

● What is the European Union?

The European Union is a group of 27 member states from all over Europe. The aim of the EU is to create a political and economic community across Europe, so that there are trade and government agreements between the countries and the majority use a single currency; the euro. Another important principle is the open border policy. This means people from the EU are free to travel, work or live in other member states without needing a visa.

● What is the Schengen Agreement?

The Schengen Agreement was adopted in 1985 between five nations and later expanded to include most continental European nations. There are no border controls within the Schengen Agreement area, so EU citizens can travel from one country to another without a passport. Not all EU members are part of the Schengen Agreement (e.g. the UK and Ireland did not sign it) and not all Schengen States are in the EU (e.g. Switzerland and Norway).

● Who are/aren't members of the EU?

The EU consists of nearly / almost half a billion people and covers over 4 million square kilometres. Countries must fulfil the Copenhagen criteria (established in 1993) to be considered for membership in the EU. The criteria states that members must have a stable democratic government, respect for minorities and human rights, and a competitive and functional market economy. Norway, Switzerland and Lichtenstein are not full EU members by choice, but they cooperate economically and politically. Croatia is set to become the 28th member of the EU on July 1, 2013. The Czech Republic joined the EU in 2004.

● Who is the 'leader' of the European Union?

Since its beginning, the EU has had a rotating presidency in which member countries take turns being in charge for six months at a time. However, this position / role / function is mostly symbolic. The European Council consists of heads of state from all member countries, and they propose / suggest issues to be addressed / talked about at future meetings. The European Commission acts as the "executive branch" of the government and works directly with the two legislative houses: The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. These two houses actually make and vote on laws, similar to Parliaments in other countries. José Manuel Durão Barroso from Portugal is the current President of the European Commission.

● How does the EU assist member countries?

While some people think that the EU is a bureaucratic nightmare, it works with and assists member countries in many ways. A significant portion of their budget is dedicated to promoting / supporting agriculture in member countries and protecting the environment. The EU also promotes growth and development in less wealthy member states, as well as providing funds for transportation and infrastructure, energy development and scientific research.

● Is there a centre or a capital of the EU?

Brussels, located / found in Belgium, is the unofficial / de facto capital of the European Union. It is considered to be the administrative / executive capital. It is where the European Commission, Council of the European Union and the European Council sit. Strasbourg, located in France, is the official seat of the European Parliament / is seen as the legislative capital of Europe. Luxembourg is the seat / location of the European Court of Justice, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank as well as other European institutions. It is viewed / seen as the judicial and financial capital of the EU. The European Central Bank is located / found / based in Frankfurt in Germany.

● What are some other important cities in the European Union?

London in the UK is the largest city by population in the European Union. Over 12 million people live in the UK's capital and it is well-known for being a very cosmopolitan city with over 300 different languages being spoken there. It is also a major centre for finance.

Paris is the capital of France and is the most popular city for tourists. It is famous for its culture and fashion and is home to such well known landmarks / sites as the Eiffel Tower, and the Louvre art gallery.

Berlin is the capital of Germany and is known for its culture / arts / film festival and nightlife. You can visit the famous Brandenburg Gate and Berlin Wall, which was once a symbol of the Cold War.

● What is the European Capital of Culture? What role does it play?

The European Capital of Culture is a title given to a city for a year. It is a chance for the chosen city to get some money from the EU to promote cultural events. The city uses this money for regeneration / to promote arts events / to attract tourists / to create awareness of the city throughout the EU. In 2013 two cities are holding the title: Marseille in France and Košice in Slovakia.

