common Market

The Treaty of Rome set a timetable. The first goal was a **customs union**: the six members would remove tariffs on goods traded among themselves and apply one common tariff to goods from outside. The target was met ahead of schedule, in 1968 (check). Trade among the six grew quickly in these years, which supporters took as proof that the idea worked (check the size of the growth).

The Community's institutions were also tidied up. A treaty of 1965, in force from 1967, merged the executives of the three Communities (Coal and Steel, the Economic Community and Euratom) into a single Commission and Council (check). From this point it is reasonable to speak of "the European Community" in the singular, although the plural form lingered.

The Common Agricultural Policy

Farming was one of the first things the six agreed to manage jointly, partly because every member protected its farmers and could not easily open its markets without a shared system. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), launched in the early 1960s, guaranteed prices to farmers and protected the market from cheaper imports (check the start date).

- **The aim.** Secure food supplies, support farm incomes and modernise agriculture, after the shortages of the war years.
- **The effect.** Guaranteed prices encouraged production, and by the 1970s and 1980s the Community held large surpluses, remembered as "butter mountains" and "wine lakes"

(check the examples).

- **The cost.** For decades the CAP took the largest share of the Community's budget, around two thirds at one point (check), and was repeatedly reformed.

> **A policy that explains many arguments**
>
> The CAP matters beyond farming. It was the main reason the budget looked the way it did, it was a point of dispute with the United States over trade, and it shaped the British grievance over what the UK paid in and received back. Some of the first arguments of the whole history are budget arguments.

De Gaulle and the Empty Chair

General Charles de Gaulle, the French president from 1959 to 1969, wanted a Europe of strong nation states and distrusted supranational institutions. He shaped the Community in two ways.

- **Vetoing British entry.** The UK, having stayed out of the Rome treaties, applied to join in 1961. De Gaulle blocked the application in January 1963, and again in 1967 (check). He argued that Britain was not yet ready to accept the Community's way of working, and the vetoes left a lasting mark on British memory.
- **The empty chair crisis, 1965–66.** The Rome treaty planned that more decisions would move from unanimity to majority voting in 1966. In mid-1965 a dispute over financing the CAP and the Commission's powers led France to withdraw its representatives from meetings of the Council, "the empty chair", which paralysed decision-making for months (check the dates).

The crisis ended with the **Luxembourg Compromise** of January 1966. It was a statement that where a very important national interest was at stake, discussion would continue until unanimous agreement was reached. The members did not agree on what it meant, and in practice it allowed any state to block a decision for many years (check). The balance between majority voting and the right to say no is explained in European Politics Fundamentals 4.

> **Two models, one argument**
>
> The empty chair is the first big public confrontation between the two ideas from Chapter 2: a Community that decides by majority and shares real power, and one that moves only when governments agree. Neither side won. The argument continues in later chapters, in

> the treaty changes of the single market and Maastricht and in the debates about vetoes today.

The First Enlargement, 1973

De Gaulle left office in 1969. His successor allowed the question of enlargement to be reopened, and the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark joined on 1 January 1973, making nine members (check). Norway had negotiated entry too, but its voters rejected membership in a referendum in 1972 (check).

- **The United Kingdom.** Membership was contested from the start. In 1975 the government held a referendum on whether to stay in on renegotiated terms, and about two thirds voted yes (check the figure). The UK then pressed for a rebate on its budget contribution, secured in 1984 (check).
- **Ireland and Denmark.** Both joined with large farming interests in mind, and Ireland's economy was closely tied to Britain's.

The Mediterranean Enlargements

Three southern European countries emerged from dictatorship in the 1970s: Greece in 1974, and Portugal and Spain soon after. The Community welcomed them, partly in the hope that membership would help to anchor their new democracies.

Year	Entry	Members after
1958	The six founders begin	6
1973	United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark	9
1981	Greece	10
1986	Spain, Portugal	12

These accessions raised a recurring question: whether a Community of richer northern countries could take in poorer southern ones. The answer was regional funds, which transfer money to

less developed regions (check the dates of the main funds), and the question returns in the eastern enlargement (Chapter 6).

Shocks and Stagnation

The 1970s were hard. The oil price shocks of 1973 and 1979 brought high inflation and unemployment, and exchange rates between European currencies moved sharply, which disturbed trade (check). Attempts at monetary cooperation produced the European Monetary System in 1979, which tied member currencies loosely together (check). The first direct elections to the European Parliament took place the same year (European Politics Fundamentals 3).

Despite these steps the early 1980s had a mood that commentators called **Eurosclerosis**, the sense that the Community was clogged with disputes about budgets and farm surpluses and had stopped progressing (check the origin of the word). Many national barriers still stopped goods crossing borders in practice, such as differing technical standards and customs paperwork, even though tariffs between members had gone.

> **Check the details**
>
> The overall story is firm: customs union, farm policy, an empty-chair crisis, three enlargements, a difficult decade. Exact dates, percentages and quotations are from general knowledge and need confirming. The statistics on the share of the budget taken by the CAP changed year by year.

A New Push

By the mid-1980s leaders concluded that the Community had to relaunch itself, and the obvious target was the barriers that remained. A new Commission president, Jacques Delors, took office in 1985 and championed a plan to complete the single market by the end of 1992. The result was the Single European Act of 1986 (check the dates), taken up in Chapter 4.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the Common Agricultural Policy: what it aimed to do, what unintended effect it had, and why it explains many budget arguments.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the empty chair crisis and the Luxembourg Compromise, and say which of the two ideas of the Community from Chapter 2 each side represented.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

List the three enlargements between 1973 and 1986 with the countries in each, and give one reason the Community welcomed the Mediterranean states.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1968:** customs union completed (ahead of schedule)
- **CAP:** guaranteed farm prices, surpluses, a large share of the budget
- **De Gaulle:** vetoed UK entry in 1963 and 1967; the empty chair (1965–66)
- **Luxembourg Compromise (1966):** unanimity where a vital national interest is claimed
- **Enlargements:** 1973 (UK, Ireland, Denmark), 1981 (Greece), 1986 (Spain, Portugal): twelve members
- **UK:** 1975 referendum to stay; budget rebate in 1984
- **1970s–80s:** oil shocks, Eurosclerosis, then the push for a single market
- **Check:** dates, shares of the budget and the origin of terms

Next chapter: Single Market, Maastricht & the Euro: 1986–2002, which follows the relaunch under Delors and the creation of the single currency.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Single Market, Maastricht & the Euro: 1986–2002

The sixteen years after 1986 turned the Community into the Union. A programme to remove the remaining barriers to trade was finished on schedule. A treaty signed in a Dutch city gave the project its present name and set a course for a single currency. The path was not smooth: voters in two countries nearly or actually rejected the treaty, and a currency crisis pushed the UK out of the exchange-rate system it had joined. This chapter follows those years, ending with euro notes and coins appearing in people's pockets in 2002. Dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Delors and the Single Market

When Jacques Delors, a French former finance minister, became president of the Commission in 1985, he was determined to end the sense of drift described in Chapter 3. He backed a Commission white paper that listed around 300 measures needed to complete a genuine single market by the end of 1992 (check the figure and the name of the commissioner who drew it up). The idea was simple. Tariffs between members had gone, but goods, services, workers and money still faced other barriers: differing technical rules, customs paperwork, national monopolies and professional qualifications that other countries did not recognise.

