What is the European Union?

It is European
= it is situated in Europe

It is a union
= it unites countries and people.

Let's have a closer look:

What do Europeans have in common?

How has the EU developed?

What does the EU do today?
Europe – our continent

Europe is one of the world's continents.

More than 700 million people live in Europe,
Europe – our history

We Europeans do not only share a continent, we share a common history. New ways of living, thinking and believing have always spread throughout Europe. They have shaped the way we feel and behave to this day. Ancient Greece and Rome, for example, have strongly influenced European culture.

The church of the Madeleine in Paris, inspired by a Roman temple, designed as a temple to the glory of Napoleon's army, seen here from the Place de la Concorde, where the guillotine was erected during the French Revolution.
Languages

Our languages reflect that: many words in European languages have common roots in ancient Greek and Latin. For example:

- Europe and democracy (Greek) or
- Union (Latin).

The Athena Fountain in front of the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna.
Arts and culture

Over the centuries, new styles of music, architecture and literature have inspired artists all over Europe. For example:
- gothic churches in France, Spain, Poland or Slovakia, or
- classical music written
- by German, Italian, Austrian, or British composers.
European wars

Sadly, the story of Europe is not all about great achievements of which we can be proud. Throughout history, European nations have fought terrible wars against each other. In the 20th century, two wars that started on this continent spread and involved countries all over the world.

This cemetery contains the remains of more than 140,000 soldiers who died during the Battle of Verdun (France) in the First World War.
Almost all the buildings in Warsaw had been destroyed by the end of the Second World War.

European wars

At the end of the Second World War, people in Europe asked themselves:
"Can anything be done to stop these terrible things from happening again?"
"Will Europeans ever learn to work together instead of fighting each other?"
Let's see what happened next.
If you want to prevent war, you have to **work together**. A first step is to control jointly the things needed for war:

- **steel** for weapons and
- **energy** for factories and transport...
The Treaty on the European Coal and Steel Community was signed in Paris in 1951. That's why six European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) agreed to unite their coal and steel industries. They set up the European Coal and Steel Community.
European Economic Community

The six countries got on so well that they decided to go a step further and to set up the European Economic Community (EEC).

The main idea was to create a 'common market'. That means getting rid of all national obstacles to free trade, such as border checks and customs duties, as if Europe were one country.
That's why the EEC decided to change its name to the 'European Union'.

Not just economics...

Over the years, more and more countries joined the EEC. They started working together in many more areas, for example,

• to protect the environment and
• to build better roads and railways across Europe.

The Øresund Bridge, completed in 1999, links Sweden and Denmark.
Fall of the Iron Curtain

In 1989, countries from central and eastern Europe broke free from Communist rule. The unnatural separation between the eastern and western parts of Europe, the 'Iron Curtain', ceased to exist. The countries that had regained their freedom reformed their laws and economies and joined the EU. The EU now has 28 member countries.
What the European Union does today

The EU tries to make life better for all of us. Let's have a look at some examples.

**Money**
In the past, each country in Europe had its own currency. Now, many EU countries use one single currency, the euro.

**Freedom for young people**
The EU supports young people who want to spend some time studying or training in another European country.
What the European Union does today

Freedom for employees
EU citizens may live and work in any EU country of their choice.

Do you want to become a chef? Why not work in another EU country to uncover the secrets of its cuisine.

Climate action
In international negotiations on climate change, the European Union speaks with one voice.
What the European Union does today

Helping poorer regions
Some areas in Europe need money to build new roads and railways; in other places many people are looking for a job. The EU provides funding for specific projects that address these needs.

Helping neighbouring countries
The EU helps other countries improve schools, hospitals and social protection. Lida and Alina from Moldova have benefited from this.

Wastewater treatment plant in Croatia, financed with the help of EU funds.
What the European Union does today

There are many more things the EU is doing today:

- Protecting the environment
- Helping to save energy
- Ensuring the food we eat is safe
- Making phone calls cheaper
- And lots, lots more!
The EU is even working in space with satellites that help cars navigate more intelligently and make air travel safer.
How the EU makes decisions

As you can imagine, it takes a lot of effort by many people to organise the EU and make everything work. So who does what?

The European Commission is made up of 28 Commissioners, one from each member state. Their job is to think about what would be best for the EU as a whole. They propose laws and make sure that the EU treaties are respected.
The European Parliament represents all people in the EU. Its members are chosen in an election every five years. All adult citizens in the EU have the right to vote.
The Council and the European Council

In the **Council**, ministers of EU Member States meet to discuss EU matters, take decisions and pass laws.

In the **European Council** all the leaders of the EU countries (Presidents, Prime Ministers or Chancellors) get together to set Europe’s general strategy.
The Court of Justice makes sure that all EU countries stick to the laws that they have agreed upon. The Court also checks that these laws respect 'fundamental rights', such as freedom of speech and the freedom of the press.
Taking care of our money

The European Central Bank is responsible for maintaining price stability in the euro area.

The European Court of Auditors checks if the budget of the European Union has been spent correctly.
Member States of the European Union

These are the 28 Member States of the European Union. Can you remember the names of the six founding countries?
Enlargement: from six to 28 countries

- **1952** Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands
- **1973** Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom
- **1981** Greece
- **1986** Portugal, Spain
- **1995** Austria, Finland, Sweden
- **2004** Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia
- **2007** Bulgaria, Romania
- **2013** Croatia
What does Europe mean to you?

Do you like travelling?

Were you born in another EU country?

What do you like best about Europe?

Would you like to study abroad one day?

What about you?
Ready for more?

This presentation was originally designed by the European Commission. The current version can be downloaded here.

Many more teaching materials about the European Union and its policies are available on our Teachers' Corner.

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