




The European Parliament





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Welcome to the European Parliament

Since 1979, millions of European citizens have elected their representatives to the European Parliament every five years. Who are its Members, what do they do in Strasbourg and Brussels and what powers do they have? Given the impact that decisions made by the European Parliament have on the daily lives of citizens across Europe, this brochure aims to provide the answers.

The European Parliament is the only multinational parliamentary assembly in the world, and the only EU institution directly elected by Europe's citizens. It represents approximately 500 million people in the EU's 27 Member States. Elections are held every five years. The June 2009 election marked the 30th anniversary of elections by universal suffrage. Following the election, 736 Members were elected to Parliament. They join together in political groups on the basis of political affiliation rather than nationality. Since then, the 18 Members provided for in the Lisbon Treaty have entered Parliament, as will the Croatian Members when that country joins the EU in 2013.

The European Parliament's official seat is in Strasbourg, on the border between France and Germany, a city that symbolises the reconciliation of Europe after the two world wars. As decided by the Member States of the EU, every year Parliament holds 12 plenary sessions in Strasbourg. Its Members meet in parliamentary committees in Brussels, where additional plenary sessions are also held. Debates are conducted in all the EU's official languages, reflecting its commitment to a varied and multicultural Union which is 'united in diversity'.

An increasingly important role

Since 1979, successive European treaties have increased the powers of the European Parliament when it comes to drafting the EU budget and laws. MEPs' political control of the EU's other institutions and bodies has also been strengthened.

The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force on 1 December 2009, extends Parliament's budgetary powers to cover all EU expenditure, including common agricultural policy spending, on which the Council (representing the Member States' governments) previously had the last word.

Parliament's legislative role has grown considerably: it now has as much weight as the Council when it comes to lawmaking in almost all of the European Union's areas of responsibility. Previously, MEPs adopted laws designed principally to facilitate the movement of persons, goods, services and capital within the EU or to protect the environment and consumers. Now their approval is also required for laws to be adopted in areas such as agriculture, fisheries, energy, tourism, control of the external borders, police and judicial cooperation and civil protection.

A candidate for the position of European Commission President is proposed by the Member States' governments on the basis of the results of the European elections. That candidate is then elected by Parliament. The Commission as a whole, including the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as its Vice-President, is then subject to a vote of approval by Parliament. The Commission can be forced to resign if MEPs adopt a motion of censure.

Citizens can petition Parliament with complaints concerning the application of European law. MEPs elect a European Ombudsman, who is responsible for investigating claims of maladministration on the part of the Union's institutions and bodies. They can also set up a committee of inquiry if they believe EU law has been broken.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights brings together in a single document the civil, political, economic and social rights hitherto dispersed over a number of national, European and international acts. The Lisbon Treaty's entry into force made the charter binding, and MEPs now invoke it when denouncing human rights violations in the EU.

Parliament also brings its influence to bear on the Union's foreign policy. All international agreements and any EU enlargement now requires the approval of MEPs. Decisions on the implementation of trade policy, development cooperation policy and humanitarian aid policy must be taken jointly by Parliament and the Council. MEPs regularly debate human rights issues and send monitors around the world to check that elections are conducted freely and fairly.



■ The European Parliament — working for you

All of us, whatever our situation — young or not so young, students, workers or pensioners — are affected by European laws, sometimes without realising it. In many areas — such as healthier food on our plates, freedom of movement and freedom to work anywhere in the EU and protection of the environment — Europe’s elected representatives play a crucial role. European laws are, above all, about making people’s lives easier within the European Union and promoting equal opportunities, rights and obligations.

In common with all parliaments, the European Parliament debates and adopts laws. In the early days, MEPs provided opinions on the legislative proposals of the European Commission, and it was the Council, representing the Member States’ governments, which had the last word on adopted laws.

Over the years, with the adoption of successive treaties, the role and powers of the European Parliament have grown substantially, to the point where it is now a key player in the process of making EU law. Nowadays, if a European regulation or directive is to come into being, Parliament and the Council must usually first agree on its content in a procedure known generally as ‘co-decision’.



Before a European law can be applied in the EU's Member States, it must first be signed by the President of the European Parliament and the President of the Council.

■ **Mobile phones: cheaper to use abroad**

European rules which came into force in 2007 have imposed ceilings intended to gradually bring down the additional costs charged for calls made from or received in another EU country. MEPs secured an agreement that, from July 2011, these roaming costs charged by operators would not exceed EUR 0.35 per minute for outgoing calls and EUR 0.11 per minute for incoming calls (exclusive of VAT). Furthermore, since July 2009 the cost of a roaming text has been capped at EUR 0.11. The cost of sending e-mails and photos and surfing the Internet from a mobile phone or portable computer is also subject to a decreasing tariff ceiling depending on the number of kilobytes.

The European Parliament, a fully fledged legislator

Co-decision is the legislative procedure used for the vast majority of European laws, including those relating to the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons within the EU's single market. It also applies in fields such as environmental protection, consumer rights and transport safety, and to programmes supporting research, education and culture and promoting public health.

With the latest treaty reform, the co-decision procedure, with some rare exceptions, has become the 'ordinary legislative procedure' for adopting EU laws. It now applies in areas that were traditionally reserved for the Council alone, such as agriculture, fisheries, immigration and police and judicial cooperation. It is also now the procedure used in areas in which Parliament previously only had veto powers (i.e. the power to accept or reject a text in its entirety), such as cohesion and regional development policy. This procedure also covers new areas of EU action, such as youth and sport, civil protection, the fight against major health scourges, energy, tourism and space policy.

Examples of the European Parliament's legislative activity

In recent years, MEPs have helped make it easier to have professional qualifications recognised in other Member States, meaning that today it is far easier than it once was to pursue a profession in another EU country. MEPs have also been involved in developing stricter product safety and labelling standards, so that in the supermarket it is now easier to choose between products from all over Europe. Now everyone can choose which food products to buy with all the facts at their fingertips; for example, whether or not to buy products containing GMOs.

The European Parliament has enhanced the rights of air and rail passengers, not least for the elderly and people with reduced mobility, who can now obtain assistance. And come the summertime, what could be more pleasant than a refreshing swim in the sea or a lake? You can be sure that the water is cleaner than before thanks to European standards which were made stricter as a result of action by the European Parliament.

MEPs contributed strongly to the adoption of a whole host of measures to deal with the economic and financial crisis and increase the transparency and supervision of the financial system. To this end Parliament successfully obtained a cap on bankers' bonuses, the outlawing of financial products which speculate on a country's debt and default, and a real reform of European financial supervision rather than merely cosmetic changes. Parliament was also at the forefront of fighting for economic governance rules which would have a real impact on improving public finances and restoring growth.

The European Union has adopted an initial package of measures to limit the effects of climate change worldwide by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from cars, industry and power stations. Parliament is thus supporting the objectives of lowering greenhouse gas emissions by 20%, improving energy efficiency by 20% and increasing to 20% the share of renewable energy in the EU's energy mix by 2020.

■ **MEPs at your service**

If you are a service provider — a tourist guide, perhaps, or a travel agent — the services directive now makes it easier for you to work abroad. Much disputed at the outset, this legislation would probably never have come to fruition had it not been for the compromise hammered out by the European Parliament after MEPs found a fair way to balance conflicting national interests, the rights of service providers and consumers and the needs of employees and employers.



MEPS showing initiative ...

