

20 YEARS

together

20 years of EU membership for Cyprus, Czechia,  
Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland,  
Slovakia and Slovenia



**20 years together - 20 years of EU membership for Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia**

European Commission  
Directorate-General for Communication  
1049 Brussels  
BELGIUM

PDF ISBN 978-92-68-14737-5 doi: 10.2775/605059 NA--09-24-244-EN-N

The Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication.

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024



© European Union, 2024

The Commission's reuse policy is implemented by Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2011/833/oj>). Unless otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the European Union, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders.

CREDITS

All photos © European Union unless otherwise stated.



## Contents

More opportunities for people and improved quality of life	4
Creating growth, jobs and prosperity	6
Boosting the competitiveness of European industries and important sectors	8
Investing in our Union	10
Advancing innovation and research	12
Standing in solidarity	13
Strengthening Europe's role in the world	15

*Twenty years ago, our European family grew bigger. On 1 May 2004, the citizens of Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia became citizens of the EU. Overnight, our Union became a greater political, economic and cultural entity, stretching from Tallinn to Lisbon, from Valletta to Stockholm, from Dublin to Nicosia. Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia's accession a few years later has made our Union even stronger.*

*The pace of change across the European Union over the past two decades has been remarkable. 450 million Europeans have enjoyed freedom of movement across a larger Union. Citizens have stronger rights and freedoms. Democracy and the rule of law have been reinforced, despite being tested at times. Opportunities for both people and business have grown.*

*With the great enlargement of 2004, the EU has become one of the world's largest single markets. We have witnessed growth and prosperity. Over the past 20 years, continental-scale modern infrastructure and connections have been built across the 27 Member States, thanks to EU investments and funds. European society has benefitted from more innovations, public and private investments, the free movement of goods, services, capital and people, higher standards and greater opportunities.*

*It was not always easy. The new Member States had to adjust to new rules across all sectors. While benefitting from opportunities and gaining access to a larger market, they nevertheless had to cope with increased competition. Certain sectors in the pre-existing Member States also had to adjust. In that respect, the European Union is well equipped to ensure fairness and cushion these changes. Various funds and support instruments - including the cohesion funds - have helped ensure that no one is left behind.*

*Enlargement has been a success story. It has helped Member States to better weather European and global challenges. While the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and most recently the war in the Middle East have at times tested the EU's unity, our enlarged Union has always managed to work out a response - and to deliver.*

*Today, the EU is stronger with the 10 Member States that joined two decades ago. And each country is better off thanks to EU membership.*



On average, **79% of citizens living in the Member States that joined the Union 20 years ago believe that their country has benefitted from EU membership**, according to the Eurobarometer survey.



Equally, **70% of citizens of the 15 countries that were already members at the time believe EU membership has been beneficial** (compared with 53% in 2004).



## More opportunities for people and improved quality of life

Enlargement has created more opportunities for citizens from all Member States to study and work across the European Union. Since 2004, more than 2.7 million people from the 10 countries have embraced the opportunity to learn and teach abroad. At the same time, thanks to the Erasmus+ programme, over 600 000 young people from other EU countries have studied in their universities.

Out of the 10 Member States that joined in 2004, nine are fully part of the Schengen area, the world's largest free travel area, guaranteeing smooth and secure travel. Work continues to further integrate Cyprus in the Schengen area while taking into consideration its special circumstances.

At the same time, Member States have cooperated more effectively to clamp down on cross-border crime, helped by common rules, operational cooperation and EU support. This has helped combat drug trafficking, money laundering and online criminality, for instance.

**Over the past 20 years, the European Union has also made significant strides on social rights, health and environmental protection, waste management,**

**consumer rights and product safety, among others, helping to improve the overall quality of people's lives.** The 10 countries that joined in 2004 have not only benefitted from these higher standards but have also helped to shape them. Today, nature is better preserved, cities have cleaner air and privacy is protected across the Union.