- **Mutual recognition.** A principle drawn from a 1979 court case (known as Cassis de Dijon): a product legally sold in one member state should in general be allowed in the others, unless a country can show a strong reason to block it (check the case and its date). It avoided agreeing one rule for every product.
- **Harmonised standards.** Where a common rule was truly needed, such as safety, one standard was agreed for the whole market.
- **Majority voting.** To avoid every measure being blocked by a veto, many single-market decisions were moved to qualified majority voting (European Politics Fundamentals 4).

The Single European Act

These changes needed a treaty. The Single European Act was signed in 1986 and came into force in 1987 (check). It was the first major revision of the Treaty of Rome. It set the end of 1992 as the target for the single market, extended majority voting, and gave the Parliament a larger

part in legislation (check). It also marked the point at which the Luxembourg Compromise (Chapter 3) faded in practice, although it was never formally abolished.

> **What "1992" meant**
>
> The single market programme was not a single day. Its deadline, 31 December 1992, was a target for a long list of measures, and some were finished late or not at all. The "single market" is better seen as a process that continues than as an achievement completed on one date. The idea reaches daily life in Chapters 5 and 8.

The Maastricht Treaty

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German reunification in 1990 changed the political situation. Leaders, notably the French president and the German chancellor, wanted to tie a larger Germany firmly into Europe (check the reasoning), and found a way in a project already under discussion: economic and monetary union.

The Treaty on European Union was signed in Maastricht in the Netherlands in February 1992 and came into force in November 1993 (check). It is usually called the Maastricht Treaty.

- **A new name.** The "European Union" was created as an umbrella over the existing Communities and two new areas of cooperation: foreign and security policy, and justice and home affairs (check the structure).
- **European citizenship.** Every national of a member state also became a citizen of the Union, with the right to live in other member states, vote in local elections there and receive consular help (check).
- **A timetable for a single currency.** Economic and monetary union would proceed in stages, with criteria that countries had to meet to join (check the criteria in Exercise 3).
- **More Parliament.** The treaty extended the Parliament's role again, in a procedure that later became co-decision (European Politics Fundamentals 6).

The Voters Push Back

Maastricht was the first treaty that truly provoked public argument. The rules for approval required either parliamentary votes or referendums depending on the country.

Country	What happened
Denmark	Voters rejected the treaty by a narrow margin in June 1992, then accepted it in a second referendum in 1993 after Denmark secured opt-outs (check the margins)
France	A referendum in September 1992 produced a narrow yes, only a little over 50 per cent (check)
United Kingdom	Ratified after a bitter parliamentary fight, with opt-outs from the single currency and, at first, from the social chapter (check)

> **The opt-out as a tool**
>
> Maastricht established a method that has been used since: when one country cannot accept part of a deal, it is allowed to opt out and the others go ahead. This avoids a veto but produces a Union of different speeds. The UK and Denmark held euro opt-outs, and the UK later left altogether (Chapter 7 and European Politics Fundamentals 9).

The Exchange-Rate Crisis of 1992

Before the euro, member currencies were loosely tied together in the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System (Chapter 3). In September 1992 speculators bet heavily against the pound and the Italian lira, and both left the mechanism, an event called "Black Wednesday" in Britain (check). The crisis embarrassed supporters of fixed exchange rates, and it was one of the arguments for a single currency: with no national currencies there would be nothing to speculate against. It was also an argument, for sceptics, that tying economies together can be dangerous. The episode is another case where the evidence can be read in two directions.

Towards the Euro

- **Convergence.** To join, countries had to meet criteria on inflation, government debt and deficits, interest rates and exchange-rate stability (check the exact limits). A Stability and Growth Pact of 1997 was meant to keep public finances in order afterwards (check).
- **The central bank.** The European Central Bank, based in Frankfurt, began work in 1998 (check).

- **The launch, 1 January 1999.** Eleven countries adopted the euro as their currency for accounting and electronic payments, with exchange rates fixed between their old currencies (check the list). The UK, Denmark and Sweden stayed out, and Greece joined shortly afterwards (check the date).
- **Notes and coins, 2002.** From 1 January 2002 euro notes and coins replaced the old national ones in twelve countries, in one of the largest currency changes in history (check the number of countries).

Enlargement and Reform in the Same Years

Alongside this, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined in 1995, taking the membership to fifteen. Norway's voters again refused to join (check). Two further treaties, signed at Amsterdam in 1997 and Nice in 2001, adjusted institutions and voting in preparation for the large enlargement of the east (check), which is taken up in Chapter 6.

Check the details

The sequence is firm: the Single European Act, the single market target, Maastricht, the referendum scares, the euro's launch and the notes in 2002. Treaty dates, referendum margins and the exact list of euro founders are from general knowledge and should be confirmed in a reliable history of European integration.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what the single market programme tried to remove, and describe the principle of mutual recognition.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

List four things the Maastricht Treaty did, and describe how voters in Denmark and France responded.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Give the key dates in the introduction of the euro, and explain why the 1992 exchange-rate crisis could be read as an argument both for and against a single currency.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Delors:** Commission president from 1985; the single market programme
- **Single European Act:** signed 1986, in force 1987; target date 31 December 1992
- **Mutual recognition:** a product legal in one state may be sold in the others
- **Maastricht:** signed 1992, in force 1993; creates the European Union, citizenship and a timetable for the euro
- **Referendums:** Denmark no, then yes with opt-outs; France a narrow yes
- **1992:** Black Wednesday; the pound and lira leave the exchange-rate mechanism
- **Euro:** launched 1999 (electronic), notes and coins 2002
- **1995:** Austria, Finland and Sweden join (fifteen members)
- **Check:** dates, margins and the list of founding euro states

Next chapter: Borders, Schengen & Free Movement, which turns from currency to the freedom of people to cross borders, live and study abroad.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Borders, Schengen & Free Movement

Of everything the Union has done, the change most people notice is the one that happens at borders: driving from France to Spain without stopping, or catching a flight from Berlin to Lisbon without showing a passport. Behind it lie two separate things that are often confused. One is the Schengen area, which removes routine border checks. The other is the right of EU citizens to live, work and study in other member states, which is part of the Union's founding treaties. This chapter explains both, shows where they overlap and where they do not, and follows the debate about border checks since 2015. Dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Two Ideas, Not One

Free movement of people

A right belonging to EU citizens (and, in modified form, to people from the EU's partner countries) to live, work and study in other member states. It is part of the treaties and the single market (Chapter 4).