If Parliament considers a draft law to be inappropriate and does not believe it can be improved, it has the power to reject the text in its entirety. This is what happened, for example, with a directive on liberalising port services, and another concerning software patents.

MEPs also have the right to make policy initiatives by suggesting to the Commission that it should submit a legislative proposal on a particular subject. They regularly ask the Commission and the Council to develop existing or new policies. For example, it was the European Parliament which asked the Commission to submit a draft law regulating and facilitating transnational inheritance procedures, on the basis of detailed recommendations.

... and citizens too

With the new Treaty, 1 million European citizens from a quarter of the Member States now have the right to ask the Commission to submit a legislative proposal on any issue on which they believe the EU should legislate.

Do you want your opinions to be taken into account?

The examples mentioned above show that European laws are about making people's lives easier within the European Union and promoting equal opportunities, rights and obligations for all Europeans. They also promote the exchange of goods and services by establishing equivalent conditions for companies in all Member States. So when, every five years, European citizens elect their representatives to the European Parliament they are participating in the process of creating laws that concern them directly.

■ Using chemicals in complete safety

Chemical products are everywhere in our lives. While there is no doubting their usefulness, questions persist over their safety for our health and for the environment. Recognising this, the EU has adopted a regulation (called 'REACH') requiring a reassessment of the thousands of chemical products on the market and the withdrawal of the most dangerous ones. Thanks to MEPs' persistence, the emphasis was put on developing new and less harmful substances, and in doing so minimising the use of animal testing.

For more information, see 'European lawmaking — how does it work?' on page 41.

*For information on the European citizens' initiative, go to:
<http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome?lg=en>*



■ Managing the European budget

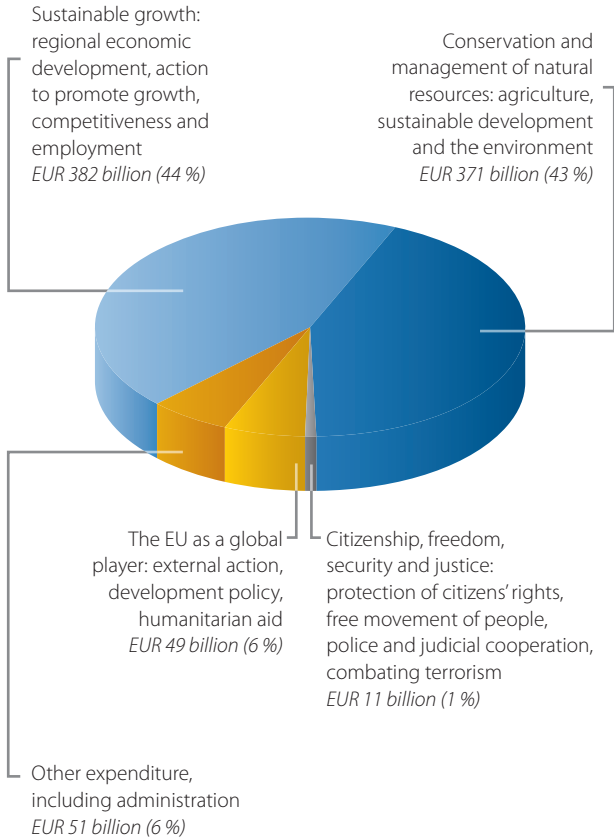
New motorways, cleaner beaches, medical research, studying abroad: we all benefit in one way or another from activities funded by the European Union. And who decides on the framework for programmes and actions to be financed at European level? The answer is the European Parliament, with the agreement of the Member States' governments. Here are some examples of activities supported by your MEPs.

Every year MEPs spend long months negotiating with the Council (representing the Member States' governments), on the basis of proposals from the Commission, to fix the Union's revenues and expenditure for the following year. The budget finally agreed on, which must comply with multiannual ceilings, is very important because it determines the level of financial support given by the EU to all its areas of activity to ensure solidarity, sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. Parliament has the power to reject the budget and demand a new draft if it does not believe sufficient consideration has been given to its priorities.

The latest reform of the treaties has extended Parliament's budgetary powers to cover all EU expenditure, including common agricultural policy spending, on which previously the Council had the last word. The procedure for adopting the annual budget has been simplified.

Where does the Union's money go?

EU financial framework 2007–13 (rounded figures from the Interinstitutional Agreement of 17 May 2006; 2004 prices)



Promoting sustainable economic development ...

A large part of the EU budget is used to boost economic growth and reduce disparities between Europe's various regions: constructing motorways and railways linking Member States, helping small firms and supporting technological research and innovation projects (e.g. for developing renewable energies).


The common agricultural policy also benefits from a large share of the budget. However, with the European Parliament's support, other areas are growing in importance, such as preservation of the environment through the creation of regional natural parks, the conservation of protected species, the management of water resources and efforts to combat climate change.

Some of the EU budget is also spent on funding economic development in other parts of the world and on humanitarian aid to help countries afflicted by natural disasters and crises.

... and the interests of citizens

The fight against global epidemics such as AIDS or avian influenza can be more effectively waged by countries acting together. The EU, encouraged by its Parliament, is therefore playing an increasingly active role in the area of public health, including financing numerous research projects to develop new medicines.

In recent years, MEPs have made use of their powers to expand programmes promoting European cultural diversity, which aim to encourage the distribution of artistic and cultural works and products in areas such as cinema, music, painting, photography and theatre.



The economic situation is also a major concern. In 2006, Parliament approved the creation of a Globalisation Adjustment Fund with a budget of EUR 500 million a year intended to help workers who are laid off due to industrial restructuring in an international context. And during the 2009 economic crisis, MEPs approved an extension of the fund's scope and a relaxing of the intervention criteria.

Investing in the future

The European Parliament also brought its influence to bear on the multiannual financial framework, which set the expenditure ceilings in each area of EU policy up until 2013. MEPs had to fight hard with the Member States to secure additional funding for projects which European citizens see as important.

In particular, Parliament fought for European youth mobility programmes, which allow young people to acquire new skills, including language skills, and learn about other cultures. One such example is the Erasmus programme, which allows over 180 000 students to study at a foreign university each year. It also supported the Leonardo da Vinci programme, which promotes professional training through apprenticeships in companies located throughout Europe. More generally, Parliament attaches great importance to research and development.

Under the Lisbon Treaty, the multiannual financial framework is now decided by a regulation (adopted in a special legislative procedure) requiring the approval of Parliament.

■ Where does the Union's money come from?

The EU budget is financed mainly by contributions from the Member States calculated on the basis of their national wealth. Some of the money also comes from part of the VAT levied throughout the EU on goods and services and from customs duties levied at the Union's external borders on industrial and agricultural products imported from outside the EU. These are known as the EU's 'own resources'. Parliament is pushing for a new system of financing that would establish a direct link between the European Union and European taxpayers, without, however, increasing their taxes.



Expenditure under the microscope

With the help of the European Court of Auditors, Parliament constantly checks that the budget is being properly managed and ensures that action is taken should any fraud be discovered.

Every year the European Commission and the other EU institutions are required to demonstrate to Parliament that they have made appropriate use of the EU money made available to them. This is known as the 'budget discharge' procedure. The Commission must take into account any recommendations made by MEPs.

■ Is Europe expensive?

Barely 1% of the Union's gross income, equivalent to around EUR 240 per inhabitant, comes into the EU's annual budget. The total amount, approximately EUR 120 billion, is very small compared with the amounts paid in national taxes. Nevertheless, this money makes it possible to finance important policies designed to help European citizens. The activities of the European Parliament cost around EUR 3 a year for each EU citizen.

