The 12 gold stars on the EU flag represent the unity of the peoples of Europe. Can this union survive the current strains?

The EU is a union of democratic, capitalist countries which have strong welfare-state systems. As it has grown from 6 to 28 states, the goals of the EU have become entwined with those of other Western organisations (see diagram). These make up a powerful ideological bloc of nation states that share economic, social, cultural and political values.

EU in trouble

EU expansion should have made the bloc stronger, but there are tensions. Some of the newer, ex-communist, eastern European members are more fearful than western European members of Russia’s interventionist foreign policy. Governments in the older EU core countries have tended to be politically ‘centre-left’. This has changed as new political parties of two sorts have challenged the centrist order:

Left-wing anti-austerity parties

- Syriza won the 2015 general election in Greece with 35.5% of the vote.
Podemos won 21% of the vote in the 2015 general election in Spain.

The Five-Star Movement gained 26% of the vote in the 2013 Italian general election.

Right-wing nationalist/eurosceptic parties
- The Front National won 27% of the French vote in regional elections in 2015.
- The Danish People’s Party won 21% of the vote in the 2015 general election.

This political shift was partly caused by the global financial crisis in 2007–08, which led to the worst recession since the 1930s.

**Existential threats?**

Some of the threats to the future of the EU are manageable if difficult political and economic decisions are made. Others, like Europe’s ageing population, are largely beyond the control of politicians (see table).

**Brexit?**

Against this background David Cameron has announced an ‘in–out’ UK referendum on EU membership on 23 June 2016. British exit would be a seismic event. No member state has left the union, and the UK is a sizeable chunk of EU population, GDP, military capacity and global geopolitical influence. The decision that will dominate the UK media until June is whether Britain is better off with or without the EU. In Europe, there are perhaps bigger issues to consider.

### Weblinks to follow up

Explore the opinions of people from all EU member states at Eurobarometer: [www.tinyurl.com/6jzrzr](http://www.tinyurl.com/6jzrzr)

Opinion-poll websites on the EU referendum include [www.tinyurl.com/zp6uvmh](http://www.tinyurl.com/zp6uvmh) which can be used to track public opinion as the vote approaches.


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### Threats to the EU

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<th>Debt</th>
<th>Youth unemployment</th>
<th>Immigration</th>
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<td>The EU’s debt in early 2016 was €12.6 trillion or 87% of EU annual GDP (up from 59% in 2007). Debt is still rising, despite austerity programmes since 2011.</td>
<td>In late 2015, average youth (15–24 years) unemployment was 22%. In France, Portugal, Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Spain and Croatia it was over 25%. There is a risk of a ‘lost generation’ of people unable to find work.</td>
<td>Around 1 million asylum seekers and refugees crossed into the EU via Greece, Italy and other member states in 2015, straining the principle of ‘open borders’ to breaking point.</td>
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<th>Ageing</th>
<th>Secessionism</th>
<th>Russia</th>
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<td>By 2025, over 20% of EU citizens will be over 65, creating a large and growing welfare and healthcare burden. On current trends total population will be declining by 2035.</td>
<td>A number of regions within EU countries have strong secessionist movements e.g. the SNP in Scotland, Catalonia in Spain and the Lega Nord in Italy. Fragmentation of EU member states threatens EU cohesion.</td>
<td>Russia’s increased defence of its perceived ‘sphere of influence’ in the east has challenged EU expansion plans and divided opinion on how to tackle a resurgent Russia.</td>
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### Activities

1. Has expansion to 28 member states made the EU ‘too big to govern’ with too many states and too many contrasting political views?
2. Would the UK’s exit from the EU affect the bloc’s geopolitical influence or could it gain cohesion from the loss of a troublesome member state?