The history of the european union politics essay

The European Community was an institutional framework for the construction of a united Europe. The European Community is commonly called the (EU) and later officially became known as the European Union (EU). It was created after World War II to unite the nations of Europe economically and politically by uniting their resources into a single economy. By doing so, another war would be less likely among neighboring countries. A number of European leaders became convinced that the only way to secure a lasting peace between their countries was to unite them economically and politically. This was the framework for the building of the early European Community which expanded into the European Union.

The EU was set up with the aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between its neighbors, which culminated in the World War II. In 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) began to unite European countries economically and politically in order to secure lasting peace " The organization oversees cooperation among its members in diverse areas, including trade, the environment, transport and employment." (BBC) The six founding countries were Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Based on the Schuman plan, these six countries signed a treaty to run their heavy industries of coal and steel. Thus under a common management no country could, on its own, make weapons of war to turn against the other as in the past. The founding fathers of the European Union, and regarded by many as the principal architects of European integration following the end of the World War II were:

Konrad Adenauer

Sir Winston Churchill

Alcide de Gasperi

Walter Hallstein

Jean Monnet

Robert Schuman

Paul Henri Spaak

Altiero Spinelli

In 1957, the Treaty of Rome created the European Economic Community (EEC), or ‘ Common Market’. Building on the success of the Coal and Steel Treaty, those six countries expanded cooperation to other economic sectors. They signed the Treaty of Rome, creating the EEC “ determined to lay the foundations of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe.” (Goldberg, 2003) The idea was for people, goods and services to move freely across borders.

In the 1960s, the early European Community continued to progress. The EU started its ‘ common agricultural policy’ in 1962, giving their countries joint control over food production. All farmers were paid the same price for their produce. The EU grew enough food for its needs and farmers earned well. There were unwanted side-effects, such as overproduction with mountains of surplus produce. Later in 1963, the EU signed its first big international agreement, a deal to help 18 former colonies in Africa. To date, this has expanded to 78 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) regions.

In 1968, the original six countries removed customs duties on goods imported from each other, allowing free cross-border trade for the first time. They also applied the same duties on their imports from outside countries. The world's biggest trading group was born. Trade among these six countries and of the EU and the rest of the world grew rapidly.

In the beginning of the 1970s pollution was starting to become a problem especially in Scandinavia and Germany because of acid rain which was destroying forests. The EU eventually adopted laws to protect the environment, introducing the notion of ' the polluter pays' for the first time, and since then " Institutions such as the EU with its countries like the Netherlands and Germany have made it a cornerstone of their environment." (Bruyninckx, 2009) This led to the founding of pressure groups such as Greenpeace. In 1973, the original six countries expanded to nine when Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom formally enter the EU. As a result, in 1974 to show their solidarity the EU leaders set up the European Regional Development Fund. Its purpose was to transfer money from rich to poor regions to improve roads, communications, attract investments, and create jobs. This came to account for one third of all EU spending. In 1979, EU citizens directly elected the members of the European Parliament for the first time. Previously they were delegated by national parliaments. Members sat in pan-European political groups (Socialist, Conservative, Liberal, Greens, etc.) and not in national delegations. The influence of the Parliament was constantly increasing.

Figure . European Summit at work. The EU continued its economic growth, political expansion, and industrial modernization. Membership of the EU reached double figures when Greece joined. They had been eligible to join since its military regime was overthrown and democracy restored in 1974. In the industrial sector, computers and automation were changing the way people lived and worked. To stay in the forefront of innovation " The EU organized ESPRIT, the European Strategic Program for Information Technology in 1984." (Grande, Hanson, & Lackman, 1994) That was the first of many research and development programs. Automated robots soon joined car factory production lines in the 1980s as well. In 1986, Spain and Portugal entered the EU, bringing total membership to 12. However, trade was not flowing freely across EU borders because of certain obstacles and differences in national regulations. european summit. jpg

The Single European Act of 1986 launched a vast six year program to sort out those trade problems. The Act also gave the European Parliament more input and strengthened EU powers on environmental protection. Next in 1987, The EU launched the ' Erasmus' program to fund university students that wanted to study in another European country for up to one year. Since then, more than 2 million students have benefited from this and similar EU plans.