For more information, see 'How the EU's annual budget is adopted' on page 44.



■ Guardian of liberties and democracy

As the only elected institution of the European Union, Parliament takes very seriously its role as a guardian of liberties and democracy, both in Europe and throughout the world. The MEPs' task is primarily to represent the citizens at EU level and defend their interests to EU leaders and the institutions of the Union.

The Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and respect for human rights, including those of minorities. These values are common to the Member States 'in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail'. Moreover, the Union's 'aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples'.

Drafted in 2000 by a convention including MEPs and members of national parliaments, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights brings together in a single document the civil, political, economic and social rights hitherto dispersed over a number of national, European and international acts. The charter became legally binding, as requested by Parliament, with the entry into force of the latest Treaty on 1 December 2009, although three Member States — the Czech Republic, Poland and the UK — secured 'opt-outs'.

With the principle of human dignity at the core of their political action, MEPs invoke this charter whenever they denounce human rights violations in the European Union.



Parliament is particularly sensitive to the issue of tolerance, and fights determinedly against all forms of discrimination, whether on the basis of sex, race, ethnic or social origin, language, religion, political opinion, handicap, age or sexual orientation. It takes a stand against racism and xenophobia and constantly highlights the need for compliance with European gender equality standards. MEPs also use their full power to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are respected and the rights of children are protected.

■ **Combating all forms of exploitation of women**

Efforts to combat all forms of violence against women, combat trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation and help women out of poverty are in many cases initiated by the European Parliament. Parliament also does all it can to promote gender equality, and was instrumental in the creation of the European Institute for Gender Equality, based in Vilnius, Lithuania, which is responsible for monitoring progress in this area. Through its plenary resolutions Parliament keeps up pressure on EU governments and institutions to improve the lot of all women.

Protecting freedoms in all circumstances

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2005, EU Member States stepped up their cooperation in the fight against terrorism. While Parliament supports the efforts to coordinate police and judicial action, which is the only effective way of countering these cross-border threats, it refuses to allow citizens' rights to bear the brunt of a policy based entirely on security considerations.

MEPs believe that the fight against terrorism must respect individual liberties, so as not to jeopardise the core values of European democracy. This is their constant message on every issue they deal with, from agreements with the United States on the transfer of air passengers' personal data, to call data retention by telephone companies or the exchange of bank transfer data. At the same time, they supported the extension of the money laundering directive to include the financing of terrorism. Laws in this area are now adopted jointly by Parliament and the Council under the co-decision procedure.

Parliament also played a major role in the creation of the new European Fundamental Rights Agency, which is based in Vienna and is responsible for ensuring that fundamental rights are protected in the Member States. It also maintains contact with the European Data Protection Supervisor, based in Brussels, whose role is to monitor the protection of personal data and privacy throughout the Union.

Replying to petitions from citizens

Any citizen of the European Union or resident of an EU Member State may submit a petition to the European Parliament on a subject which comes within the EU's fields of activity and which affects them directly.

Many petitions highlight difficulties associated with the specific application at national level of EU directives, notably in the areas of the environment, social security, recognition of qualifications and some aspects of the functioning of the EU single market. Parliament helps to resolve these problems.

Address to which you can send your petitions: page 56.



■ **Silicone implants:
petitions lead to stricter legislation**

Two petitions were submitted to the European Parliament in 1998 highlighting the negative health effects of silicone breast implants and calling for them to be banned immediately. The ensuing debates in Parliament, its resolutions on the subject and a study commissioned by MEPs led the Commission to clarify and strengthen the provisions on information for patients, tracking and surveillance. A directive adopted in 2003 substantially enhanced the quality and safety checks to be carried out before breast implants can be placed on the European market.

Supervising the European Commission

The Commission President can only be appointed with the agreement of the European Parliament. A candidate is proposed by the Member States' governments on the basis of the results of the European elections, and must then be elected by the MEPs. The Commissioners-designate, nominated by the governments, are questioned by MEPs on their skills. The same procedure is followed for the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in his or her role as Vice-President of the Commission.

MEPs approve the Commission en bloc in a vote of confidence. They may also force the Commission to resign, again en bloc, by means of a vote of censure. However, a censure is viewed as a 'last resort' and has never been applied, although in 1999 the prospect of Parliament passing a vote of no-confidence in the Commission under the presidency of Jacques Santer led to it resigning.

Parliament keeps a close eye on the Commission's work, scrutinising the small print of its reports on EU policies, legislation and the budget. Commissioners are often required to appear before MEPs, at committee meetings or in plenary, to defend their policies, explain what action they intend to take and answer questions. At every plenary session, the President of the Commission is present for Question Hour, during which MEPs question him or her on current affairs.

■ And the euro?

MEPs scrutinise the management of Europe's single currency by inviting the Presidents of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the Eurogroup, as well as the Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, to come and explain their policies before its Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee. Moreover, the ECB President and all the other members of the bank's executive board can only be appointed after Parliament has been consulted. Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, Parliament is now empowered to adopt the measures regulating euro-related issues together with the Council.

Over the last couple of years Parliament has, particularly through its Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee, considerably increased the discussions it holds with all leading decision-makers involved with the euro in a bid to shed more light on the way monetary decisions are being taken. In this sense, the European Parliament has become one of the only forums acting to improve the transparency of the governance of the eurozone. This focus on transparency and democratic legitimacy characterises Parliament's position in the negotiations on the new international agreement on economic governance.

Monitoring the Council's work

Parliament's President states its key policy recommendations at the start of each EU summit (or 'European Council'), where the leaders of the Member States agree on overall policy guidelines. The President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy — two new posts created by the Lisbon Treaty — report regularly to MEPs on their activities.

The Presidency of the Council, which is held by national ministers in rotation, often meets the chairs of Parliament's political groups and attends plenary sessions to present its programme and report on its results and discuss them with MEPs. The Presidency also frequently takes part in committee meetings.



At a plenary session or in writing, MEPs may put questions to the EU Council Presidency on any topic, including the need for action to remedy breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

■ European Ombudsman

Parliament elects a European Ombudsman to examine cases of 'maladministration' by EU institutions which are brought to his or her attention by citizens and companies with a view to reaching a settlement. MEPs determine the rules and general conditions governing the performance of the Ombudsman's duties. He or she works from offices on Parliament's premises.

Cooperating closely with national parliaments

The European Parliament is also involved in building and maintaining close links with national parliaments in the European Union. This interparliamentary cooperation is intended essentially to extend democratic control and accountability over decisions taken at EU level, thus ensuring more transparency and openness in the decision-making process.

The treaty reform has brought the national parliaments even more closely into the institutional process, especially at the legislative level. They are now real participants in the process of adopting European laws, being called on to assess, in particular, compliance with the subsidiarity principle, according to which action at EU level should be taken only when the objectives envisaged cannot be achieved sufficiently at national or local level. If a sufficient number of national parliaments raise objections on the issue of conformity with the subsidiarity principle, the proposal is re-examined and the European institutions must give reasons for any decision to pursue the procedure.

The national parliaments also contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union by taking part in the treaty revision procedures and by being notified of applications for accession to the Union.



■ The European Parliament and EU enlargements

The European Union cannot accept new Member States without the European Parliament's approval. MEPs check that the applicant countries fulfil the political and economic criteria laid down in the treaties, attaching great importance to the issue of human rights.

Any European country which respects the values of the EU and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. The application is made to the Council, which acts unanimously after consulting the Commission and receiving Parliament's approval.