Since 2004, **over 2.7 million young people from the 10 Member States have participated in the Erasmus+ programme.**



**Since joining the EU, the 10 Member States have increased their recycling of municipal waste. From 2004 until 2022, Slovakia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Latvia, among others, reported increases of more than 40 percentage points in their recycling rates.**



Over 20 years, average **life expectancy** in the 2004 enlargement states has climbed **from 75 years to 79 years**, nearly closing the gap with the **EU-27 average of 81 years.**



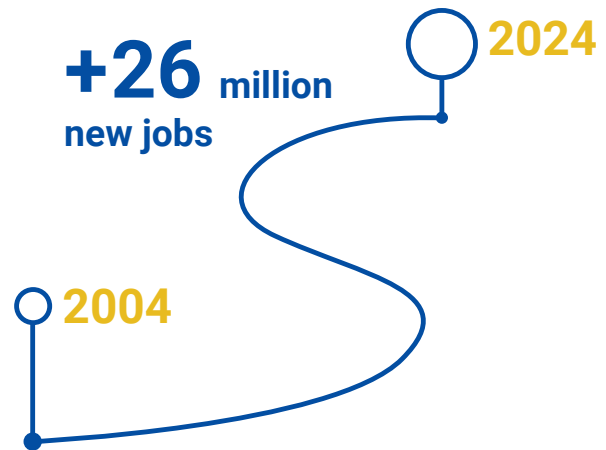
For those who joined the European Union 20 years ago, **life satisfaction has increased from 68% in 2004 to 89% in 2024**, according to the latest Standard Eurobarometer.

## Creating growth, jobs and prosperity

Over the past 20 years, despite the global economic downturn, the EU's economy has grown by 27%. The countries that became part of our Union in 2004 have witnessed substantial economic growth. The Polish and Maltese economies have more than doubled in size, for instance. Slovakia has grown by 80%. **The economies of all newer Member States are steadily converging with the EU-27 average.**

The countries that were already members at the time of the 2004 enlargement have also experienced growth and prosperity. Spanish exports to the 10 countries have doubled over the last 20 years. Italian trade in goods with these countries has increased by 77% since then. The trade links between Lithuania and Sweden have also grown significantly. In less than two decades, the internal flow of goods within the EU has increased by more than 40%.

And people have seen this growth in their lives. Real wages have doubled from 2004 to 2023 in the 10 states. And poverty levels have halved. **Out of the 26 million new jobs, which have emerged across the EU in the last 20 years, 6 million have been created in the 10 new EU Member States.**







**The economies of the 10 Member States that joined the EU in 2004 have enjoyed sustained economic growth:** Estonia has witnessed an average yearly Gross National Income (GNI) growth rate of more than 8%, while Poland, Slovakia, Malta and Latvia grew on average by more than 7%.



**The average GDP per capita of the 10 Member States grew from 59% of the EU-27 average in 2004 to 81% in 2022.**



**Poverty and social exclusion levels have declined significantly** in these Member States, **from 37% in 2005 to 17% in 2020**. The number of children at risk of poverty shrank from 41% to 17% in the same period.



**The share of people aged 25-34 with tertiary education has increased by almost 20 percentage points** in the 10 Member States since accession



**Seven of these 10 Member States have adopted the euro.** Slovenia adopted it first in 2007, while Lithuania adopted it in 2015. This has allowed more businesses and citizens to enjoy the full benefits of the single market without exchange rate risks.

## Boosting the competitiveness of European industries and important sectors

From the Polish electronics business to the German car manufacturing sector, industry has grown due to the economies of scale offered by an enlarged single market. European industry has gained greater access to key inputs like critical raw materials. Companies can now easily source copper in Cyprus, cobalt in Czechia, rare earths in Lithuania and nickel in Slovakia.

Wider EU membership has also created opportunities to sell into a larger market for agri-food produce, offering citizens a greater choice of quality products. The 10 new Member States have enriched the EU's agricultural diversity, with different farming traditions, crops, livestock and high-quality produce. **The value of agricultural production in these countries has tripled over the last two decades, exceeding €68 billion.**

*“The value of agricultural production in the 10 Member States has tripled over the last two decades, exceeding €68 billion.”*



© NurPhoto via Getty Images

*“From the Polish electronics business to the German car manufacturing sector, industry has grown due to the economies of scale offered by an enlarged single market.”*



**Access to a larger single market has been beneficial for European industries.** Between 2004 and 2022, Slovakia doubled its production of basic metals, while Czechia more than doubled its production of paper products.



