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European Union: From Coal to Constitution

How six war-torn nations forged the world's largest single market. 30 milestones from the 1950 Schuman Declaration to the 2024 Ukraine accession talks, covering treaties, enlargements, crises, and reinvention. Sources: EU official records, EUR-Lex treaty database, European Council conclusions.

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1950-05-09

Schuman Declaration proposes pooling coal and steel

[treaty, France, Germany, foundations]

French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposes placing Franco-German coal and steel production under a common authority. The plan, drafted by Jean Monnet, aims to make war between France and Germany 'not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.' May 9 later becomes Europe Day.

1951-04-18

Treaty of Paris creates the ECSC

[treaty, ECSC, foundations, supranational]

France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg sign the Treaty of Paris, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community. It is the first supranational institution in history, with binding authority over sovereign states in a specific economic sector.

1957-03-25

Treaty of Rome founds the EEC and Euratom

[treaty, EEC, common market, foundations]

The same six nations sign the Treaty of Rome, creating the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. The EEC establishes a common market with free movement of goods, services, capital, and people — the four freedoms that define Europe today.

1962-01-14

Common Agricultural Policy launches

[agriculture, CAP, policy, budget]

The CAP enters into force, creating a unified agricultural policy with price supports and import levies. It becomes the EEC's largest budget item, consuming over 70% of spending at its peak. The policy transforms European farming but draws criticism for trade distortions.

1968-07-01

Customs union completed 18 months early

[customs union, trade, common market]

The six member states eliminate all internal customs duties and establish a common external tariff, completing the customs union ahead of schedule. Intra-Community trade doubles within a decade. The economic logic of integration proves itself.

1973-01-01

First enlargement: UK, Ireland, Denmark join

[enlargement, United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark]

The United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark join the EEC after years of French vetoes under de Gaulle. The Community grows from 6 to 9 members and 256 million people. Norway votes no in a referendum and stays out.

1979-06-10

First direct elections to the European Parliament

[European Parliament, democracy, elections]

410 members of the European Parliament are directly elected by citizens for the first time. Previous MEPs were appointed by national parliaments. Turnout reaches 62%. Simone Veil becomes the first elected president of the Parliament.

1981-01-01

Greece joins the EEC

[enlargement, Greece, Mediterranean]

Greece becomes the 10th member state, the first Mediterranean enlargement. The accession follows Greece's return to democracy in 1974 after seven years of military dictatorship. EEC membership anchors Greek democracy and opens structural funds.

1986-01-01

Spain and Portugal join the EEC

[enlargement, Spain, Portugal, Mediterranean]

Spain and Portugal join after their transitions from authoritarian rule. The Community reaches 12 members and 320 million people. Iberian accession reinforces the pattern: the EEC as a stabilizer for young democracies.

1986-02-17

Single European Act: relaunching integration

[treaty, single market, institutional reform]

The first major revision of the Treaty of Rome sets a deadline of December 31, 1992, to complete the single market by removing remaining barriers. It introduces qualified majority voting in the Council, breaking the unanimity deadlock that slowed decision-making.

1987-06-15

Erasmus programme sends students across borders

[education, Erasmus, culture, youth]

The European Community launches the Erasmus programme for student exchange. 3,244 students participate in its first year. By 2024, over 13 million people have studied, trained, or volunteered abroad through Erasmus+, making it the EU's most popular programme among citizens.

1989-11-09

Fall of the Berlin Wall reshapes Europe

[Cold War, Germany, reunification, geopolitics]

The Berlin Wall falls, triggering the reunification of Germany and the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe. The geopolitical landscape shifts overnight. The EEC faces a historic question: how to integrate a continent divided for 40 years.

1992-02-07

Maastricht Treaty creates the European Union

[treaty, Maastricht, EU citizenship, foundations]

The Treaty on European Union, signed in Maastricht, transforms the EEC into the EU with three pillars: the European Community, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Justice and Home Affairs. It establishes EU citizenship and sets the roadmap for a single currency.

1993-01-01

Single market becomes reality

[single market, four freedoms, trade, economy]

The single market enters into force, enabling free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across 12 member states. The European Commission estimates it creates 2.5 million jobs in its first decade. It becomes the world's largest single market by GDP.

1995-01-01

Austria, Finland, Sweden join the EU

[enlargement, Austria, Finland, Sweden]

Three former EFTA members join after the end of the Cold War makes neutrality less relevant. The EU grows to 15 members. Norway holds a second referendum and votes no again.