The collapse of communism across Central and Eastern Europe which began in Poland and Hungary, symbolized the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Faced by a mass exodus of its citizens to West, the East German government opened the gates. Germany was united after more than 40 years, and its Eastern part joined the EU in1990. The fall of the Berlin Wall led to some economic issues " At the same time, consumers suddenly had access to goods and services that hadn't been available behind the Iron Curtain, and, for the first time in decades, entrepreneurs were able to start their own companies.” (Tucker, 2009)

More major expansions took place in the 1990s for the EU, and later the European Community was officially recognized as the European Union. In 1992, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) was signed in Maastricht. The Treaty established “ Community policies in six new areas: trans-European networks, industrial policy, consumer protection, education and vocational training, youth, and culture.” (EU Legislation, 2007) It was a major EU milestone setting clear rules for the future single currency, foreign policy, security policy, and closer cooperation in justice and homeland affairs. Under the treaty, the name ‘ European Union’ officially replaced ‘ European Community’. With old barriers gone, people, goods, services, and money moved around Europe as freely as within one country. In 1993, the single market and its four freedoms were established: the free movement of goods, services, people, and money had become reality.

As the EU has expanded, more than 200 laws have been agreed on since 1986 covering tax policy, business regulations, professional qualifications and other barriers to try and open more frontiers. Unfortunately, free movements of some services were still delayed. In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the EU which increased membership to 15 countries which covered almost all of Western Europe.

In the late 1990s, the Schengen Agreement took effect in seven countries: Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Travelers of any nationality could travel between all of those countries without any passport control at the borders. Other countries have since joined the passport-free Schengen area. In 1997, there was the signature of the Treaty of Amsterdam. It built on the achievements of the treaty from Maastricht by laying down plans to reform EU institutions, to give Europe a stronger voice in the world, and to concentrate more resources on employment and the rights of its citizens. Later that year, EU leaders agreed to start the process of membership negotiations with 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The Mediterranean islands of Cyprus and Malta were also included in negotiations.

In 1999, the Euro (European Currency) was introduced in 11 countries for commercial and financial transactions only, notes and coins would come later. The Euro countries were Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland (Greece later incorporated the Euro in 2001). However, a country's old currency must have had a stable exchange rate for two years and because of that Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom decided to stay out of the Euro area for the time being. There were other conditions as well, such as interest rates, budget deficits, inflation rates, and the level of government debt.

Moving into 2000, changes to the Treaty of Nice agreed to open the way for enlargement by reforming EU voting rules. In 2001, the EU stood firmly alongside the United States in the fight against international terrorism after the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center killing over three thousand people. Moving into 2002, Euro notes and coins were introduced. Printing, minting, and distributing them in 12 countries was a major logistical operation. More than 80 billion coins were involved, and notes were the same for all countries. Coins had one common face, giving the value, while the other carried a national emblem…all currency circulated freely.

Figure . EU PeacekeepersIn 2003, as part of its foreign and security policy, the EU took on peace-keeping operations in the Balkans. Their main concern was in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and then in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In both cases, EU-led forces replaced the NATO units. Internally, the EU agreed to create an area of freedom, security, and justice for all citizens by 2010. EU Peacekeepers. jpg

In 2004, the EU finally finished the process of membership with eight countries (Bulgaria and Romania still remained candidate countries) of Central and Eastern Europe: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia joined the EU. This finally ended the division of Europe which had been decided by the Great Powers 60 years earlier at Yalta. Next, twenty-five EU countries signed a Treaty to establish a European Constitution in 2004. It was designed to streamline democratic decision-making and management in an EU of twenty five or more countries. It also created the post of a European Foreign Minister. The Constitution had to be ratified by all 25 countries before it could go into force. When citizens in both France and the Netherlands voted ‘ No’ to the Constitution in referendums in 2005, EU leaders declared a “ period of reflection.” (EurActiv, 2007) The constitutional treaty signed in 2004 was meant to make the EU more efficient.