**Through the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU has helped modernise agricultural and food industries in the 10 Member States.**



**Europeans can enjoy more high-quality foods and produce from across the Union.** From Gozitan wine to Slovak fermented cabbage, over 280 products from the 10 countries have been added to the EU's list of products with protected designations of origin.

## Investing in our Union

**Over the past 20 years, the EU has invested substantially in infrastructure to make Europe a better place to live and work** - from highways to pipelines, public transport, connectivity, data centres and cross-border infrastructure.

Europe's transport connections have extended and improved, linking all parts of the continent. For instance, Slovenia now has an expanded electrified train network, while EU investments have also contributed to the development of metro lines in Hungary. Many more projects are in the pipeline - Rail Baltica, for example, will connect the Baltic states to the rest of Europe, and it will enhance links between Finland and other countries in the EU.

Our integrated energy market – with interconnected electricity grids between Malta and Italy, and gas connections linking Denmark and Poland, among others - has helped us to weather crises, for instance when Russia cut gas deliveries. EU countries have worked together to source more secure and sustainable energy supplies, driving the clean energy transition and reducing our dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

*“Rail Baltica will connect the Baltic states to the rest of Europe.”*



**With substantial EU investments, coverage of high-speed broadband networks and internet access have surged across the EU.** Digital leaders such as Estonia, are helping to pioneer e-government services. In all parts of Europe, millions of people have gained access to the 5G network. Moreover, all EU citizens have benefitted from the removal of mobile roaming charges, avoiding extra costs for calls or texts made while travelling across 27 Member States. And EU investment is helping to further improve connectivity and network resilience – for instance, through the new fibre-optic route linking Sweden and Finland to the Baltic countries.

Today, we are taking things further with NextGenerationEU. **Worth over €800 billion, it is funding hundreds of projects, from offshore wind farms to electric trains, from top-notch digital services to world-class medical centres, creating quality jobs – in all 27 Member States.**

And as the strategic environment around us continues to change and Europe needs to step up on defence, all Member States are taking part in the effort - from Estonian defence research to Swedish aircraft development and Polish ammunition production.



With the support of EU cohesion policy funding and the Connecting Europe Facility, **Europe's transport network has transformed and expanded.** Motorway lengths have tripled in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia in the last two decades. Since 2004, Lithuania's rail network has expanded by 200 kilometres.



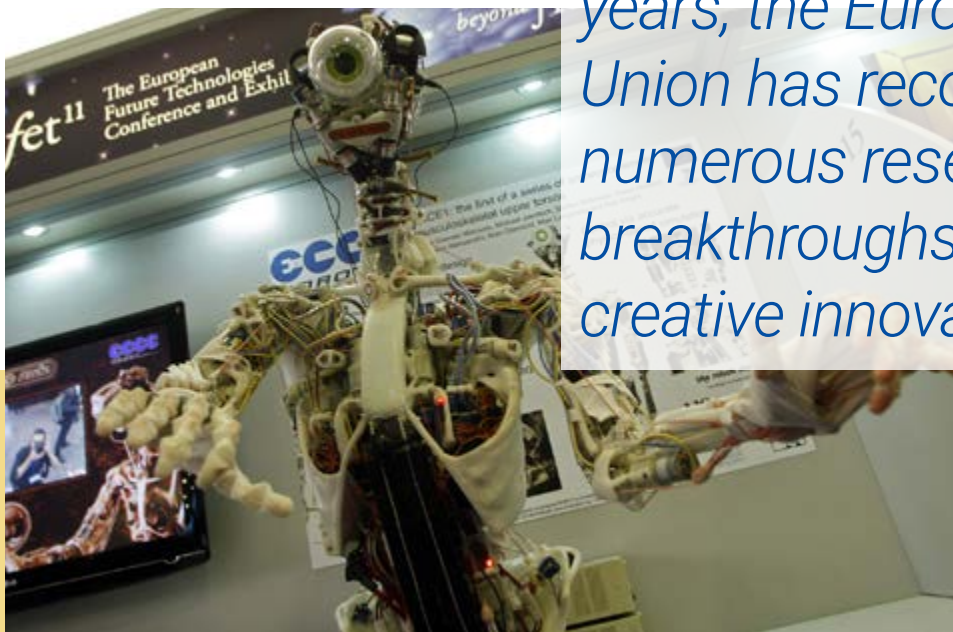
**In the last 20 years, the EU has succeeded in improving the energy efficiency of its economy.** As a whole, the EU has reduced the energy intensity of its economy by almost 33%. The 10 Member States have done even better, reducing the energy intensity of their economies by over 40%.

