

1998–2009 The unification of Europe

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The end of the 1990s saw the launch of the historic process of enlargement of the European Union (EU) to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs). This was the result of crucial reforms in the economic, political and social systems of the ‘Eastern’ countries following their liberation from the communist yoke. It also marked the end of the division between the two Europes, which had been separated since the end of the Second World War by the Cold War and the Berlin Wall. Thus, on 1 May 2004, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, together with Malta and Cyprus, became EU Member States. However, the borders of the enlarged Europe posed the question of its relationship with its new neighbours and its place in the world.

The renewal of ties within the continent of Europe also raised economic problems and questions about the future of the Union and its operational methods. In 1997 the European Commission therefore adopted *Agenda 2000*, an ambitious action programme covering enlargement as a whole, the reform of Community policies and the Union’s future financial framework. At the same time, weakened by the resignation of its President, Jacques Santer, and his team in March 1999, the Commission was forced to address the issue of its own operational methods with a view to improving its transparency and efficiency in its new spheres of activity.

The Treaty of Nice, finalised in February 2001, endeavoured to bring about the institutional reforms necessitated by the accession of candidate countries already hotly pursued by others which, like Turkey, also wished to join the Union. But the EU Member States were concerned at the weakness and slow pace of this institutional restructuring, and at the end of the Laeken European Council (14–15 December 2001) they called for a Convention on the future of Europe to be convened, tasked with considering the key issues arising for the Union’s future development and with trying to identify the various possible solutions. The Convention, which met twice a month, conducted its work between February 2002 and July 2003. On 18 July 2003, its Chairman, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, submitted to the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union a draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was amended by the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) and signed in Rome on 29 October 2004 by the 25 Member States, who thus committed themselves to taking steps to ensure its ratification.

The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe would never enter into force. In spring 2005, although it had already been ratified by eleven Member States, the failure of the referendums in France and the Netherlands led to the suspension of the ratification process. While seven Member States subsequently continued with their ratification procedure, seven others postponed it indefinitely. The European Union (EU) was plunged into an unprecedented crisis that would last for two years.

In 2007, the German Presidency stepped up consultations and managed to break the deadlock. On 23 June 2007, the Heads of State or Government meeting within the European Council agreed to convene a new Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) as soon as possible. In its mandate, the IGC was asked to draw up a ‘Reform Treaty’ amending the Treaties in force. The constitutional concept, which consisted in repealing all the existing Treaties and replacing them by a single constitutional text, was abandoned.

The IGC began its work on 23 July 2007 and was concluded on 18 October 2007 with an informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government in Lisbon. During this meeting, a political agreement on the text of the new Treaty was finally secured. On 13 December 2007, the Heads of State or Government signed the *Treaty of Lisbon* and called for a swift completion of national ratification processes in the 27 Member States with a view to enabling the Treaty to enter into force on 1 January 2009.

On 12 June 2008, Ireland, the only country requiring ratification by referendum, rejected the Treaty. The solution recommended by the June 2008 European Council was to continue the ratification process that had been started. By this stage, the parliaments of 19 Member States had already approved the Treaty and a renegotiation of the text was inconceivable. After obtaining further guarantees from the European Council, Ireland held a second referendum on 2 October 2009. This time, the 'yes' vote won. On 3 November 2009, ratification of the Treaty by the Czech Republic brought the EU-wide ratification process to a close. The Treaty of Lisbon finally entered into force on 1 December 2009.