2026 REALTIME COMPETITION EN

The roots of the European Union lie in the ashes of World War Two. In the aftermath of the deadliest conflict in human history, the leaders of Western Europe sought a new path forward, one based on cooperation, economic interdependence, and shared values. The central idea was that countries bound by trade and mutual prosperity would be less likely to wage war against one another. This vision took shape in nineteen fifty one with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community by the six founding countries of Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

By pooling coal and steel production, essential war materials, these nations laid the groundwork for economic integration and peace. The next major step came in nineteen fifty seven with the Treaty of Rome, establishing the European Economic Community, which aimed to create a common market and customs union with deeper economic cooperation at its heart. Over a few decades, it expanded gradually, welcoming Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom in nineteen seventy three, followed by Greece in nineteen eighty one, Spain and Portugal in nineteen eighty six, and then Austria, Finland, and Sweden in nineteen ninety five.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in nineteen eighty nine and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in nineteen ninety one opened a new chapter in European history. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, long separated by the Iron Curtain, expressed a strong desire to return to Europe. They sought not only economic benefits but also the democratic values and institutional stability that membership promised. The Maastricht Treaty of nineteen ninety three officially transformed the European Economic Community into the European Union and introduced new forms of cooperation in foreign policy, security, and justice.
This rebranding was both broader in ambition and deeper in integration. Enlargement was no longer a side project. It became a central objective.

May one, two thousand four marked a defining moment in European history. On that day, ten countries joined the European Union. Those new members included Cyprus, Malta, Baltic and Balkan states, and Central European countries. Known as the big bang enlargement, this was the largest single addition of territory, population, and diversity. The road to this event was long

and complex. In the nineteen nineties, the Copenhagen criteria were established, which candidate countries had to fulfill prior to joining.

These included stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the ability to adopt and implement new laws and regulations. The addition of ten members was deeply symbolic. It signified the formal end of the Cold War division of Europe and the reunification of a continent. For many Central and Eastern European countries, membership was a return to a European family from which they had been forcibly separated for decades. Increasing the number of members also presented practical challenges. Economic disparities between old and new members were significant. Western European governments introduced transitional arrangements to limit labor migration.

Institutions, budgets, and policies had to be adjusted to accommodate the newcomers. Despite these problems, the enlargement is widely regarded as a success, providing stability, growth, and democratization in the region. The next wave of expansion came on January one, two thousand seven, with the admission of Bulgaria and Romania. These two countries, also emerging from communist regimes, faced more daunting challenges than their two thousand four counterparts. Their accessions were marked by intense scrutiny, particularly regarding governance, corruption, and the rule of law. To address these concerns, the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism was implemented, a monitoring tool designed to help the countries meet their reform commitments. While this allowed approval to move forward, it also underscored the growing caution and the increasing complexity of enlargement.

Bulgaria and Romania becoming member states was important for several reasons. It extended the European Union's presence to the Black Sea, increased its geopolitical influence, and demonstrated continued commitment to Eastern Europe. As well, it again reinforced the idea that further growth must be balanced with internal cohesion and credibility. Public opinion in older member states grew mistrustful. Worries about migration, organized crime, and misuse of funds were amplified in political discourse. Nonetheless, both countries made substantial progress in their democratic and economic development, and the transformative power of membership was reaffirmed. On July one, two thousand thirteen, Croatia joined the European Union, becoming the twenty eighth member state. Its approval was the culmination of over a decade of reform and negotiation, marked by

post-conflict reconstruction and a strong desire to break with the legacy of the Yugoslav Wars.

The path to membership for Croatia was more complex and demanding than for earlier admissions. It had to address war crimes, cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and overhaul its legal and administrative systems. This rigorous process was a testament to the evolving standards and commitment to justice and accountability of the European Union. Croatia's admission was noteworthy for the Western Balkans. It demonstrated that, despite regional instability and uncertainty, membership was achievable through sustained reform. Though the country's experience became a reference point for others in the region, it also coincided with increasing enlargement fatigue. Economic crises, rising populism, and internal divisions among the member states reduced enthusiasm for further expansion.

Croatia's entry reasserted the strategic interest in completing the integration of Southeast Europe. As the number of member states increased, additional growth began to encounter growing resistance and doubt. This phenomenon reflected both internal and external challenges. Internally, there was the strain of absorbing new members. Economic disparities, migration flows, and institutional gridlock led to debates about the capacity to integrate new states effectively. The financial crisis of two thousand eight and the subsequent turmoil diverted attention and resources from continued accession. At the same time, concerns emerged about democratic backsliding in various member states, most notably Hungary and Poland. These countries were accused of undermining judicial independence, restricting media freedom, and challenging norms. The European Union's paradox was promoting democracy in candidate countries while struggling to uphold it within its own ranks.

Externally, the appeal of becoming a member of the European Union began to wane for some countries, while others felt somewhat disillusioned with the slow path. The once powerful life-changing effect of membership appeared to be diminishing. Populist movements across the continent focused on fears of immigration, cultural dilution, and the loss of sovereignty, further complicating the debate. The United Kingdom's departure, officially completed in two thousand twenty, marked the first time a member state had exited the European Union. Brexit was a significant event with far-reaching implications, both symbolic and practical. The predominant causes of Brexit

included concerns regarding immigration, sovereignty, and economic regulation. Brexit posed enormous challenges. It disrupted internal balances, especially budget contributions and legislative alignment. The European Union's united negotiating stance during the withdrawal process strengthened its cohesion and resolve.

END OF DICTATION.