It is up to the Council and the Commission to negotiate with the applicant countries and to set the date of accession, but MEPs monitor the procedure until the very day of the accession to make sure that all the conditions laid down in the Treaty are met.

Any country seeking membership of the European Union must conform to the 'Copenhagen criteria', named after the city where, in 1993, the Heads of State or Government established the conditions for accession (those conditions have since been tightened).

Specifically, to become a member of the EU an applicant country must meet the following three criteria:

- political: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;

- economic: existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;
- acceptance of the *acquis communautaire*: ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

In addition, Parliament has called for consideration to be given both to the applicant countries' preparations for joining and to the Union's absorption capacity. MEPs have debated these issues on a number of occasions in recent years. They gave the go-ahead for opening negotiations with Turkey and Croatia, and supported the candidacies of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Iceland.

■ From 6 Member States to 28

January 1958	Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands
January 1973	Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom
January 1981	Greece
January 1986	Portugal and Spain
November 1990	Reunification of Germany, integration of the former East Germany
January 1995	Austria, Finland and Sweden
May 2004	Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia
January 2007	Bulgaria and Romania
July 2013	Planned accession of Croatia

'Voluntary withdrawal' from the Union

The Lisbon Treaty now provides the possibility for a Member State to withdraw from the EU if it so wishes. The arrangements for withdrawal will need to be determined in an agreement between the Member States' governments, which will require Parliament's prior approval. The country involved will still be able to rejoin the EU, providing it goes through the accession procedure once again.





■ The European Parliament on the world stage

The European Parliament's approval is required for most international agreements concluded by the EU, and Parliament is also involved in shaping the EU's development and humanitarian aid policy. MEPs are increasingly bringing their influence to bear on European foreign policy and maintain close links with lawmakers around the world. The European Parliament's chamber is also an important stage for international leaders and personalities.

In its relations with the wider world, the Union promotes its values and interests and contributes to the protection of its citizens. It works for peace, security, the sustainable development of the planet, solidarity between peoples, free and fair trade, the eradication of poverty, protection of human rights and the strict observance and development of international law.

No international agreements without the European Parliament

MEPs' assent is required for most of the international agreements which the EU enters into — a number of financial protocols with non-EU countries have been rejected by Parliament on human rights grounds.

Furthermore, the Commission is required to inform Parliament about progress in multilateral trade negotiations conducted under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and in bilateral negotiations with non-EU countries. In the context of those negotiations, MEPs make recommendations which carry a great deal of weight as Parliament has to approve the outcome of the negotiations. Under the Lisbon Treaty, it is now Parliament and the Council together that adopt legislative acts on the implementation of the common commercial policy.

An enhanced role in development and humanitarian aid policy

The measures needed to implement the policy on aid for developing countries and on economic, financial and technical cooperation with other non-EU countries are now decided by Parliament and the Council under the co-decision procedure. The main objectives are fighting poverty and promoting good governance, democracy and human rights.

MEPs have acquired a legislative role in the EU's humanitarian aid policy, which is intended to provide assistance, relief and protection for people in non-EU countries who are victims of man-made and natural disasters.

■ **Towards a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps**

Parliament and the Council are required to determine the operating arrangements for a new European voluntary corps, thereby establishing a framework for joint contributions from young Europeans to the humanitarian actions of the Union.

EU foreign policy closely scrutinised by MEPs

Parliament is consulted by the Council on major foreign policy decisions. MEPs can ask questions about foreign policies and make recommendations. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who is also a Vice-President of the Commission) is regularly invited to report to the plenary on the EU's activities around the world.

Parliament also has the right to conduct full scrutiny of the new European External Action Service created by the Lisbon Treaty. This diplomatic service is intended to ensure that the EU's foreign policy is conducted coherently in political, economic and military terms.

The European Parliament is constantly trying to build political, economic and cultural links with other parliaments around the world. Members participate in the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (ACP–EU); the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), including the Palestinian Authority and Israel; the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat); and the EU–Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (Euronest).



Leaders from around the world received at the European Parliament

The European Parliament regularly invites heads of state, prime ministers and other personalities from around the world to address MEPs at a plenary session. In recent years visitors to Parliament have included King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine, President Ellen Sirleaf Johnson of Liberia, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, President Evo Morales of Bolivia, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.



■ Defending human rights

In Europe and around the world, Parliament acts to uphold human rights, freedoms and democracy. It sends observers to the four corners of the Earth to monitor elections for irregularities. MEPs also ensure that human rights are protected in the EU's external economic and trade agreements, and each year they award the Sakharov Prize to people who fight for 'freedom of thought'.

Parliament ensures that human rights are at the top of the European agenda. It takes initiatives in a range of areas, such as preventing torture, the protection of minorities, conflict prevention, promoting women's and children's rights, the protection of human rights activists and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Parliament also actively supports the establishment and work of international tribunals, such as the International Criminal Court or the tribunals specially set up to judge the perpetrators of war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Condemning violations of human rights

At each plenary session in Strasbourg, MEPs examine critical human rights situations in various parts of the world. Parliament regularly adopts resolutions calling on the EU institutions or governments to take immediate action to put an end to violations of fundamental rights.

Every year the European Parliament publishes an annual report on the human rights situation in the world, maintaining the focus of EU and world attention on the most serious cases by means of its denouncements. In these reports it has condemned cases such as the genocide in Darfur, violations of freedoms in China and the crimes committed in Chechnya.

■ **Parliament strongly opposed to the death penalty**

The European Parliament strongly condemns the use of the death penalty in all cases and under all circumstances. Its Members have repeatedly called for a worldwide, unconditional moratorium on executions, to be established through a UN resolution. By means of such a moratorium, Parliament wishes to affirm the universal value of human life and dignity.



Guaranteeing democratic elections

Delegations of MEPs are often sent on election observation missions to non-EU countries. They monitor the entire election process and draw any breaches of citizens' rights to the attention of the relevant authorities and the international community. MEPs have, for example, participated in election observation missions in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Palestinian Territories and Ukraine.

Ensuring that international agreements take account of human rights

Parliament has the power to refuse the conclusion of important agreements with non-member countries if it finds evidence of breaches of human rights and democratic principles. By the same token, it insists on strict compliance with the human rights clauses that are systematically included in such agreements and which provide for an agreement to be terminated in extreme cases.





Asylum policy and combating human trafficking

The Lisbon Treaty calls on the EU to develop a common asylum policy aimed at giving an appropriate status to all political refugees by laying down common procedures for granting and withdrawing protection, as well as standards relating to the reception conditions for asylum-seekers.

One of the aims of the EU's common immigration policy is to ensure fair treatment of non-EU nationals who are staying legally in the EU. In that context, Parliament is now involved in adopting measures to combat human trafficking, and especially the trafficking of women and children.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named after Russian scientist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, is intended to honour individuals or organisations who defend human rights, democracy and freedom of expression and combat intolerance and oppression anywhere in the world.

Established in 1988, the prize is awarded each year by the European Parliament at a formal sitting in Strasbourg. The parliamentary calendar permitting, it is awarded as closely as possible to 10 December, the anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Previous winners include Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Alexander Dubček (Czechoslovakia), Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo — Argentina), Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma), Ibrahim Rugova (Kosovo), the United Nations Organisation and its then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, Hu Jia (China), Memorial (an association defending human rights in Russia) and representatives of the Arab Spring.





