

Borders : "It is important to distinguish geographical Europe from the European Union"

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Misnaming things adds to the world's misfortunes. European issues are complex. Therefore, it is important to bring clarity to the use of words. Referring to the EU as 'Europe' is a misuse of language that can be confusing, especially when it comes to defining European borders. In an article commissioned by the daily newspaper La Croix (June 13, 2024), the author explains as clearly as possible the differences between geographical Europe and European institutions, and the processes that could lead to changes in the borders of the EU. Or not.

IS THERE a clear definition in European treaties of the countries eligible for membership in the [European Union \(EU\)](#) ? Yes and no. The Lisbon Treaty specifies : "*Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union*" (Art. 49). However, there is no official map or list of "European states." In other words, the maximum borders of the EU are not clearly defined. This seems both clever and worrying. On one hand, it is clever because it leaves the door open for future opportunities ; on the other hand, it is worrying for segments of public opinion that feel the EU could expand indefinitely.

Is the European space limited to the European Union ? No. No one denies that Switzerland or Norway are European countries. Yet these countries do not belong to the EU and have not applied for membership. Thus, Europe is not limited to the EU, and the EU has no legitimacy to speak on behalf of "Europe"—in other words, it cannot speak for a subcontinent that includes many countries not in the EU and that do not wish to join it.



Map. Geopolitics of the European Union (2024)

Click on the thumbnail to enlarge the map : Geopolitics of the European Union (2024). Production : M. Lefebvre, P. Verluise. Design made by AB Pictoris in January 2024 for [Diploweb.com](#)
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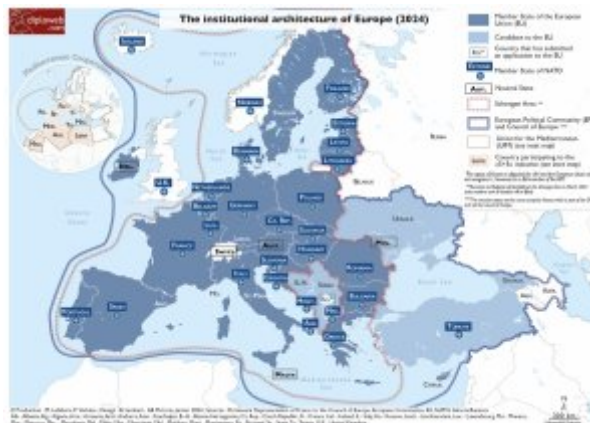
Having expanded from 6 to 28 and then 27 members, the EU is attractive but can also be repulsive, as evidenced by the UK's exit in 2020. The EU can also leave some indifferent, and why not ? The EU can even provoke hostility and contempt from a partially European country : Putin's Russia. That's how it is. The EU therefore cannot claim to embody European identity... and that's okay.

Geographical Europe

To define European borders, it is essential to clarify the meaning of the words Europe and Europeans. What do they refer to ? It is important to distinguish geographical Europe from the European Union. Geographical Europe is a convention, debatable like all conventions.

In western Eurasia, the boundaries of geographical Europe conventionally extend from the Svalbard islands (North), to the Azores (West), to the Strait of Gibraltar (South), the Bosphorus Strait (Southeast), then to the Caucasus dominated by Mount Elbrus (5,642 m), and then up to the Ural Mountains (East) dominated by Mount Narodnaya (1,895 m). It is understood that three centuries ago, Tsar Peter the Great placed the conventional boundary of geographical Europe at the Urals to prove that Russia is partly a European country, hence modern.

Given the lack of a definition in treaties of "European states" eligible for membership in the European Union, not only is Ukraine evidently within its right to apply for EU membership due to its geographical location, but Belarus and European Russia could also apply. Who can deny Belarusians and Russians living west of the Urals their European status ? To some extent, they are as legitimate to speak "on behalf of Europe" as the Swiss (non-EU) or the French (EU).



Map. The Institutional Architecture of Europe (January 2024)

Click on the thumbnail to enlarge the map : The institutional architecture of Europe (2024). Production : M. Lefebvre, P. Verluise. Design made by AB Pictoris in January 2024 for Diploweb.com
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Institutions

It is therefore understood that the concept of "European borders" does not only refer to a geographical space but also to institutions. [An institution, or several institutions ?](#) The Council of Europe, founded in 1949, the European Economic Community (EEC), created in 1957 and later becoming the European Union in 1993, and the [European Political Community \(EPC\)](#), established in 2022, are all institutions that define European borders. Their members are often the same but sometimes different.

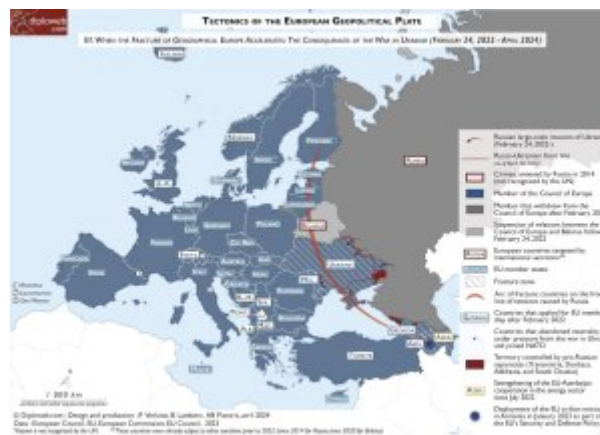
It would be easy to add complexity to this concept of "European borders" by mentioning the European Economic Area, the [Schengen Agreement](#), the eurozone, or [even NATO](#), whose members are mostly from geographical Europe... but whose most decisive member is in North America. These institutions are as entitled to speak on behalf of "Europe" as the EU. In other words, using Europe to refer to the EU is a misuse of language that adds to the confusion. Who benefits from this little game ?

What are European borders ?

So, how can we define "European borders" ? If we consider that they are exclusively the borders of the European Union, then the answer is "simple." At any given moment, the borders of the EU can include any "European state" that applies and meets—at least theoretically—the requirements of the European treaties at that time, notably by adopting the community acquis. It is important to respect the rules, criteria, and practices of accession at the given date.

To the famous Copenhagen criteria (1993) were added the specific conditions set for the Western Balkans at the Thessaloniki summit (2003) regarding the obligation to resolve any bilateral dispute before joining or even opening accession negotiations. What will it be for Ukraine or even Moldova ? In this long and complex process, the European Commission assists negotiators, but it is the member states that take the final decision.

Currently, accession is achieved only by the unanimity of member states, meaning each has a veto. It also requires the majority of the European Parliament and ratification by each member state and each candidate according to their institutional rules at that time.



Map. Tectonics of the European Geopolitical Plate. When the Fracture of Geographical Europe Accelerates : The Consequences of the War in Ukraine (February 24, 2022 - April 2024)

[View the map in high print quality PDF format.](#) Design and production of the map : AB Pictoris. AB Pictoris is a young French company founded by Blanche Lambert, an independent cartographer.

Lambert-Verluisse/Diploweb.com

It remains to be seen what the EU's capacity will be to assimilate new states and honor its commitments under Article 42.7 of the Treaty : *"If a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states shall provide aid and assistance by all the means in their power."*

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Translation of the text, from French to English, AB Pictoris

P.-S.

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