

Enlargement of the European Union

FACTSHEET



From 6 to 27 Member States

When the European Economic Community came into being on 1 January 1958, it had just six founding Member States – Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany.

Because the Community proved successful in helping to generate prosperity and foster peaceful cooperation between its members, other countries soon applied to join.

In 1973, the Community welcomed Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom into its ranks.

For Greece, which entered in 1981, as well as Spain and Portugal (1986), the step marked their return to the family of democratic European nations.

In 1990, after the Berlin Wall fell and Germany was reunited, eastern Germany also became part of the Community.

Austria, Finland and Sweden joined what had now become the European Union (EU) in 1995.

In 2004, eight former communist countries joined the EU – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia – along with the Mediterranean island nations of Cyprus and Malta.

Bulgaria and Romania entered the EU in 2007, bringing the total number of Member States to 27, with around 500 million people.

Which countries can join the EU?

The eligibility criteria for EU membership are set out in the Treaty on European Union. Any European country can join the EU provided it meets certain economic and political conditions. These were agreed by EU leaders at a summit in Copenhagen in 1993.

To be considered for membership, a country must have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minority groups. It must also have a functioning market economy that will be able to cope with competitive pressures once inside the EU.



Who decides?

It is up to the government of the country concerned to apply for EU membership. On the EU side, every step towards membership requires the unanimous approval of the Member States.

At the request of the Member States, the European Commission assesses whether the country meets the Copenhagen criteria and eventually recommends the opening of accession negotiations to the Council of the European Union, where the governments of the Member States are represented.

If all of the Member States are in agreement, an applicant country can be granted 'candidate status'.

A lot of hard work to prepare for membership must then follow. Each candidate country must adopt and implement all EU legislation currently in force before receiving the green light to join. These laws are divided into 35 policy-specific chapters, in areas ranging from transport to employment and from immigration to the environment. It usually takes several years for a country to be able to 'close' all of these chapters.

When this process is completed, an 'accession treaty' is drawn up and signed by the candidate country and the EU Member States. The country can join the EU only once this treaty has been formally approved by its parliament, those of all the existing Member States and the European Parliament.

Which countries are next in line to join?

At present, membership negotiations are underway with three countries:

Croatia and Turkey opened negotiations with the EU in 2005, while talks with Iceland began in 2010.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, has been granted candidate status but has yet to begin formal membership negotiations.

There are five further 'potential candidates' which have been recognised by the EU in the Western Balkans region of south-east Europe, meaning that they will be granted candidate status as soon as they fulfil the necessary requirements. These are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo*.

Want to know more?

Visit the following web pages for:

- A full explanation of the enlargement process:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/the-policy/process-of-enlargement/index_en.htm

- More information on the conditions for membership:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/the-policy/conditions-for-enlargement/index_en.htm

- The latest news on EU enlargement:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/index_en.htm

- The people and culture of southeast Europe:

<http://www.southeast-europe.eu/>

* Under UNSCR 1244/1999

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