

## **The Single European Act and the road toward the Treaty of the European Union (1986-1992)**

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### **The Single European Act (1986)**

The [Single European Act](#), signed in Luxembourg and The Hague and came into force on 1 July 1987, was the first modification of the foundational treaties of the European Communities, that is to say, the [Treaty of Paris](#) in 1951 and the Treaties of Rome in 1957.

Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission, summarised the main objectives of the Single European Act in the following way:

*"The Single Act means, in a few words, the commitment of implementing simultaneously the great market without frontiers, more economic and social cohesion, an European research and technology policy, the strengthening of the European Monetary System, the beginning of an European social area and significant actions in environment"*

These are the main changes that the [Single European Act](#) introduced :

- In the institutional field, it ratifies the [European Council](#), that is to say, the periodical meeting of Head of State and Government, as the organism where major political negotiations take place among the member States and great strategic decisions are taken. The competences of the [European Parliament](#) were lightly reinforced.
- The main compromise agreed was to adopt measures guided to the progressive establishment of a common market over a period that would conclude on 31 December 1992. This would mean an area without obstacles to free movement of goods, people, services and capitals. This ambitious goal, summed up in 282 detailed measures, was broadly reached in the foreseen term. The common market became a reality.

- Different procedures were passed to coordinate the monetary policy of the member States, paving the way toward the objective of economic and monetary union.
- The [Single Act](#) included diverse initiatives to promote integration in the spheres of social rights (health and the workers' security), research and technology, and environment.
- To achieve the objective of a greater economic and social cohesion among the diverse countries and regions of the Community, reform and financial support to the denominated [Structural Funds](#), European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) was settled.



### **The road toward the Treaty of the European Union (1986-1992)**

The [Single European Act](#) entailed an important step forward in the integration process. The [president of the Commission, Jacques Delors](#), was the main figure. This French socialist, not only promoted the [economic and monetary union](#) as a key element in the integration process, but tried to balance the advancements on free trade, that benefited managers directly, by proposing the passing of a [Social Charter](#) that would guarantee some social minimum standards to every European worker.

The whole policy of Delors was against the stance of the British Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher](#). The conservative leader had played, alongside US President Ronald Reagan, a leading role in what had been denominated the *neoliberal revolution*: shrinking State intervention in economy and in social welfare, deregulation of whole economic areas, decreasing of worker unions influence, reduction of taxes... From the first half of the eighties, the *Iron Lady* had also claimed an out-and-out policy against any advancement in European integration, striving to reduce the British contribution to the EEC budget.

In a celebrated speech, pronounced at the College of Europe in Bruges (Belgium) on 20 September 1988, [Margaret Thatcher](#) summed up its *eurosceptic* view:

*"To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging (...) We certainly do not need new regulations which raise the cost of employment and make Europe's labour market less flexible and less competitive with overseas suppliers (...) And certainly we in Britain would fight attempts to introduce collectivism and corporatism at the European level - although what people wish to do in their own countries is a matter for them".*

[Jacques Delors](#)'s reply took place one year later in the College of Europe in Brussels. Before the flabbergasting events that were about to occur in Central and Eastern Europe in that unforgettable year of 1989 materialised, the president of the Commission called to speed up the European integration process:

*"History is accelerating and we should make it with her..."*

The French politician had the advantage of being in that moment an observer of one of the most paramount events in the 20th: the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe -the old *people's democracies*- whose symbol was the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. The collapse of communism peaked in 1991 with the Soviet Union break-up. That same year the disintegration of Yugoslavia brought the war again to our continent, after a long peace period from 1945.

The first direct consequence caused by the collapse of communism in the EEC was the reunification of Germany in October 1990. Henceforth, the German Federal Republic, with 80 million inhabitants and 30% of the GNP of the EEC, became a State that incontestably overpowered France and Great Britain in economic might.

The French president, [François Mitterand](#), suspicious of a possible reappearance of hegemonic German foreign policy in Europe, decided to encourage a new boost to the European integration process as a means to anchor Germany in Europe. The German chancellor, [Helmut Kohl](#) did the same to relieve Paris and London's misgivings about a reunified Germany. A decisive impulse toward a greater European integration was the only way that Germany had to start projecting its political weight in Europe and the world without raising fear and hostility.

The power void created in Central and Eastern Europe with the collapse of communism and the break-up of the USSR, brought about a change in the political position of the EEC in our continent. It became an organisation that guaranteed stability amid an unstable Europe. In fact, the new democracies emerged from the communism collapse rushed to apply for beginning [accession negotiations](#) with the Community.

A last feature that we should keep in mind is the financial and monetary uncertainty that characterised that period. The Stock Exchange crash in 1987 and the problems of the European Monetary System that arose violently in 1992 -the Sterling Pound and the Italian Lira had to leave the EMS, and the Spanish Peseta and the Portuguese Escudo were forced to devaluation-, were major factors that impelled the European political leaders to take a decisive step in the march toward the European union.

All these elements underlie the great step ahead that the Treaty of the European Union signifies.

In 1989, at [Delors'](#) request, an [Intergovernmental Conference \(IGC\)](#) was called to agree the definitive establishment of the [monetary and economic union](#) In 1990, another [IGC](#) was called to study the constitution of a political union.

The so-called French-German axis had a key role again. In a common message, [Helmut Kohl](#) and [François Mitterand](#), affirmed in 1990:

*"(...) we consider necessary to accelerate the political construction of the Europe of the Twelve. We think that this is the right moment to transform the whole of the relationships among the member States into an European Union and to endow it of the necessary means of action".*

After almost three years of debate, in many cases confined to the high political spheres and without the transparency that the European public demanded, finally the [European Council](#) held in Maastricht on 9-10 December 1991, approved the Treaty of the European Union, popularly known as *Treaty of Maastricht*. The Treaty was signed and came into force on 7 February 1992.