■ The workings of the European Parliament

The work of the European Parliament is structured according to a calendar divided up into different coloured weeks: pink, red, blue and turquoise, each corresponding to a different type of parliamentary activity. For the work to proceed as smoothly as possible, there needs to be good organisation and administrative support. The machinery runs well, everyone knows their role and nothing is left to chance.

Pink weeks for parliamentary committees

The European Parliament has 20 standing committees, each specialising in a particular field, such as the environment, transport, industry or the budget. The make-up of these committees reflects the various political trends in Parliament and the number of MEPs they contain varies from committee to committee. They are responsible for preparing the work for plenary sessions.

In committee meetings MEPs hold a series of debates and votes on reports, thereby expressing their opinion on proposed laws or on the draft EU budget for the following year. They also draw up 'own-initiative reports' in which they recommend action to be taken in a particular area by the Commission or the Member States' governments.



■ Special committees and committees of inquiry

If necessary, Parliament can set up special committees and committees of inquiry. For example, in 1996 a committee of inquiry was asked to check whether the Commission and the governments had properly handled the 'mad cow' epidemic. Following the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige*, MEPs set up a committee in 2003 to look into ways to improve maritime safety. And in 2006 a committee investigated the CIA's activities in Europe following press revelations about the extraordinary rendition and illegal detention of suspected terrorists in a number of European countries by the US secret services. In 2007, a temporary committee was set up to examine possible responses to climate change. A special committee was set up in 2009 to propose measures to make the financial markets more sound and stable in response to the global financial, economic and social crisis.

Red weeks for plenary sessions

The plenary session is the highlight of the parliamentary month. This is when all the MEPs assemble either in the chamber in Strasbourg or, for additional, shorter sessions, in Brussels. The reports adopted in committee are once again debated, amended and adopted to reflect Parliament's official position.

As well as reports, MEPs adopt resolutions and directly question Commission or Council representatives on topical issues. Plenary sessions may also be attended by Heads of State or Government and personalities from all over the world.

Blue weeks for the political groups

MEPs are grouped together on the basis of political affiliation rather than nationality. A minimum number of MEPs from at least one quarter of the Member States is required to form a political group. MEPs who do not belong to any group are automatically grouped together as ‘non-attached’ Members.

During ‘group weeks’, which generally come the week before the plenary session, each political group coordinates and formulates the positions it will take in the assembly on each of the subjects on the agenda.

Turquoise weeks: MEPs in their constituencies or on mission

A number of weeks a year are set aside for MEPs to carry out constituency work and meet their electorate or to travel on mission to other parts of the world.

■ What language do you speak?

All Parliament’s plenary sittings and meetings are fully multilingual: Members can speak in any official language of the EU, and everything they say is simultaneously interpreted. Thanks to the translation service, Parliament’s working documents are available in all the official languages of the European Union, reflecting and promoting the EU’s cultural diversity and making MEPs’ work accessible to everyone.

Who does what in the European Parliament?

Elected to serve a two-and-a-half-year term by the MEPs, the President of the European Parliament plays a key role: he or she directs Parliament's activities, chairs plenary sessions and signs the budget and laws adopted together with the Council. The President represents Parliament in international relations and in its relations with the other EU institutions. Parliament has 14 Vice-Presidents, each with a specific area of responsibility.

The Conference of Presidents is made up of the chairs of the political groups and the President of the European Parliament. It organises and schedules the work of Parliament, including the timetable and agenda for plenary sessions and the composition of committees and delegations.

The Bureau is the body responsible for dealing with Parliament's administrative, staffing and organisational matters. It comprises the President of Parliament, the Vice-Presidents and the Quaestors, who are elected by MEPs. The Bureau is also responsible for Parliament's budget.

The Conference of Committee Chairs is the political body of the European Parliament consisting of the Chairs of all parliamentary committees. This body monitors the progress of work in committees and ensures cooperation and coordination between parliamentary committees in their legislative and non-legislative activities.

MEPs and Parliament are assisted by a large administration. The Secretariat has the task of assisting all MEPs in the performance of their official duties. It consists of almost 5 600 people — one fifth of whom are translators and interpreters — who work in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg and in the information offices in the Member States. Including the 900 people working for the political groups and the 1 600 MEPs' assistants, a total of about 8 000 people keep Parliament's wheels turning.

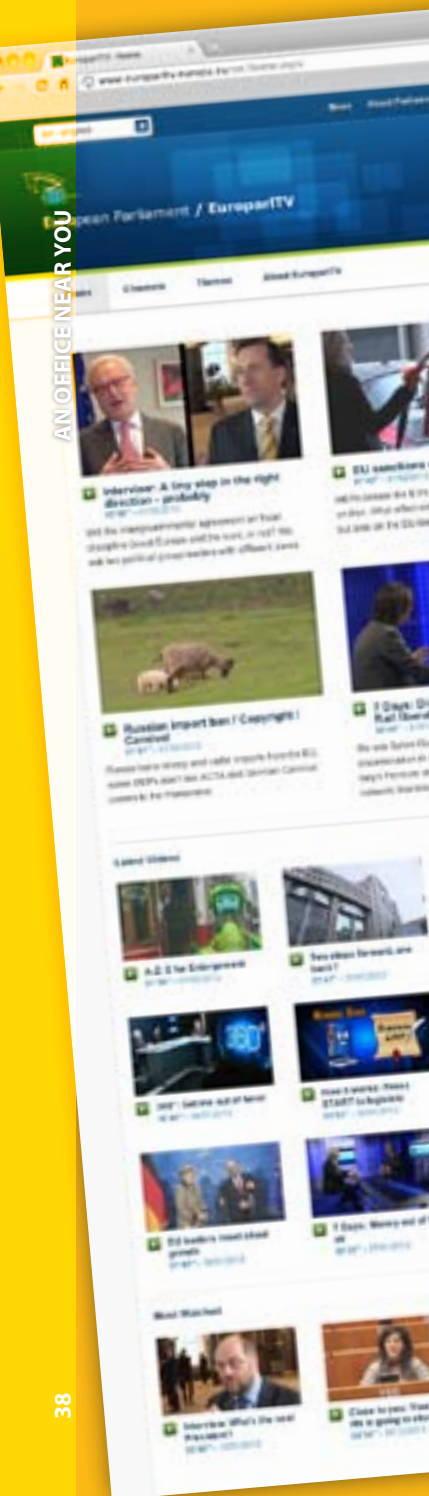
■ An office near you

Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg are the European Parliament's 'places of work', but you can keep an eye on its activities wherever you are. From your computer you can follow a plenary session, consult documents and press releases and ask Europe-related questions on line. Not only that, but there are information offices at your service in all the EU's capital cities.

The website: a window on the European Parliament

Parliament's website — the address is easy to remember: **www.europarl.europa.eu** — is a mine of interesting information in all the official languages. Whether you want to know about Parliament's most recent work, follow committee and plenary debates and votes as they happen, get to know who the MEPs are and find out what they do, submit a petition or simply discover how the institution works, it's all on the website.





To ensure that its work is known and understood by the public, Parliament provides access to its documents via an online register. Historical archives are also available.

EuroparlTV: Parliament's web television

Follow EU news, see the MEPs in action, go 'behind the scenes' at Parliament or watch a live transmission of its work — it's all possible at www.europarlTV.eu. Parliament's web television offers a package of four channels each aimed at a different audience, from schoolchildren to professionals, as well as anyone interested in European politics.