## Advancing innovation and research

**In the past 20 years, the European Union has recorded numerous research breakthroughs and creative innovations – in disease prevention and cancer treatment**, for instance. Many of these have taken place in the 10 new EU countries or have been the result of cooperation between researchers from long-standing and newer Member States, with EU financial support.

Hungarian and French scientists have advanced research on matter, receiving a Nobel Prize in Physics for their work. From Latvia to Spain, academics have worked closer together to boost our knowledge of genomes, for instance.

*“In the past 20 years, the European Union has recorded numerous research breakthroughs and creative innovations.”*



Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Germany and others are cooperating to build the **world's largest and most advanced high-power laser infrastructure**.

## Standing in solidarity

**From floods to forest fires, from earthquakes to medical emergencies, the 27 Member States have given vital assistance to each other when disasters hit.**

All EU countries have channelled support across the continent and beyond through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, throughout the past 20 years. Examples abound. Five Member States rushed to provide assistance to Hungary in the wake of flash floods in 2010. During the summer of 2022, Austrian firefighters came to the aid of Slovenia when it faced devastating wildfires. Last year, emergency specialists from Slovakia came to the aid of Greece as it battled historic wildfires.



Since the first day of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, EU Member States have worked together to deliver support to the Ukrainian people. Logistics hubs in Poland and Slovakia, as well as Romania, have helped channel aid from across the Union. The EU has granted temporary protection to more than 4.1 million of Ukrainian refugees, with almost 1.7 million of them being hosted by the Member States that joined in 2004.



**EU Member States have worked together to mobilise emergency relief for other countries and each other, responding to more than 700 requests for assistance** made through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism since 2004.



**Stockpiles of rescEU** medical items located in Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia, as well as pre-positioned firefighting planes in Cyprus and helicopters in Czechia, **have enabled the EU to channel support rapidly to all 27 Member States.**



Poland is hosting the EU's medical evacuation hub for Ukrainian patients in need of urgent treatment. To date, **over 3 200 people have been transferred to receive specialised healthcare in hospitals across Europe.**



**Cyprus** is at the forefront of the **maritime corridor channelling humanitarian aid to Palestinian people.**





## Strengthening Europe's role in the world

Over the past 20 years, Europe's voice on the world stage has grown stronger – whether to rally the world to take action on climate change, to fight the pandemic, or to promote democracy.

**The addition of 10 new Member States has boosted our economic power globally.** A larger single market has made the EU an even more attractive trading partner, enabling us to create new opportunities abroad. Since 2004, our global international trade has expanded by €3 trillion – reaching €5 trillion in 2023.

**A larger Union has also enhanced Europe's role as a leading humanitarian donor.**

**European humanitarian support**, whether in Ukraine, Gaza or Sudan is carried out by aid workers from around the EU, including Polish non-governmental organisations, Czech humanitarian partners and Cypriot aid workers, among others.

*“With 27 Member States, the EU has become a stronger geopolitical player.”*

Enlargement has promoted prosperity, strengthened democracy and ensured stability across the Union. **And with 27 Member States, the EU has become a stronger geopolitical player.**





Publications Office  
of the European Union