The Schengen area

An agreement to abolish routine border checks between participating countries. Its members are not the same as the EU's members, and it concerns crossing borders, not the right to settle.

It is possible to have one without the other. Ireland is an EU member whose citizens enjoy free movement, but it is outside Schengen. Switzerland is outside the EU but inside Schengen. The two overlap heavily, and so are easy to treat as one.

Free Movement of Workers

The 1957 Treaty of Rome (Chapter 2) included the free movement of workers as one of the four freedoms of the common market, alongside goods, services and capital. At first it meant the right of a worker from one member state to take a job in another without discrimination on grounds of nationality (check the scope). It developed in stages.

- **Workers, then everyone.** From the 1990s the right was extended beyond workers to students and others with sufficient means, and Maastricht (Chapter 4) created EU

citizenship, with a general right to move and reside (check).

- **The conditions.** A right to stay for the first three months with little more than an identity document. For longer stays, an EU citizen needs to be working, studying, or self-sufficient, with health insurance (check the details of the 2004 directive).
- **Recognised qualifications.** Rules for recognising professional qualifications let doctors, architects and others work abroad, a part of the single market programme.
- **Social security.** Contributions and pension entitlements can be counted across countries, so a person who worked in several countries is not penalised for moving (check).

> **A right that has also been contested**
>
> Free movement is among the most popular features of the Union with its beneficiaries, and among the most argued over with those who worry about its effects on wages, public services or communities. Research on the economic effects exists and is itself disputed, and what the evidence shows differs by country and sector. This course reports the arguments and does not settle them.

The Schengen Story

Schengen is named after a village in Luxembourg, on the river Moselle, where the agreement was signed on a boat in June 1985 (check the detail of the boat) by Belgium, France, West Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. They did this outside the EU's formal structure, because not every member wished to go as far. A fuller convention followed in 1990, and the first controls were removed at the end of March 1995 for a small group of countries (check). In 1997 the Amsterdam Treaty brought the Schengen rules into the EU's legal framework (check).

- **What it does.** Removes routine passport and customs checks at internal land, sea and air borders between participating states. A visitor with a Schengen visa can generally travel freely around the area.
- **What goes with it.** Stronger checks at the area's outer borders; shared police databases such as the Schengen Information System; common rules for short-stay visas; and a border agency, Frontex (check).
- **What it does not do.** It does not abolish the power of states to check identity inside the country, and it allows temporary checks to be reintroduced (see below).

Who Is In and Who Is Out

Group	Position
Most EU members	Inside Schengen
Ireland	EU member, outside Schengen, keeps the Common Travel Area with the UK (check)
Some newer EU members	Joined the EU but entered Schengen later, in stages (Bulgaria and Romania completed theirs around 2024–25; Cyprus has not, check)
Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, Liechtenstein	Not EU members, but inside Schengen by agreement
The United Kingdom	Never in Schengen, and no longer an EU member since 2020

> **Check the current list**
>
> The Schengen membership list has changed more than once in recent years. Confirm it against the EU's current information before quoting it.

Erasmus: The Best-Loved Programme

If one EU programme has a good public reputation, it is Erasmus, launched in 1987 to let students spend part of their degree at a university in another country (check). The name honours Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Renaissance scholar who travelled widely, and is also treated as an acronym (check). It later grew into a wider programme covering school pupils, teachers, trainees and young people, and over ten million people are said to have taken part (check the figure). Its effect has been largely cultural: friendships, marriages and careers across borders. Chapter 9 returns to it as part of everyday life.

Borders Come Back

The Schengen rules allow member states to reintroduce border checks temporarily for serious threats to public order or security. This provision has been used far more often since 2015.

- **2015 onwards.** After the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe in 2015, several states, including Germany, Austria and Sweden, introduced checks on some internal borders, some of which were repeatedly extended (check the countries). Chapter 7 treats the migration crisis itself.
- **2020.** During the Covid pandemic, many borders were closed or restricted at short notice, which showed how quickly the open area could be interrupted (check).
- **Since then.** Some countries have kept or reintroduced checks for reasons including security and irregular migration (check the current position).

Supporters of Schengen say that the temporary exceptions show the system working as designed. Critics of the exceptions say that long-running checks erode a core achievement of the Union. Both claims describe the same facts.

The UK after 2020

Since the UK left the EU, UK citizens no longer have a right to live and work in EU states, and visits to the Schengen area are limited to a number of days in a given period, with some entry procedures being introduced (check the current rules, which have been changing). EU citizens likewise lost the automatic right to live and work in the UK, subject to a settlement scheme for those already resident. These are everyday consequences of Chapter 7's story, and are discussed in Chapter 9.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the difference between free movement of people and the Schengen area, with one example of a country that is in one but not the other.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe how Schengen began, what it does and does not do, and how its rules came into the EU's legal framework.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Give two arguments for and two against the claim that long-running internal border checks undermine Schengen, without taking a side.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Free movement:** a treaty right of EU citizens to live, work and study; from workers (1957) to all citizens (1990s)
- **Schengen:** no routine internal border checks; agreed 1985, checks removed 1995, in EU law from 1997
- **Not the same group:** Ireland (EU, not Schengen); Switzerland and Norway (Schengen, not EU)
- **Erasmus:** launched 1987; student exchange, later much wider
- **Border checks since 2015:** temporary exceptions repeated and extended
- **UK:** no longer has free movement rights since 2020
- **Check:** Schengen membership list, entry rules and participation figures

Next chapter: Enlargement: Eastern Europe and Beyond, which follows the Union's biggest expansion and its unfinished list of candidates.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Enlargement: Eastern Europe and Beyond

In 1989 the political map of Europe changed. Within two years the communist governments of central and eastern Europe had fallen, Germany had reunited and the Soviet Union had dissolved. The countries that had been on the other side of the Iron Curtain looked west, and the European Community had to decide what to do about them. The answer, after more than a decade, was the largest enlargement in the Union's history, followed by further additions and a long list of candidates still waiting. This chapter follows that story, and also records the first departure of a member. Dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Why Enlarge?

The arguments for taking in the new democracies were strong, and the arguments against were also real.