In 2007, two more countries from Eastern Europe, Bulgaria and Romania, joined the EU. This brought the total number of member states to twenty-seven. Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey were candidates for future membership, but have not yet been accepted. Later that year, the twenty seven EU countries signed the Treaty of Lisbon, which amended the previous Treaties. It was designed to make the EU more democratic, efficient and transparent, and thereby able to tackle global challenges such as climate change, security, and sustainable development. The Treaty of Lisbon aimed to make the EU primarily act more efficiently in security matters.

Also in 2007, a Council decision was made determining the order in which the office of President of the Council should be held. The position is held for six months by each Member State on a rotational basis. The Council is the main decision-making body of the European Union. The ministers of the Member States meet within the Council of the European Union. Depending on the issues on the agenda, each country is represented by the minister responsible for that subject (foreign affairs, finance, social affairs, transport, agriculture, etc.).

Council responsibilities included:

The Council passes laws, usually legislating jointly with the European Parliament.

The Council coordinates the broad economic policies of the Member States.

The Council defines and implements the EU’s common foreign and security policy, based on guide lines set by the European Council.

The Council concludes, on behalf of the Community and the Union, international agreements between the EU and one or more states or international organizations.

The Council coordinates the actions of Member States and adopts measures in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters.

The Council and the European Parliament constitute the budgetary authority that adopts the Community’s budget.

In 2008, Cyprus and Malta incorporated the Euro, increasing the size of the Eurozone to 15 Member States. The value of the Euro reached an all time high on July 18th at 1. 5843 to the U. S. dollar. However, later in the year, the worldwide recession began to take its toll on the currency and European economies. Also in 2008, Sweden ratified the Lisbon Treaty.

Slovakia incorporated the Euro in 2009, and the Eurozone now included 16 Member States. In December, the world’s three main credit ratings agencies downgraded Greece’s debt, sending financial markets tumbling and raising concerns about other weak European economies like Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Italy. Concerns started to show as “ The leaders of the European Union gathered in Brussels in an emergency summit meeting that seemed to highlight the very worries it was designed to calm: that the world economic crisis has unleashed forces threatening to split Europe into rival camps.”

(Castle & Erlange, 2009) Later that year, the previously signed Lisbon Treaty entered into force.

As the EU struggled in 2010 to contain the debt crisis, Standard & Poor's in April downgraded Greece's sovereign debt to junk status, and cut Portugal and Spain's credit ratings. The Eurozone finance ministers met in May to approve a €110 billion ($146 billion) loan package to Greece. That June, the Euro reached a four year low, falling below €0. 862017 ($1. 19). Eventually the Euro began to comeback " the EU recovered from the global financial crisis faster than expected, with business investments growing by an estimated 2% in 2010, but with public investment and housing development lagging. Strong corporate profits should enable this recovery to continue in 2011." (The World Factbook) To date, the EU continues to progress and move forward amid untimely setbacks.

In closing, the European Community formed as a result of WWII with the intent of preventing European countries from another war, devastating destruction, and the loss of lives within its soon to be member States. The European Community gradually evolved into the European Union with the purpose of increasing economic integration, citizen socialization among its member States, modernizing industrialization, and to centralize a monetary currency among its member States. European citizens now have the freedom to live, work, and study in any part of the EU. Since the European Community began over half a century ago, the EU has taken great strides in achieving a greater sense of unity among its members States and throughout Europe. The future of the European Union rests in its ability to balance supranational (social) and intergovernmental (monetary) issues. While the EU decision-making process might become bogged down as the number of member States around the table increases, the EU has a solid foundation to evolve and prosper with the right unified leadership from within its member States.