Any questions? Drop a line to Parliament's mailbox

Parliament's website is certainly comprehensive, but it is sometimes difficult to find your way through the EU labyrinth. So the European Parliament provides a mailbox to which anyone can send questions, requests for information or suggestions concerning areas of EU activity. Each year Parliament replies to tens of thousands of messages from the public.

As well informed as the journalists

The media plays an important role in bringing citizens closer to the institutions representing them. Parliament has a Press Service which informs journalists about the day's parliamentary debates and the outcome of votes. This information is available to the general public in real time on Parliament's multilingual website. Journalists can also make use of logistical and technical support and audiovisual material (photos, videos, audio archives, etc.). In addition, the Press Service organises press conferences and seminars on topical European issues.

Visiting Parliament

Perhaps you have found a lot of information on the website and now you'd like to see in practice how the European Parliament works and what it does for you. Nearly 300 000 people visit Parliament's places of work in Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg each year, either individually or in groups, to attend plenary sessions and meet their MEPs. If you would like to gain a deeper insight into the workings and role of the European Parliament and have your questions answered, all you have to do is contact the Visits and Seminars Unit, which organises guided tours in all the EU's official languages.

Europe Day (9 May) is 'open day' at the European Parliament, when its chambers in Strasbourg and Brussels are open to the general public. Every year around 40 000 people take advantage of the occasion to visit Parliament and learn about its activities.

A new Visitors' Centre in Brussels with an interactive exhibition on the history and workings of Parliament and the impact its decisions have on the daily life of Europe's citizens opened in October 2011. Called the Parliamentarium, this new centre is open seven days a week and admission is free. A multimedia role-play game even lets young visitors be 'MEPs for a day'.



Information offices providing a service to European citizens

The European Parliament has an information office in all EU capitals, as well as regional offices in certain Member States. They serve as a point of contact between European citizens and the institution which represents them.

The information offices run information campaigns on various European issues. They organise seminars and conferences, in particular for students, opinion multipliers and the media.

The information offices also organise decentralised forums at which MEPs, local authorities, individual citizens and representatives of various occupations debate the most important issues in the regions concerned. They also organise meetings between MEPs and national and local representatives, the press and the public.

Contacting your MEP

Parliament, above all else, is the MEPs. Backed by the mandate given to them in European elections, it is MEPs who pass laws and take political initiatives which have an impact on our daily lives and provide the inspiration for a European approach to the major international issues.

The names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of every MEP can be found under their MEP profile in the 'MEPs' menu on Parliament's website. There are also details of their curriculum vitae, constituency and political affiliation, as well as the positions they hold and the work they have performed in Parliament.

See pages 56–59 for contact details.



■ European lawmaking — how does it work?

Co-decision, which puts the European Parliament on an equal footing with the Council, has become the 'ordinary legislative procedure' for the adoption of EU laws. In principle, the Council acts by qualified majority, including in areas where unanimity was required before the Lisbon Treaty was adopted.

In addition to policy areas traditionally subject to co-decision — such as the environment, transport, consumer protection and the free movement of goods and workers — the procedure has been extended to a further 50 legal bases, bringing the total to 86. It is now also applied in areas that previously were almost exclusively the Council's responsibility (such as agriculture, fisheries, and justice and home affairs initiatives) as well as the EU's new areas of action, such as tourism, youth and sport.

The ordinary legislative procedure is divided into three stages. The general outline of this procedure is as follows.

The Commission submits a legislative proposal to the European Parliament and the Council.

At first reading (the first stage of deliberation of the text) Parliament adopts or does not adopt amendments (changes) to the Commission proposal. If Parliament does not adopt amendments and if the Council also accepts the Commission proposal, the legislative proposal is adopted. It is also adopted if the Council accepts Parliament's amendments. The new law can then enter into force. If the Council does not approve all the MEPs' amendments, it submits an alternative text to Parliament setting out the Member States' position in first reading.

A second reading then begins. The legislative process is completed if, within three months, the MEPs approve the Council's position, reject it or do not take a decision. If, however, the MEPs propose amendments to the Council's position, the Council is required to examine those amendments in a second reading. The legislative text is adopted if the Council approves all the amendments.

If it does not approve all the amendments, a consensus must be reached: this is the stage known as conciliation. This task is given to a conciliation committee, composed of representatives of the two institutions. The Commission is also involved throughout the procedure. If, within six weeks, the conciliation committee does not approve a joint text, the proposal falls.

If, however, the representatives of the two institutions reach an agreement on a joint text, that text is submitted, in a third and final reading, to a plenary session of Parliament and to the Council. If the text is then approved it becomes law. If no decision is taken, the proposed act is deemed not to have been adopted.

At the very beginning of the legislative procedure the proposal is also sent to the national parliaments, who have eight weeks to assess its compatibility with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. If a sufficient number of parliaments raise objections on those grounds, the EU institutions are required to re-examine the proposal and, if necessary, substantiate their decision to pursue the procedure.



Special legislative procedures

All procedures other than that described above are known as ‘special’ procedures, including the ad hoc procedure required for adopting the budget, which is described in detail in the following chapter.

Some acts must be adopted unanimously by the Council, with Parliament’s prior approval. MEPs thus have a kind of veto, allowing them to reject or accept a proposal as a whole, without the possibility of proposing amendments. This is the case with the multiannual financial framework and measures to combat discrimination or extend the rights associated with citizenship (which also require national ratification).

Other acts are adopted by the Council unanimously or by qualified majority after Parliament has been ‘consulted’. In such cases the MEPs’ opinion is not binding and it is the governments that have the final word. This procedure applies, for example, to social security and protection acts, tax-related provisions in the area of energy and harmonisation of turnover taxes and indirect taxation. It also applies to operational police cooperation and to measures governing intervention by a Member State’s authorities in the territory of another EU country.

The rules on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal and European elections in the Member State of residence are also subject to this procedure, although the Council may choose — by unanimous decision taken after consulting Parliament — to apply the ordinary legislative procedure.





■ How the EU's annual budget is adopted

Parliament and the Council, using a special legislative procedure, establish the EU's annual budget on the basis of the five-year multiannual financial framework, which is established by a regulation adopted by the two arms of the budgetary authority — Parliament and the Council.

With the exception of the European Central Bank, each institution draws up, before 1 July, estimates of its expenditure for the following financial year. The Commission consolidates these estimates in a draft budget, which contains an estimate of revenue and an estimate of expenditure. It submits this draft to the European Parliament and the Council not later than 1 September. The Council is required to adopt its position on the draft budget and forward it to Parliament, with explanations, not later than 1 October.

The budget is adopted if, within 42 days of such communication, Parliament approves the Council's position or has not taken a decision. If, however, Parliament adopts amendments, its draft budget is forwarded to the Council and the Commission. The budget is adopted if, within 10 days, the Council approves all the amendments.

If the Council does not approve all the amendments, the President of the European Parliament, in agreement with the President of the Council, convenes a meeting of the conciliation committee — composed of representatives of the two arms of the budgetary authority — with the task of reaching agreement on a joint draft. The Commission takes part in proceedings and tries to reconcile the positions of Parliament and the Council. If, within 21 days, the conciliation committee does not agree on a joint text, a new draft budget must be submitted by the Commission. However, if the committee reaches an agreement, Parliament and the Council each have a period of 14 days in which to approve the joint text.

The budget is definitively adopted if, within that 14-day period, Parliament and the Council both approve the joint text or fail to take a decision, or if one of these institutions approves the joint text while the other one fails to take a decision.