The case for

Anchor fragile new democracies and market economies, as had been hoped for Greece, Spain and Portugal (Chapter 3). Reunite a divided continent. Widen the market. Many of the new states saw membership as a return to Europe after decades of Soviet control.

The case for caution

The candidates were much poorer, so the budget and the farm policy would be strained. More members would make decisions harder. Some existing members worried about migration and competition.

The Copenhagen Criteria

At a summit in Copenhagen in June 1993 the member states agreed that the countries of central and eastern Europe could join once they met conditions (check the date and wording). These "Copenhagen criteria" are still the framework for every candidate.

- **Political.** Stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities.

- **Economic.** A functioning market economy that can cope with competition inside the Union.
- **Legal.** The ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adopting the whole body of EU law, called the *acquis* (check). A later summit added that a country must also have the administrative capacity to apply it.

The Union also reserved the right to consider whether it was itself ready to absorb new members, a point that has become known as "absorption capacity".

> **Joining is a process, not a vote**
>
> A country applies, is accepted as a candidate, and then negotiates chapter by chapter on adopting EU law. All existing members must agree at each stage, and each new treaty of accession must be ratified by every member and the candidate. This is why a single member can delay or block progress. The formal basis for joining is Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (check).

The Big Enlargement of 2004

Negotiations began with the first group in 1998 and with others later (check). On 1 May 2004 ten countries joined at once, taking the Union from fifteen members to twenty-five.

Year	Countries	Members after
2004	Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Cyprus	25
2007	Bulgaria, Romania	27
2013	Croatia	28
2020	(The United Kingdom leaves.)	27

Most of the new members held referendums on joining and voted clearly in favour (check the figures; Hungary's was in April 2003 and strongly positive). Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007, and the Union applied extra monitoring of judicial reform and corruption to them

afterwards (check). Croatia, which had been at war in the 1990s, became the twenty-eighth member in 2013.

What Changed After 2004

- **Labour migration.** Citizens of the new member states gained the right to work elsewhere in the Union, after transition periods. Most existing members imposed temporary limits, but the UK, Ireland and Sweden opened their labour markets from the first day (check). The numbers who moved to the UK were higher than government estimates had expected, which became a significant theme in later British debate (check the figures).
- **Money.** Large regional funds flowed east for roads, railways and infrastructure. In many towns a plaque on a new road, school or tram line carries the Union's flag, which is explained in Chapter 9.
- **Decision-making.** A Union of twenty-five or more was harder to run, and the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, in force from 2009, was in part an effort to adapt the institutions (check).
- **Rule of law.** Some members that joined after 2004 have since faced disputes with the Commission over judicial independence and the media, an unresolved issue (check). The Union has few tools to compel a member that is already inside.

The Waiting List

Several countries are candidates or hope to become so. Progress has been slow and uneven.

- **Turkey.** It applied in 1987, was recognised as a candidate in 1999, and began negotiations in 2005, which have been effectively stalled for years (check).
- **The Western Balkans.** North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania hold candidate status, with Bosnia and Herzegovina granted it in 2022, and Kosovo has applied (check the current status). Their long wait has caused frustration.
- **Ukraine and Moldova.** Both applied in 2022 shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and were granted candidate status in June 2022, a speed that was without precedent. Accession talks were opened in 2024 (check). Georgia was recognised as a candidate in 2023, though its path has been disputed since (check).
- **Others.** Iceland applied after its 2008 financial crisis and withdrew the application (check).

> **Enlargement fatigue**

Some existing members and publics have become wary of more accessions, citing the cost, the rule-of-law disputes in some newer members, and doubts about how many more states the institutions can handle. Supporters of continued enlargement reply that the Union's credibility is at stake when it makes promises to candidates and then lets them wait for decades, and that the security situation after 2022 has changed the calculation. The honest summary is that the debate is open.

The First Departure

For its first sixty years, every change in membership meant a new member. In 2020 the United Kingdom became the first country to leave the Union, bringing the number back to twenty-seven. The formal route is Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (check). A territory had left earlier: Greenland, part of Denmark, withdrew from the European Community in 1985 after a referendum (check). The full British story, including the referendum and the withdrawal negotiations, is told in European Politics Fundamentals 9, and this course does not repeat it. Its everyday consequences come up in Chapters 5, 8 and 9.

Check the current status

Candidate lists and negotiation stages change every year, and the details here are from general knowledge up to the time of writing. Confirm any status you plan to quote on the EU's enlargement pages.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

State the three groups of Copenhagen criteria, and explain how a country moves from applying to joining.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

List the enlargements from 2004 to 2013 with the membership total after each, and describe two effects of the 2004 enlargement.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain "enlargement fatigue" with one argument on each side, and name three current or recent candidates with one fact about each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Copenhagen criteria (1993):** political, economic and legal/administrative conditions
- **Process:** apply, candidate status, negotiate chapters, unanimous approval, ratification
- **2004:** ten join (25 members); 2007 Bulgaria and Romania (27); 2013 Croatia (28)
- **After 2004:** labour migration, regional funds, decision-making and rule-of-law disputes
- **Candidates:** Turkey (stalled), the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova (2022), Georgia
- **2020:** the UK leaves; 27 members; Greenland had left in 1985
- **Check:** candidate statuses, referendum figures and migration numbers

Next chapter: Crisis Years: 2008 to the Present, which follows the euro crisis, the migration debate, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Crisis Years: 2008 to the Present

Between 2008 and the present the Union was hit by a financial crash, a debt crisis in the countries that share its currency, a surge of asylum seekers, the departure of a major member, a pandemic and a major war on its border. Each reshaped it, and each left arguments that have not been settled. This chapter treats the crises in turn, asks what changed after each, and then looks at a well-known claim: that the Union moves forward chiefly by being pushed. Because it covers recent events, which are still developing and still politically charged, it states a cut-off date, gives the facts first and the arguments second, and marks many points "check".

> **Cut-off**
>
> The account here is written from general knowledge up to the time of writing (autumn 2026) and is more likely than other chapters to be out of date. Treat recent figures and the status of recent policies as things to confirm against current sources.

The Euro Crisis, 2009–2015

The world financial crash of 2008 exposed weaknesses in the euro, which Chapter 4 described being built. Countries that share a currency cannot devalue it to recover competitiveness, and the system had no common budget to help a member in trouble.

- **Greece.** In late 2009 a new government revealed that the budget deficit was much larger than reported (check the figures). Lenders lost confidence, and Greece's borrowing costs soared. In 2010 it received the first of three international rescue programmes, from euro countries and the International Monetary Fund, on conditions of spending cuts and reforms (check).
- **Others.** Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus also received programmes, and Spain obtained a loan for its banks (check the details). Italy was a source of worry because of the size of its debt.
- **The human cost.** The conditions, known as austerity, were followed by deep recessions and high unemployment, especially in Greece and Spain, with young people hit hardest (check the figures).