1995-03-26

Schengen Area abolishes border controls

[Schengen, free movement, borders]

The Schengen Agreement enters into force among 7 countries, eliminating passport checks at internal borders. By 2024, the area covers 29 countries and 420 million people. It becomes one of the most tangible achievements of European integration for ordinary citizens.

1999-01-01

Euro launched as electronic currency

[euro, monetary union, ECB]

11 member states adopt the euro for electronic transactions, locking exchange rates irrevocably. The European Central Bank in Frankfurt takes over monetary policy. Physical banknotes and coins will follow three years later.

2002-01-01

Euro banknotes and coins enter circulation

[euro, monetary union, ECB, economy]

300 million citizens in 12 countries begin using euro banknotes and coins, completing the largest currency changeover in history. 14.89 billion banknotes replace national currencies overnight. The euro becomes the world's second reserve currency after the dollar.

2004-05-01

Big bang enlargement: 10 new members

[enlargement, Eastern Europe, reunification]

Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia join, reuniting Europe after the Cold War. The EU grows from 15 to 25 members and 455 million people. It is the largest single enlargement in EU history.

2005-05-29

Constitutional Treaty rejected by France and Netherlands

[referendum, constitution, France, crisis]

French voters reject the proposed EU Constitution with 54.7% voting no. Three days later, the Netherlands follows with 61.5% against. The result plunges the EU into a constitutional crisis and forces a rethink of how integration is sold to citizens.

2007-01-01

Romania and Bulgaria join the EU

[enlargement, Romania, Bulgaria, Eastern Europe]

Romania and Bulgaria become the 26th and 27th member states, completing the fifth enlargement. Both countries remain under a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for judicial reform and anti-corruption, a precedent for conditioned accession.

2007-12-13

Treaty of Lisbon reforms EU institutions

[treaty, Lisbon, institutional reform]

Signed after the constitutional crisis, Lisbon salvages key reforms: a permanent European Council President, a strengthened High Representative, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights becomes legally binding. It also introduces the Article 50 exit clause — later used by the UK.

2010-05-02

Eurozone debt crisis erupts

[euro, crisis, Greece, economy]

Greece receives a 110 billion euro bailout from the EU and IMF, triggering the sovereign debt crisis. Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Cyprus follow. The crisis exposes flaws in the euro's design — a shared currency without shared fiscal policy — and tests the union's solidarity.

2013-07-01

Croatia becomes the 28th member state

[enlargement, Croatia, Western Balkans]

Croatia joins the EU after a decade-long accession process, becoming the first new member since 2007 and the second from the former Yugoslavia after Slovenia. Accession negotiations set new benchmarks for rule of law and judicial reform.

2015-09-15

Migration crisis tests open borders

[migration, Schengen, crisis, solidarity]

Over 1.3 million asylum seekers arrive in Europe in 2015, the highest since World War II. Germany suspends Dublin rules and opens borders. The crisis divides member states on burden-sharing, strains Schengen, and fuels populist movements across the continent.

2016-06-23

Brexit referendum: UK votes to leave

[Brexit, United Kingdom, referendum, crisis]

51.9% of British voters choose to leave the EU. The result shocks markets, triggers the resignation of Prime Minister Cameron, and launches the most complex withdrawal in EU history. It is the first time a member state invokes Article 50.

2020-07-21

NextGenerationEU: 750 billion euro recovery fund

[COVID-19, recovery fund, economy, fiscal integration]

EU leaders agree on a 750 billion euro recovery fund after marathon negotiations to address the COVID-19 economic fallout. For the first time, the EU borrows collectively on capital markets. The fund marks a watershed moment in fiscal integration.

2022-02-25

EU responds to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

[Ukraine, Russia, sanctions, geopolitics, defense]

One day after Russia's full-scale invasion, the EU adopts unprecedented sanctions packages targeting Russian banks, oligarchs, and energy imports. Member states provide billions in military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The invasion accelerates EU defense and energy policy overhaul.

2022-06-23

Ukraine and Moldova granted EU candidate status

[enlargement, Ukraine, Moldova, geopolitics]

The European Council grants candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, a decision unthinkable months earlier. The move signals a geopolitical shift: the EU embraces enlargement as a strategic security tool. Bosnia and Herzegovina receives candidate status in December.

2024-06-25

EU opens accession negotiations with Ukraine

[enlargement, Ukraine, accession, geopolitics]

The EU formally opens accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. The decision follows Ukraine's implementation of reforms despite ongoing war. The enlargement agenda — dormant for a decade — is back at the center of European strategy.