Conversely, a new draft budget is submitted by the Commission if Parliament and the Council both reject the joint text, or if one of these institutions rejects the joint text while the other one fails to take a decision. The same applies if Parliament rejects the joint text while the Council approves it.

If Parliament approves the joint text while the Council rejects it, Parliament may — acting by a majority of its component members and three fifths of the votes cast — decide to confirm all or some of the amendments. Where a Parliament amendment is not confirmed, the position agreed in the conciliation committee on the budget heading which is the subject of the amendment is retained. The budget is deemed to be definitively adopted on this basis.



■ EU keywords

Acquis communautaire

This is a French term covering, essentially, the rights and obligations that all EU countries share. The *acquis* includes all the EU's treaties and laws, declarations and resolutions, international agreements on EU affairs and the judgments given by the Court of Justice of the European Union. Candidate countries have to accept the *acquis* before they can join the EU, and make EU law part of their own national law.

Committee of the Regions

Established in 1994, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) is a political assembly providing local and regional bodies with a voice in the European Union. The Commission and the Council are required to consult the Committee of the Regions whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions at regional or local level. These areas include economic and social cohesion, trans-European infrastructure networks, health, education and culture, employment policy, the environment and transport. The Lisbon Treaty gives the CoR the right to bring proceedings before the Court of Justice in cases where, in respect of legislative acts on which it must be consulted, the subsidiarity principle appears to have been violated. The Committee has 344 members, who are regional or local elected officials, appointed by the Council for five years, having been nominated by the Member States.

Council

The Council, along with Parliament, exercises legislative and budgetary functions. The Lisbon Treaty has substantially increased the number of areas in which it acts by qualified majority. The Council is also the lead institution for decision-making on the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and on the coordination of economic policies. Its meetings are attended by national ministers and it is thus the institution which represents the Member States. The Council's headquarters are in Brussels, but it also meets in Luxembourg.

The Council meets in various configurations bringing together the relevant Member State ministers: General Affairs; Economic and Financial Affairs; Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs; Competitiveness; Cooperation in the Fields of Justice and Home Affairs; Transport, Telecommunications and Energy; Agriculture and Fisheries; Environment; and Education, Youth and Culture. These configurations are headed, on a rotating six-monthly basis, by the three countries holding the rotating presidency of the EU over an 18-month period.

The General Affairs Council, however, is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a post created by the Lisbon Treaty. The High Representative conducts the Union's common foreign and security policy and ensures the consistency of the Union's external action; contributes to the development of the CFSP and implements it as instructed by the Council, with the aid of the new European External Action Service; performs the same role with regard to the common security and defence policy, and takes part in meetings of the European Council.

Court of Justice of the European Union

The Court of Justice, based in Luxembourg, ensures compliance with the interpretation and application of the founding treaties. It is composed of the same number of judges as there are Member States. The judges are assisted by eight advocates-general, who are appointed for six years by agreement among the Member States. It has two principal functions: to check whether instruments of the European institutions and of governments are compatible with the treaties; and to give rulings, at the request of a national court, on the interpretation or the validity of provisions contained in EU law. The Court also comprises a General Court, composed of at least one judge per Member State, and specialised courts.

Division of competences

The competences of the European Union and its Member States are divided into three different categories:

- The exclusive competences of the Union, where the Member States have irrevocably relinquished all possibility of taking action, relate mainly to the customs union, competition rules, monetary policy in the euro area and the common commercial policy.
- Shared competences (the most common case) concern, for example, the internal market, consumer protection, agriculture and fisheries, energy, transport, public health, social policy and territorial cohesion, research, development cooperation and humanitarian aid and the area of freedom, security and justice.

— Supporting competences or areas of supporting action, where the EU's task is to encourage, coordinate and complement action by the Member States, include, in particular, health protection, industry, culture, tourism, education and professional training, youth and sport, and civil protection.

The principles of subsidiarity and proportionality act as regulators to ensure compliance with this division.

Economic and monetary union

Economic and monetary union (EMU) is the process of harmonising the economic and monetary policies of the Member States of the Union, including the introduction of a single currency, the euro. On 1 January 1999 the exchange rates were fixed and the single currency was introduced in the countries participating in EMU.

On 1 January 2002 euro notes and coins replaced the old national currencies. Not all Member States have adopted the single currency.

The 12 Member States which joined the EU on or after 1 May 2004 are required to adopt the euro once they meet all the convergence criteria, which aim to ensure that economic development within EMU is balanced and does not give rise to any tensions between the Member States.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights brings together in a single document the civil, political, economic and social rights hitherto dispersed over a number of national, European and international acts. Drafted by a convention including MEPs and members of national parliaments, the charter was formally proclaimed in December 2000 at a European Summit in Nice. In October 2007 in Lisbon, at a summit devoted to institutional reform, the EU's Heads of State or Government agreed to make it legally binding, as called for by Parliament. It finally became binding with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, some Member States — the Czech Republic, Poland and the UK — secured 'opt-outs'.

European Anti-Fraud Office

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) has been responsible, since 1 June 1999, for combating fraud against the European Union budget. The Office investigates the management and financing of all the Union's institutions and bodies with absolute operational independence.

European Central Bank

Founded on 30 June 1998 in Frankfurt, the European Central Bank (ECB) is responsible for monetary policy in the member countries of the euro area. Since 1 January 1999 its main tasks have been to maintain price stability in the euro area and to implement the European monetary policy defined by the European System of Central Banks (ESCB). The ECB acts totally independently. The Lisbon Treaty gives the ECB the status of an EU institution.

European citizenship

Every national of a Member State is a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union is additional to national citizenship and does not replace it. The Lisbon Treaty stipulates that in all its activities the Union must observe the principle of the equality of its citizens, who must receive equal attention from its institutions, bodies, offices and agencies. Moreover, under the Treaty, the functioning of the Union is 'founded on representative democracy' and 'citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament'.

Citizens of the Union have the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. They also have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections to the European Parliament and in municipal elections in their Member State of residence, under the same conditions as nationals of that Member State. In countries outside the EU where there is no representation of a particular Member State, nationals of that Member State may enjoy the diplomatic and consular protection of any other Member State.

European Commission

The European Commission embodies and upholds the general interest of the Union. It has the virtually exclusive right to initiate legislation. It prepares and then implements the legislative instruments adopted by the Council and the European Parliament in connection with EU policies. The Commission also has powers of implementation, management and control. It is responsible for planning and implementing common policies, executing the budget and managing EU programmes. As 'Guardian of the treaties', it also ensures that European law is applied in the Member States.

The European Commission President, proposed by the national governments on the basis of the results of the European election, is elected by the European Parliament by absolute majority. The other members of the Commission — one from each Member State, except the President's country of origin — are nominated for five years by the Council with the agreement of the Member States. One of the Vice-Presidents also holds the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The Commission as a whole is subject to a vote of approval by the European Parliament, to which it is answerable.

European Council

The Lisbon Treaty has elevated the European Council to the status of EU institution. It brings together twice every six months the Heads of State or Government of the European Union Member States. Its role is to provide the EU with the necessary impetus for its development and to lay down general political guidelines. It has no legislative role and its decisions, as a rule, are taken by consensus.

Under the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council elects its President for a renewable two-and-a-half-year term. The President, who may not hold national office, ensures the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council in cooperation with the President of the Commission, and endeavours to facilitate cohesion and consensus. The President presents a report to the European Parliament after each of the meetings of the European Council and ensures the external representation of the Union, without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative.