The creditor view

Countries that borrowed beyond their means had to reform, and lenders could not simply write off the debt. Rules had to be kept or the system would lose credibility.

The debtor view

Austerity deepened the recession and made the debt harder to repay, and the burden fell on ordinary people, while banks had been rescued. Lenders shared responsibility for the lending.

What the evidence shows

Economists disagree about how much austerity was needed and how much it hurt, and both views draw on real data. The debate is partly about values: fairness between countries and between taxpayers and creditors.

What Changed After the Euro Crisis

- **Rescue funds.** Temporary funds were turned into a permanent European Stability Mechanism (check the dates).
- **The ECB.** In July 2012 its president, Mario Draghi, said the bank would do "whatever it takes" to preserve the euro, a statement credited with calming markets (check). The bank later bought government bonds on a large scale.
- **Banking union.** The largest banks in the euro area came under a single European supervisor (check).
- **Tighter fiscal rules.** Stronger monitoring of national budgets, later revised (check).

Greece held a referendum in July 2015 that rejected the creditors' terms, then accepted a third programme within weeks (check). It left the euro neither then nor later.

The Migration Debate, 2015 Onwards

In 2015 more than a million people arrived in the Union, most crossing the Mediterranean or the Aegean, many of them fleeing the war in Syria (check the figure). The arrival was uneven: Greece and Italy were the first points of entry, while Germany and Sweden received many applications.

- **The rules.** Under the "Dublin" rules the country where an asylum seeker first arrives is normally responsible for the claim, which put pressure on a few states (check).
- **The responses.** Germany's chancellor allowed many Syrians to enter, with the phrase "we can do this" (check). Other governments, particularly in central Europe, refused to accept quotas for sharing out asylum seekers. Some states reintroduced internal border checks (Chapter 5).
- **The Turkey deal.** In March 2016 the Union agreed with Turkey that irregular migrants arriving in Greece could be returned, in exchange for money and other incentives (check).
- **Afterwards.** Years of negotiation led to a Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024 (check the details), whose implementation is a continuing argument.

This is one of the most heated subjects in European politics. The facts about numbers, routes and legal duties are firm. The arguments about what the right response is, and what the Union can compel its members to do, are not.

Brexit

In June 2016 the United Kingdom voted in a referendum to leave. It left on 31 January 2020, and a trade agreement took effect at the start of 2021 (check). The full story is in European Politics Fundamentals 9. Its place in this chapter is the effect on the Union: the remaining members did not follow, and public support for membership in several countries rose in the years afterwards, a result that surprised some commentators (check the survey data).

Covid and the Recovery Fund

The pandemic in 2020 began with each country closing borders and competing for supplies, and the Union was criticised for a slow start. The vaccine programme was organised jointly, with the Commission purchasing doses on behalf of members, a decision that brought both advantages and a dispute with some suppliers (check).

The economic response was more significant. In July 2020 the leaders agreed a recovery fund, NextGenerationEU, of around €750 billion, which the Commission would raise by borrowing on markets together, repaying over many years (check). It was the first time the Union borrowed on this scale in its own name, and some commentators called it a step towards deeper integration, others a one-off emergency measure (check). Money is distributed as grants and loans to member states, tied to national recovery plans.

War in Ukraine and Energy

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 produced swift and unusual responses (check).

- **Sanctions.** Successive packages against Russia, adopted by unanimity.
- **Energy.** Many members, Germany above all, had relied heavily on Russian gas. The Union set out to reduce that dependence quickly, at the cost of high energy prices (check).
- **Refugees.** The Union activated for the first time a "temporary protection" rule giving Ukrainians the right to live and work in the Union without individual asylum claims (check).
- **Arms and enlargement.** The Union financed weapons deliveries for the first time through a special fund (check), and in 2022 granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status (Chapter 6).

Does the Union Advance Through Crisis?

Observers have noticed a pattern. Jean Monnet is often quoted as saying that Europe would be forged in crises (check the wording). Political scientists have given a more formal version, called "failing forward" (check the authors): a crisis arises because governments agreed a minimal deal, and then they respond with another minimal deal, which solves part of the problem and leaves a new weakness for the next crisis.

> **A theory to test, not accept**
>
> The pattern fits the euro (each fix followed a scare), and the recovery fund (a response to the pandemic). It fits less well with Brexit, which reduced the Union, and with migration, where the Union has not agreed a lasting settlement. Critics argue the theory is too neat and makes every outcome look like progress. A fair test of any such idea is to ask what evidence would count against it.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why a shared currency made the Greek crisis hard to handle, and give the creditor view and the debtor view of austerity.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Name two changes made to the euro system after the crisis, and two responses to the 2015 migration arrivals.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain the "failing forward" idea, give one crisis that fits it and one that fits it less well, and say what evidence would count against the theory.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Euro crisis (2009–15):** Greece and others rescued; austerity; ESM, ECB "whatever it takes", banking union
- **Migration (2015):** over a million arrivals; Dublin rules; quota dispute; Turkey deal (2016); Pact (2024)
- **Brexit:** referendum 2016, exit 2020 (see European Politics Fundamentals 9)
- **Covid:** joint vaccine purchase; NextGenerationEU of about €750 billion
- **Ukraine (2022):** sanctions, energy shift, temporary protection, candidate status
- **Pattern:** "failing forward": minimal deals and repeated crises
- **Check:** every recent figure, date and policy status

Next chapter: Everyday Life I: Money, Shopping & Consumers, which turns from the big events to what the Union means at the till and on the shelf.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Everyday Life I: Money, Shopping & Consumers

The first seven chapters told the story of the Union's history. The last three turn to the question in the course title: what does it have to do with ordinary life? This chapter starts at the till and the shelf. Most of what the Union does that a shopper meets is a product of the single market programme of Chapter 4: one set of rules for many countries, which lets a product cross borders and gives the buyer the same protections wherever they are. As with all claims about the Union, this chapter separates what is documented from what is repeated. Rules, dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Euro in Your Pocket

For people in the euro area, the most obvious effect is the money itself. A traveller can spend the same coins and notes in many countries, and compare prices without converting. Several smaller effects follow.

- **No exchange costs.** Moving between euro countries no longer means changing money or paying commission.
- **Price comparison.** A product's price in different countries is directly comparable, which was one of the arguments for the currency in Chapter 4.
- **Cross-border payments.** Euro transfers between accounts in different countries, and card payments, are subject to common rules, and charges for euro payments across borders have to match domestic ones (check the rules, which date from the 2000s).

