

Customs Union: The world's largest trading block turns 50

The Customs Union is unique in the world. It is a foundation of the European Union and essential for the proper functioning of the Single Market. The Customs Union is a single trading area where all goods circulate freely, whether they're made in the EU or imported from beyond its borders. This means that there are no customs duties at the borders between EU countries. Duty on goods from outside the EU is generally paid when they first enter the EU. From then on, there's nothing more to pay and no more checks. National customs services in all EU countries work together as one to manage the day-to-day operations of the Customs Union. Member countries share one single system for handling the import, export and transit of goods.

The Customs Union comprises the 28 Member States of the EU, Monaco and British territories. Over 114,000 customs officers work around the clock at airports, border crossings, ports, inland customs offices or customs laboratories. The EU's customs administrations need to work closely to facilitate trade and protect the health and safety of all EU citizens.

How does the EU's Custom Union help to protect and keep us safe?

The aim of the Customs Union is to protect society at large while making sure that legitimate trade can flow easily. The Customs Union defends against international trafficking and smuggling, protects consumers against illegal and dangerous goods, and preserves the environment and European cultural heritage as well as the financial interests of the EU and the Member States. In the EU, there are 90 state-of-the-art customs laboratories to carry out this job. Some labs specialise in certain types of analysis – for example, toy safety. When human senses are not enough to detect certain types of illegal goods, customs officers partner up with sniffer dogs which specialise in detecting illegal drugs, suspicious food, explosives or even large amounts of cash.

HOW THE CUSTOMS UNION PROTECTS



DRUGS AND CIGARETTES

- In 2016, EU customs seized almost 4.6 billion illegal cigarette and 298.9 tonnes of drugs in the EU.
- In **Spain**, for instance, law enforcement dismantled an organisation producing contraband tobacco products. In three of these operations, 15 persons were detained and more than 275 tonnes of tobacco products, valued at more than €20 million, were seized. Two types of machines were confiscated: for the manufacturing of the tobacco products and for drying the tobacco. Additionally, numerous sacks containing chemical substances used to fabricate the final product were also seized.
- In **Poland**, a tobacco sniffer-dog discovered 10.5 million cigarettes inside a sea-container at the container terminal of the Gdynia sea-port.
- On the west coast of **France**, 19 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized in a sailing ship. Three tonnes of cocaine were found in a maritime container. In addition, 120 000 doses of diazepam were seized.
- In **Spain**, a customs boat supported by a customs helicopter intercepted a sailing ship loaded with almost nine tonnes of hashish.
- In **Belgium**, customs seized 2 275 kilos of drugs which were smuggled through passenger traffic (by air) and 476kg by express consignments.



WEAPONS

- Some 6,256 firearms were seized in the EU in 2016, along with more than 1 million pieces of ammunition and 1 520 pieces of explosives.
- Customs officials in **Belgium** were able to stop 126 pieces of weapons/ ammunition/ explosives from entering the EU. These weapons were being smuggled into the EU through air traffic or post.
- In **Spain**, 737 assault rifles and 72 grenade launchers, including chargers and instruction books were seized.



FAKE AND DANGEROUS GOODS

- EU customs intercepted products suspected of violating intellectual property rights on more than 63 000 occasions. In 2016, more than 41 million articles were detained with an estimated value of nearly €672 million.
- **Estonian** customs seized almost 34,000 pieces of fake “Diesel” jeans in Muuga Port.
- **Greek** customs seized more than 1.3 million batteries, 537,000 packs of cigarettes and 24,300 wallets.
- There were almost 14 000 cases of goods presenting a risk for consumers in terms of health (sanitary, phyto-sanitary and veterinary technical standards). More than 37 million items were identified as unsafe or uncompliant in terms of product safety.



GOODS VIOLATING ENVIRONMENTAL RULES

- 3,500 infringements of regulations for endangered species (CITES) were detected. In 96 cases, exports were detected which did not respect the rules on exports of cultural goods.
- **Estonian** customs seized almost 66,000 tubes of face cream which contained caviar.
- In **France**, 110,000 cosmetic products with caviar and protected plants were seized, as well as 46 square meters of alligator skin and 20 tonnes of wood from the exotic "Dalbergia retusa" species.
- In the **United Kingdom**, 300 map turtles (*Graptemys spp*), 5 live giant salamanders, 6 kg of caviar, 300 leather items made from python skin, 760 kg of traditional medicines containing protected plant species and 18 kg of ivory tusks were seized.