European Court of Auditors

The European Court of Auditors, based in Luxembourg, is composed of one national from each Member State. The Court checks the revenue and expenditure of the European Union (and any body created by the EU) for legality and regularity and ensures that its financial management is sound. It also supplies the European Parliament and the Council with a statement of assurance as to the reliability of the accounts and the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions. The Court of Auditors also has the power to report any irregularities to the European Parliament and the Council.

European Economic and Social Committee

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), established by the Treaty of Rome (1957), is a consultative assembly representing organisations of employers, the employed and other parties representative of civil society. In certain areas, including employment policy, social policy, education, public health, consumer protection, economic and social cohesion and agricultural policy, the Treaty stipulates that a decision may be taken only after the Council or Commission has consulted the EESC. It has 344 members who are nominated by national governments and appointed by the Council for a renewable five-year term of office.

European Investment Bank

The task of the European Investment Bank (EIB), which is based in Luxembourg, is to contribute to economic, social and territorial cohesion through the balanced development of the EU territory. It provides long-term financing for practical projects whose economic, technical, environmental and financial viability is guaranteed. Outside the European Union, the EIB supports the pre-accession strategies of the candidate countries and of the western Balkans. It also manages the financial dimension of the agreements concluded under European development aid and cooperation policies.

European Ombudsman

The European Ombudsman is empowered to receive complaints concerning maladministration by EU institutions or bodies (with the exception of the Court of Justice and the General Court) from any EU citizen or any individual residing in a Member State or from businesses, associations or other bodies with a registered office in the EU. For example, complaints may be based on lack or denial of access to information, unjustified administrative delays, unfairness or discrimination or lack of transparency.

European Union

The European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

The Lisbon Treaty introduced changes both to the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) and the Treaty establishing the European Community (Treaty of Rome). It established a single entity having a single legal personality: the European Union. In so doing it did away with the old system of 'three pillars', two of which had been essentially intergovernmental (the 'common foreign and security policy' and 'justice and home affairs'). There is now a single institutional framework in which the 'community method' generally applies, except in the case of the particular procedures laid down for the foreign, security and defence policy.

Legal acts of the Union

To exercise the Union's competences, the institutions adopt regulations, directives, decisions, recommendations and opinions. A regulation is general in scope, binding in its entirety and directly applicable in all Member States. A directive is binding, as to the result to be achieved, upon each Member State to which it is addressed, but leaves to the national authorities the choice of form and methods. A decision is binding in its entirety. Recommendations and opinions have no binding force.

Single market

The European Union is a large area where, in principle, persons, goods, services and capital can move around freely between the Member States as if they were all one country, with no checks carried out at the borders and no customs duties paid. However, this took a while to achieve. Customs duties between EEC countries were not completely abolished until 1 July 1968. Other barriers to trade also took a long while to remove, and it was not until the end of 1992 that the 'single market' was in place.

Subsidiarity and proportionality

The subsidiarity principle is intended to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that constant checks are made as to whether action at EU level is justified in the light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. Specifically, it is the principle whereby the Union does not take action (except in the areas which fall within its exclusive competence) unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level. It is closely bound up with the principle of proportionality, which requires that any action by the Union should not go beyond what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaty.

Under the Lisbon Treaty, the national parliaments are asked to verify compliance with these principles at the beginning of a legislative procedure. A sufficient number of parliaments may require the EU institutions to reconsider the appropriateness of the legislative proposal in question. The Committee of the Regions has acquired the right to bring action for violation of the subsidiarity principle against legislative acts which require its prior consultation in order to be adopted.



■ Milestones in European integration

9 May 1950 — Robert Schuman, French Foreign Minister, proposes a coal and steel union between France and Germany, a plan based on the ideas of Jean Monnet. The date of Schuman's speech has since then been celebrated annually as 'Europe Day'.

April 1951 — Based on the Schuman Plan, Belgium, West Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands establish the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in the Treaty of Paris.

March 1957 — The six founding members sign the Treaties of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC), or 'common market', and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). The treaties enter into force on 1 January 1958.

March 1958 — Constituent session of the European Parliamentary Assembly.

March 1962 — The European Parliamentary Assembly is renamed the European Parliament.

July 1968 — Customs duties on industrial goods are completely abolished 18 months ahead of schedule and a Common External Tariff is introduced.

January 1973 — The first enlargement of the Community: Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom join the EEC.

June 1979 — The first direct elections to the European Parliament are held. Members were previously delegated by national parliaments. Nine countries elect 410 MEPs.

January 1981 — Greece joins the EEC.

June 1984 — European Parliament elections: 10 countries elect 441 MEPs.

January 1986 — Spain and Portugal join the EEC.

July 1987 — The Single European Act enters into force, enhancing Parliament's legislative powers.

June 1989 — European Parliament elections: 12 countries elect 525 MEPs.

November 1989 — Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Cold War ends and Europe's divisions can begin to be removed.

January 1993 — The single market and its four freedoms are established: free movement of goods, services, people and money is now reality.

November 1993 — The Treaty on European Union signed at Maastricht comes into force. It sets out plans for the introduction of a future single currency, a foreign and security policy and closer cooperation in justice and home affairs. The newly established 'European Union' is based on the previous 'European Communities'. The co-decision procedure is introduced, giving real legislative power to the European Parliament.

June 1994 — European Parliament elections: 12 countries elect 567 MEPs.

January 1995 — Austria, Finland and Sweden join the EU.

May 1999 — The Treaty of Amsterdam enters into force. It lays down plans to reform EU institutions, give Europe a stronger voice in the world and concentrate more resources on employment and the rights of citizens.

June 1999 — European Parliament elections: 15 countries elect 626 MEPs.

December 2001 — The Laeken European Council adopts a declaration on the future of the Union. This opens the way for a major reform of the EU and the establishment of a convention to draft a European constitution.

January 2002 — Euro notes and coins enter circulation in 12 countries, replacing the previous national currencies.

February 2003 — The Treaty of Nice enters into force, preparing the EU for the entry of 10 new members the following year. The Charter of Fundamental Rights is adopted.

July 2003 — The Convention on the Future of Europe completes its work on the draft European Constitution.

May 2004 — The Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia join the EU.

June 2004 — European Parliament elections: 25 countries elect 732 MEPs.

October 2004 — EU Heads of State or Government sign the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

May–June 2005 — Rejection of the draft Constitution in referendums held in France and the Netherlands.

January 2007 — Bulgaria and Romania join the EU. The number of MEPs rises to 785. Slovenia adopts the euro.

March 2007 — To mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, Parliament signs the Berlin Declaration together with the Council and Commission.

October 2007 — At the Lisbon Summit the EU's Heads of State or Government reach agreement on the reform of the treaties.

December 2007 — The Presidents of Parliament, the Commission and the EU Council formally sign the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the Heads of State or Government sign the Lisbon Treaty.

January 2008 — Cyprus and Malta adopt the euro.

January 2009 — Slovakia adopts the euro to become the 16th member of the eurozone.

June 2009 — European Parliament elections: 27 countries elect 736 MEPs.

December 2009 — The Lisbon Treaty enters into force. The European Union acquires legal personality and the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights assumes binding legal force. Parliament gains broader legislative, budgetary and control powers. Co-decision — with qualified majority voting in the Council — becomes the ordinary legislative procedure for adopting European laws and is extended to almost all the EU's areas of competence.

January 2011 — Estonia adopts the euro to become the 17th member of the eurozone.


July 2013 — Planned accession of Croatia.





European Parliament addresses

European Parliament

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