The euro is not universal in the Union. Around twenty members use it, and the rest keep their own currency (check the current number, which has grown in recent years). The criticisms of the euro were explored in Chapter 7. A fair account of everyday effects should note that some people in the euro area believe prices rose around the 2002 changeover, a perception that official statistics did not fully support (check).

Standards and the CE Mark

Many products in the Union carry a small **CE** mark. It is one of the most misunderstood symbols in everyday life.

What it is

A declaration by the manufacturer (or importer) that the product meets the EU requirements for its type, mostly on safety, health and environmental protection. For some products an independent testing body is involved.

What it is not

It is not a mark of quality, and not a guarantee that the product was made in Europe. A popular story says it stands for "China Export". It does not (check). It comes from the French for "European Conformity".

The CE mark is the single market in practice. A product that meets the rules can be sold in every member state without separate approval, which is why a manufacturer in one country can sell to all of them. Great Britain created its own UKCA mark after Brexit, though the CE mark continued to be accepted for a time (check the current position), which adds a cost for firms that sell on both markets.

The Common Charger

A recent and visible rule concerns chargers. After years of attempts to persuade manufacturers to agree on one connector, the Union passed a law requiring a common USB-C charging port for a list of devices, including phones, tablets, headphones and cameras, from the end of 2024, with laptops following in 2026 (check the dates and the list). Supporters said it would reduce electronic waste and save consumers money. Critics, including some manufacturers, said that rules fixed in law could hold back innovation in connectors. The effect, as with other EU standards, extended beyond the Union, since a product built for the market will often be sold everywhere (check).

The "Brussels effect"

When the Union is a large enough market, companies often adopt its rules everywhere instead of making two versions. Scholars call this the "Brussels effect" (check the origin of the phrase). It means that a rule agreed by the Union can end up affecting shoppers outside it, which supporters take as influence and critics as an unaccountable reach. The Digital Markets Act in European Politics Fundamentals 10 is a case in point.

Consumer Rights

Common rules protect people who buy goods and services in the Union, including from sellers in another member state (check the details).

- **Cooling-off period.** A buyer who orders online or by phone usually has 14 days to cancel without giving a reason.
- **Legal guarantee.** Goods must conform to the contract, and the buyer has remedies for at least two years after delivery if they do not.
- **Clear information.** Prices must be stated in full, with unavoidable charges, and unfair contract terms can be challenged.
- **Cross-border complaints.** European consumer centres exist to help with disputes against a seller in another country (check).

These protections apply to purchases within the Union. UK-based consumers shopping on EU sites, and the reverse, lost parts of the framework when the UK left, though UK law retains many similar rights (check the position).

Roaming Charges

Before 2017, using a mobile phone in another EU country could be very expensive. The Union passed a series of caps on roaming charges over about ten years, and since 15 June 2017 the rule of "roam like at home" has meant that people pay domestic prices for calls, texts and data while travelling inside the Union (check the date). It is one of the most frequently cited examples of a direct, noticeable benefit. Since Brexit, UK mobile operators have no obligation to follow the rule, and policies vary by company (check).

Data Protection and GDPR

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has applied since May 2018 (check). It gives individuals rights over their personal data: to see what is held, to have it corrected or deleted, and to object to some uses. Organisations must have a lawful reason for collecting data, and can be fined up to a percentage of global turnover for serious breaches (check the figures).

The case for

A strong baseline of privacy rights across the whole market, backed by real fines, and a

The case against

Compliance costs fall hardest on small organisations. The cookie banners that

model that many other countries have copied.

people click through every day are often blamed on it, though they stem partly from a separate earlier directive (check). Enforcement has been uneven between national regulators.

Food With a Name

Since the early 1990s the Union has protected names of regional foods and drinks, so that only those made in a place in the traditional way can use the name (check the date of the scheme). There are different tiers: protected designation of origin, where all production steps happen in the area, and protected geographical indication, where at least one step does (check).

Product	Country	Note
Champagne	France	Protected name for sparkling wine from the region; the best-known case
Parma ham	Italy	Prosciutto di Parma, with rules on production
Tokaji	Hungary	The sweet wine of the Tokaj region (check the category)
Stilton	United Kingdom	Protected so that only cheese made in the three named counties can use the name (check)
Scotch Beef and Scotch Lamb	United Kingdom	Scottish products protected under the scheme (check); Scotch whisky has its own protection as a spirit (check)

The scheme protects producers and, supporters say, gives buyers a reliable guide. Critics say that it favours established producers, and complicates trade deals. After Brexit the UK created its own parallel scheme for protected names (check).

Check the details

Rules in this area change regularly, and national and UK variants have emerged since 2020. Confirm any rule you plan to rely on, such as dates or fees, against the current text on EUR-Lex or a consumer site.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what the CE mark does and does not mean, and say what the "China Export" story gets wrong.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Give an argument for and an argument against the common-charger rule, and explain the "Brussels effect".

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one of consumer rights, roaming, GDPR or protected food names, and describe what it gives an ordinary person, one criticism of it, and how Brexit affected it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The euro:** no exchange costs and comparable prices; around twenty members
- **CE mark:** a manufacturer's declaration of conformity, not a quality mark and not "China Export"
- **Common charger:** USB-C required for many devices from the end of 2024 (laptops later)
- **Consumer rights:** 14-day cooling-off, two-year guarantee, clear pricing
- **Roaming:** domestic prices when travelling in the Union since June 2017
- **GDPR:** data rights since May 2018, with fines for breaches

- **Food names:** Champagne, Parma ham, Tokaji, Stilton; UK has its own scheme since Brexit
- **Check:** dates, lists and the post-Brexit position of each

Next chapter: Everyday Life II: Travel, Study, Work & Place, which looks at the Union on journeys, in classrooms and in the places people live.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Everyday Life II: Travel, Study, Work & Place

Chapter 8 looked at the Union at the till. This chapter follows people out of the shop and onto journeys, into classrooms and workplaces, and through the places where they live. Much of the Union's effect here is indirect: a cheaper flight, a hospital that accepts a card, a new road with a blue-and-yellow sign beside it, a beach that passes a water test. It is also where the effects of Brexit are most often felt. As elsewhere, the chapter separates what is documented from what is repeated. Rules, dates and figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Travel

Cheap flights

One of the biggest changes in how Europeans travel came from the single market programme (Chapter 4). In the 1990s the Union opened its airline market in stages: any airline from a member state could fly any route within the Union, and governments could no longer fix fares or protect national carriers in the same way (check the dates). Low-cost airlines grew quickly in the new environment, and routes and fares that would have been impossible under the old system became ordinary. Supporters point to this as a clear gain to travellers. Critics point to the environmental cost of the growth in flying, and to the pressure on wages and conditions in the industry.