UNDECLARED CASH

- Travelers entering or leaving the EU are obliged to declare amounts of cash valued at €10,000 or more (or its equivalent in other currencies or bearer negotiable instruments) to customs authorities. In 2016, there were 571 significant cases, where seizures of undeclared cash amounted to more than €50,000.
- Each year, more than 100,000 cash declarations are submitted to customs, amounting to more than €62 billion. Each year, more than 10,000 cases of undeclared cash or incorrectly completed cash declarations are recorded
- As part of the EU's Action Plan against Terrorism financing, [recently-agreed new rules](#) will extend the rules to cover **cash sent in postal parcels or freight shipments, to prepaid cards and to precious commodities**.

How does the EU's Custom Union help to facilitate trade?

The EU is one of the largest trading blocks in the world. In 2015, the EU accounted for almost 15% of world trade in goods, worth €3.5 trillion. Managing this volume of international trade requires handling millions of customs declarations per year in a fast and efficient manner. The Union Customs Code removed the need for hundreds of different customs forms and now allows the use of electronic transport manifests for customs purposes and the moving of goods under temporary storage without lodging a transit declaration. It also introduced centralised clearance, and is more straightforward for businesses, providing uniform and harmonised rules on guarantees. Finally, it also reduces the administrative burden on compliant and trustworthy economic operators (AEOs) by allowing a number of simplifications of customs procedures, and of the use of guarantees, and by allowing self-assessment of customs debts under certain conditions.

What has the Commission proposed to support customs operations as part of the new EU budget?

As part of the plans for the next EU budget, the Commission has now proposed a continued financial commitment of €950 million for the EU's customs programme, representing just 0.07% of the entire budget. The programme supports the essential cooperation between customs authorities across the EU and protects the financial and economic interests of the European Union and its Member States. It has helped to build a modern and innovative Customs

Union that ensures the safety and security of all EU citizens, while at the same time facilitating growing global trade. It allows the joint development and operation of major, pan-European IT systems and establishes networks, bringing together national officials from across Europe.

The new proposed **Customs Programme** [LINK] will build on this success, helping customs administrations to deal with increasing trade flows and emerging trends and technologies, such as e-commerce and blockchain. It will also support customs authorities through enhanced cooperation on the ground and more training. The programme will help to provide better risk management to protect the EU's financial interests and to respond to security threats and cross-border crime. A new Customs equipment instrument worth €1.3 billion is also being created to allow the purchase, maintenance and replacement of innovative customs equipment by Member States.

CUSTOMS UNION – TIMELINE AND KEY STEPS

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1 July 1968 | All customs duties and restrictions lifted between the six member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC). A common customs tariff replaces national customs duties on products from the rest of the world. Trade between the countries multiplies and investment and economic growth increases. |
| 1987 | One Single Administrative Document replaces hundreds of national customs declaration forms. At the same time, the common transit system is created. |
| 1992 | EU adopts the Community Customs Code, creating a common rulebook for customs legislation. This milestone leads to much simpler guidance for traders and customs alike. |
| 1993 | Free movement of goods become a reality: no more customs formalities at internal borders of the EU and no more long queues for lorries filled with goods to be checked at border crossings. For the first time, uniform customs legislation becomes directly applicable in all Member States of the EU. |
| 1994 | Launch of the integrated tariff of the European Union in digital format (TARIC) with daily transmissions to the EU Member States. It replaced the first TARIC database with weekly transmissions since 1987. |
| 1996 | EU-Turkey Customs Union enters into force. |
| 2003 | A new computerised transit system becomes operational. It is the first European customs system that uses electronic declaration and processing. |
| 2004 | 10 new countries join the EU and the EU Customs Union, marking the largest expansion of the EU Customs Union in its history. |

- 2005** EU launches the Customs Risk Management system that connects more than 800 customs offices and provides a digital platform to exchange information about risks and irregularities. New security legislation is introduced providing for advance cargo information, risk-based controls and measures aimed at end-to-end supply chain security, including through use of technology.
- 2008** EU introduces the Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) status: an internationally-recognised quality mark indicating that a company's role in the international supply chain is secure, and that customs controls and procedures are efficient and compliant. It is voluntary and enables simplified customs procedures and in some cases the right to 'fast-track' shipments through some customs and safety and security procedures.
- 2011** Customs becomes a major actor for increased security in the EU. Common risk criteria for security and safety start to apply to all goods crossing the EU borders, ensuring equal protection of all EU citizens and member states.
- 2016** The Union Customs Code takes effect, further modernising and streamlining customs procedures throughout the EU. It also introduces a number of IT systems to support harmonised customs rules and to reduce the administrative burden for trade. Full implementation of IT systems is foreseen in steps, with the majority of systems being available by 31 December 2020, with further upgrades during the period up to 2025.
- 2018** The EU Customs Union celebrates 50 years of operation.

For more information

[Press release](#)

[50CU website](#)

[50CU videos playlist on YouTube](#)

One minute [video about the Customs Union](#)