

Pros and cons of a federal Europe

A federal Europe would buy security, scale and one real voice abroad – at the price of remoter government and a genuinely hard democratic problem.



Most pages on this question are written by someone selling one column of the ledger. Here is the whole ledger, both columns at full strength.

First, what “federal” would mean

Not a superstate that dissolves nations. In every serious design – and in the Swiss model usually cited – a federation runs the things that only work at scale: defense, foreign policy, external borders, the currency and capital markets. Language, schools, culture, healthcare, policing and most taxation stay where they are. The Czech Republic would still be the Czech Republic; France would remain insufferably France. What changes is who faces Moscow, Washington and Beijing: one actor instead of twenty-seven.

The case for

Security. Europe outspends and outnumbers Russia, yet cannot be certain of defending itself, because 1.9 million soldiers serve thirty separate commands. A federation closes the gap that money alone cannot – one command, one procurement, one deterrent posture. The math is on the table: Bruegel prices European self-reliance at some €250 billion a year; fragmentation is a large part of why it costs that much.

Scale. The US-EU economic gap has grown for two decades largely because American firms get a continental home market and deep capital on day one. A finished single market with one capital market is, in effect, the economic half of federation.

A voice. On trade, where the EU already acts federally, it negotiates as an equal of the United States and China. On foreign policy, where it

acts by unanimity, it is routinely ignored. Same continent, same resources – the difference is the decision rule.

Small-state leverage. Counterintuitive but historically sturdy: rules and equal-vote institutions are the small country’s weapon. In a Europe of loose great-power dealing, Berlin and Paris decide and Prague adapts. Inside binding shared institutions, Prague holds votes, vetoes copies of nobody, and chairs things.

The case against

The demos problem. Democracy needs a public – shared debate, shared media, a language of argument. Europe has twenty-four. A parliament whose voters cannot follow the same news cycle is structurally distant, and “just add elections” does not fix that. This is the strongest objection, and the honest response is design, not denial: keep federal powers few and visible, keep everything else close to home.

Remoteness. Every layer of government added is a layer further from the citizen. The EU already suffers this at half-strength; a careless federation would double it.

Dominance fears. Any union has heavyweights. Institutions can check them – but institutions are written by someone, and small states are right to read the fine print before signing.

Diversity as cost. One interest rate already fits Greece and Germany badly on occasion; one fiscal policy would fight the same friction. Diversity is Europe’s charm and its transaction cost, simultaneously.

How the ledger nets out

That depends on the alternative – and the alternative is not a comfortable status quo. The half-built Union already costs money and safety: a currency without a treasury, a market without capital, thirty armies without a command. The real choice on the table is not “federation versus nation-states as God made them.” It is: finish the house, or keep paying for a roof that covers half the rooms while the weather gets worse.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

What would a federal Europe actually control?

In most serious proposals: defense, foreign policy, borders and capital markets. Language, culture, education, health-care and most taxes would stay national – closer to Switzerland’s design than to a centralized superstate.

What is the strongest argument for a federal Europe?

Security and scale. A continent that acts as one can deter Russia, negotiate with America and China as an equal, and give its companies a home market big enough to grow world-class.

What is the strongest argument against it?

The demos problem: there is no single European public opinion, press or language, and democracy without a shared public square is genuinely hard. Serious federalists concede this rather than wave it away.

Wouldn’t Germany and France just run it?

That fear is real – and cuts the other way. Big states dominate most where there are no shared rules, in back-room intergovernmental deals. Equal-vote institutions and courts are historically the small state’s best leverage.

Do Europeans actually want this?

They want more unity, not necessarily a federation: 90 % tell Eurobarometer that member states should be more united, and 81 % back a common defence policy. Support for full federation is smaller and varies sharply by country.

SOURCES

- Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2025 (90 % more united; 81 % common defence)
- Bruegel / Kiel Institute: Defending Europe without the US (2025)
- European Parliament resolution on treaty change (22 November 2023)
- Draghi report on EU competitiveness (2024)
- Swiss federal design (subsidiarity model); Kelemen et al. on the EU as a federal system