Health cover when travelling

The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) lets a visitor to another EU country, and a few non-members, receive state-provided healthcare during a temporary stay on the same terms as people insured in that country (check the list of countries). It is not a replacement for travel insurance: it does not cover private treatment or repatriation, and the care available depends on that country's system. Since Brexit, UK residents use a UK-issued Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC), which provides similar cover in the EU (check the details).

Passenger rights

Passengers have rights if a flight is cancelled, badly delayed or overbooked. Under an EU regulation of 2004, passengers on most flights within the Union, and on flights leaving it, can be entitled to compensation of a fixed amount depending on distance, as well as assistance such as meals and a hotel when held up (check the amounts and conditions, which have been disputed in the courts). Similar, though different, rights exist for rail and bus travellers. After Brexit the UK kept a version of the air rules in its own law, which may now diverge (check).

> **Rights are not always claimed**
>
> A right on paper is not the same as a right in practice. Airlines can dispute that a delay was caused by "extraordinary circumstances", and passengers often do not know what they are owed. The Union's rules set a standard, and its effect depends on enforcement by national bodies and on people asking.

Study: Erasmus in Practice

Chapter 5 introduced Erasmus. In practice it works like this: a student enrols at their home university, spends a term or a year at a partner university in another country, pays no tuition fees there, and receives a grant towards extra living costs, and the credits count towards the home degree (check the details). The programme was widened over time into Erasmus+, covering vocational training, school staff, youth exchanges and sport (check). The total budget for 2021 to 2027 was agreed at around €26 billion (check the figure).

- **The benefits claimed.** Language skills, independence, friendships across borders, and a boost to employment prospects (check the studies, which are mostly produced by those running the programme).
- **The criticisms.** Grants can be too small to cover costs, so participants tend to come from better-off families, and some places are heavily over-subscribed.
- **The UK.** The UK left Erasmus+ after Brexit and set up its own Turing Scheme from 2021, which supports outward study only (check). Discussions about a UK return to Erasmus+ have been reported more recently (check the current position).

Work

- **Working abroad.** EU citizens can take a job in another member state without a work permit, and the employer cannot discriminate on grounds of nationality (Chapter 5).
- **Qualifications.** Rules on mutual recognition let a person who is qualified as a nurse, architect or teacher in one country apply to practise in another (check the professions covered and the process).
- **Social security.** Pension and insurance contributions made in different countries can be added together (check).
- **Workers' rights.** The Union sets minimum standards in some areas, such as working time and equal treatment, which national law can exceed (check).
- **Commuters and posted workers.** People who live in one country and work in another, and employees sent temporarily by their firm to work abroad, have their own set of rules, which have been contested (check).

Place: The Signs on the Road

Anyone who has travelled in a newer member state, or in a poorer region of an older one, may have seen a blue board with the EU flag beside a new road, a tram line, a school or a hospital extension. That is the visible sign of the Union's **regional policy**, also called cohesion policy.

- **The idea.** Narrow the gaps between richer and poorer regions, which became a larger concern as the Union took in poorer members (Chapters 3 and 6).
- **The money.** Several funds, including a regional development fund, a social fund and a cohesion fund, together account for about a third of the Union's budget (check the share). The money goes mostly to regions below an income threshold, and is usually matched by national funding (check).
- **The recipients.** Poland has been the largest recipient in recent periods (check). Before 2020, parts of the UK including Scotland and Wales also received funds; since Brexit the UK has used its own replacement scheme (check).

> **Does the money work?**
>
> Studies of regional funds find real effects in many places, especially for infrastructure, and weaker or disputed effects in others. Questions are asked about waste, about whether the money reaches the places most in need, and about corruption in some cases. A fair view is that results differ widely by region and by how well the programme is run. The signs show where money went, not whether it did what it was meant to do.

Environmental Rules People Notice

The Union makes a large share of the environmental law that applies in its members, because pollution crosses borders.

- **Bathing water.** Beaches and lakes designated for swimming are tested against EU standards, and results are published each year in a classification (check the details). The familiar Blue Flag award is a separate scheme run by a non-governmental body, not by the Union (check).
- **Drinking water and sewage.** Common standards for water quality and the treatment of sewage before it is discharged.
- **Air quality.** Limits on pollutants, with legal action against states that exceed them (check).
- **Plastics and waste.** Targets for recycling and rules on single-use plastics, including bans on some items such as plastic straws and cutlery, and a rule that caps stay attached to drinks bottles (check the dates).
- **Nature.** Networks of protected sites for habitats and species, under two nature directives (check).

Supporters note that these rules have improved things like beach water quality in many places. Critics, among them some farmers, builders and business groups, say that the compliance costs are heavy and that rules are sometimes badly designed. Farming is a special case, since the farm policy of Chapter 3 now carries environmental conditions that have caused protests (check).

> **Check the details**
>
> Fund shares, compensation amounts, the countries covered by the health card and recent changes to UK arrangements all move over time. Confirm anything you plan to rely on against the EU's own pages or the relevant UK government page.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how the single market made cheap flights possible, and what the health card and the passenger rights regulation each give a traveller.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe how an Erasmus year works in practice, with one benefit and one criticism, and say how Brexit affected UK students.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain what the blue-and-yellow signs on building projects mean, why a sign is not proof that the money worked, and give two environmental rules an ordinary person might notice.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Flights:** the airline market opened in the 1990s; low-cost carriers grew
- **EHIC:** state healthcare on the same terms as locals during a temporary stay; not travel insurance
- **Passenger rights:** compensation and assistance for delays and cancellations (2004 regulation)
- **Erasmus+:** study and training abroad; UK left, replaced by the Turing Scheme
- **Work:** no permit for EU citizens, recognised qualifications, added-up pensions
- **Regional policy:** about a third of the budget; signs show where money went
- **Environment:** bathing water, drinking water, air quality, plastics, nature sites
- **Check:** budgets, shares, amounts, and the current UK position

Next chapter: Capstone: What Is the Union For?, which brings the course together and tests the claims of earlier chapters.

The European Union: Origins, Institutions & Everyday Life

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: What Is the Union For?

Chapter 1 said that the Union is built on a bargain: countries share some decisions so that they can do together what none can do alone, and they keep the rest. This last chapter follows that single thread through everything that came before, offers the main answers people give to the question in the title, walks through an ordinary day to show where the Union appears, and applies the tests from Chapter 1 to some common claims. It ends with the open questions and does not give a verdict, because the course has tried throughout to report the arguments without choosing between them. Dates, figures and quotations are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Thread, Chapter by Chapter

Chapter	What was shared	What was kept
2	Control of coal and steel, under a High Authority; then a common market	Armies (the defence community failed in 1954); most other policies
3	A customs union and a farm policy	A veto where a "vital interest" was claimed (the Luxembourg Compromise)
4	Rules for the single market, decided by majority; then a currency	Opt-outs for the UK and Denmark; taxes and budgets stayed national
5	Open borders and the right to move	The power to bring back border checks
6	Membership widened to the east, with all of EU law as the entry price	A veto for every member over every new member
7	Rescue funds, joint borrowing, a common response to war	Asylum shares, defence and foreign policy, much of fiscal policy
8–9	Product rules, data rules, consumer rights, regional funds, environmental law	Healthcare, education, pensions, most public spending

Two patterns stand out. First, sharing has advanced where it was practical and limited (markets, standards, money) and stalled where it touched the symbols of national sovereignty (armies,

taxes, borders when under pressure). Second, almost every step was followed by an argument about whether it had gone too far or not far enough, and neither side has won finally. That is not a flaw of the history. It is the history.

Four Answers to "What Is It For?"

A peace project

The Union exists to bind former enemies together so that war between them is impossible. *Evidence:* no war between members since its founding, and Schuman's own words (Chapter 2). *Questions:* how much of the peace is owed to NATO, the Cold War and prosperity, and whether this still explains the Union to people born long after 1945.

A market

The Union exists to make trade, work and travel easier across borders. *Evidence:* the single market, the euro, cheap flights, the CE mark (Chapters 4, 8 and 9). *Questions:* who gains and who loses from open markets, and whether a market needs a currency, a parliament and a flag.

A set of standards

The Union exists to set rules, on consumers, data, the environment and workers, that member states would struggle to set alone. *Evidence:* GDPR, the common charger and the "Brussels effect" (Chapter 8). *Questions:* who is accountable for rules made at this distance, and whether the rules are well designed.

A way of having weight in the world

The Union exists so that medium-sized states can act together in a world of large powers. *Evidence:* trade negotiations, sanctions on Russia, joint vaccine purchasing and the recovery fund (Chapter 7). *Questions:* whether the Union can act as one on defence and foreign policy when members disagree.

The answers pull in different directions

Someone who sees the Union as a market may want it to stop at trade, and someone who sees it as a way of having weight may want it to go further. Many arguments that look like disagreements about facts are really disagreements about which of these four is the point.

A Day in the Life

Here is one ordinary day in a member state, with the chapter that explains each point. Not every item applies to every country, and some changed for the UK in 2020.

- **Morning.** A phone charged with a USB-C cable, on a plan with no roaming charges when travelling in the Union (Chapter 8).
- **Breakfast.** Cheese or ham carrying a protected name, in a country using the euro or its own currency (Chapter 8).
- **Work.** A colleague from another member state, working there without a permit, and a contract under rules on working time (Chapters 5 and 9).
- **Online.** A cookie banner and a data request under GDPR, and a purchase with a 14-day right to cancel (Chapter 8).
- **Evening.** A cheap flight booked for the weekend, a health card in the wallet, and a swim at a beach tested to a common standard (Chapter 9).
- **On the way home.** A new road with a blue board showing that regional funds helped to pay for it (Chapter 9).

The list is not an argument that the Union is good, since a critic could point at each item and ask what it cost, who decided it and whether it needed to be done at that level. It shows how much of the Union is quiet.

Testing Common Claims

Chapter 1 proposed three categories: record, claim and Euromyth. Here are four claims you may meet, tested the same way.

Claim	What is firm	What is contested
"The EU has kept the peace."	Members have not fought each other since the Union began	How much credit goes to the Union as against NATO, the Cold War and prosperity (check the arguments)
"Brussels makes most of our laws."	A large body of national law comes from EU law	The share: estimates range from about a tenth to well over half, depending on what is counted and how (check the studies)

Claim	What is firm	What is contested
"The EU is a huge bureaucracy."	The Union has a large civil service, and a complicated process	Its size relative to national governments: the Commission's staff is often compared to a large city council, and the budget is around one per cent of members' combined income (check both figures)
"The CE mark means China Export."	It does not (Chapter 8)	Nothing: this one is a straightforward myth

The method, once more

Find the original text. Ask what is being counted. Separate the fact from the credit or blame attached to it. Notice who is making the claim and what they want. These steps do not tell you what to think about the Union. They tell you what to check before you do.

Open Questions

- **Deeper or looser?** Some argue the Union must integrate further (a stronger common budget, common defence) to deal with the problems of Chapter 7. Others argue that it should do less and leave more to members, or accept different speeds with opt-outs (Chapter 4). A third view says the current balance is about right.
- **Wider or deeper?** Admitting Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans (Chapter 6) would change the Union's size, budget and voting. Can it do that without first reforming how it decides?
- **Accountability.** People vote in national elections and, less enthusiastically, for the Parliament. Supporters say the system has the checks it needs, and critics say decisions are too remote (see European Politics Fundamentals 3 and 6 for the mechanics).
- **Leaving and joining.** The UK's departure (Chapter 6) showed that exit is possible. Whether it is a warning or an exception is itself an argument.
- **Shocks to come.** Climate, technology, defence and demography will test the bargain again. The "failing forward" pattern of Chapter 7 predicts further crises and further partial fixes. It does not prove this will happen.

What This Course Left Out

The course followed the Union's history, enlargement and everyday life, and treated institutions only in passing. It did not follow each member's own politics, the Union's trade policy in depth, its foreign and security policy, or its law as a lawyer would. Treat it as a map of the main roads. For how the institutions work, continue with European Politics Fundamentals. For European bodies that are not the Union, see The European Space Agency and The Eurovision Song Contest.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Trace the thread of shared decisions against kept decisions through three earlier chapters of your choice, and say where sharing advanced and where it stalled.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose a claim about the Union that you have heard, sort it into record, claim or Euromyth, and say what you would check before repeating it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

In about 200 words, state the strongest argument for deeper integration and the strongest argument for a looser Union, without saying which you prefer.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The thread:** what countries share and what they keep, from 1950 to now
- **Pattern:** practical steps advance; sovereignty symbols stall
- **Four answers:** a peace project, a market, a set of standards, a way of having weight
- **Testing claims:** record, claim, Euromyth; find the original text and ask what is counted
- **Open:** deeper or looser, wider or deeper, accountability, shocks to come
- **No verdict:** the course reports the arguments and does not choose
- **Check:** law-share estimates, staff and budget figures

End of course. For how the institutions work, see European Politics Fundamentals. For European bodies outside the Union, see The European Space Agency and The Eurovision Song Contest.