What is a European federation?

A European federation would share power between a European government and the member states under a constitution, each sovereign in its own field.

The term is older than the EU, and the founders used it.

The definition

A federation divides power by territory. A central government handles some matters for the whole; member units, called states, provinces or cantons, handle others; a written constitution fixes who does what, and neither level can change that division alone. The United States, Canada, Switzerland, Australia and Belgium work this way.

Two neighboring terms help. A **confederation** is a looser union whose members can veto many decisions and can leave; the United States under the Articles of Confederation was one. A **unitary state**, like France, has one national parliament that decides what powers regions hold. A European federation would sit in between: European institutions would govern a limited list of common matters, typically defense, foreign policy and the single market, while nations kept everything else.

The founders' word

The Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, the founding text of today's Union, said the coal and steel pool would lead to "the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace." In 1984 the European Parliament adopted Altiero Spinelli's Draft Treaty establishing the European Union by 237 votes to 31. The treaties themselves chose a vaguer phrase: Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union speaks of "an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe."

How close is the EU?

Closer than a confederation, short of a federation: its law, market and currency work federally; defense, foreign policy and taxes do not, and members can leave under Article 50. We set out both halves in Is the EU a federation?

The live debate

The question is back in mainstream politics.

- **Germany.** The 2021 coalition agreement of the SPD, Greens and FDP said the Conference on the Future of Europe should lead to a constitutional convention and "a federal European state". The 2025 agreement of the CDU/CSU and SPD dropped the phrase and says only that Germany is open to treaty changes "where necessary".
- **The European Parliament.** In November 2023 it adopted proposals to amend the treaties, with more majority voting, new EU powers in areas such as health and industry, and a larger EU role in defense, by 291 votes to 274. The European Council has not acted on them; in November 2025 Parliament again urged it to discuss a convention.
- **Mario Draghi.** In October 2025 the former Italian prime minister and ECB president argued that "a new, pragmatic federalism is therefore the only viable path forward", while conceding that a full federation "would require political conditions that do not exist today."
- **The opponents.** The Patriots for Europe alliance, launched in 2024 by Viktor Orbán, Herbert Kickl and Andrej Babiš, pledged in its founding manifesto to "prioritize sovereignty over federalism" and warned of a European "superstate".

The arguments on both sides are weighed in Pros and cons of a federal Europe, and the practical design in Would a United States of Europe work?

What it would take

A federation cannot be reached by stretching the current treaties. Under Article 48, any treaty change needs the agreement of all 27 govern-

ments and ratification in every member state, several of them by referendum. That is why recent change has come in smaller steps, such as joint borrowing and common defense loans. Our position is that defense is where a federal answer would do the most good, and where Europe's current arrangement is under the most strain.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

What is a federation?

A state in which a constitution divides power between common institutions and member units, and neither level can change that division alone. The United States, Canada, Switzerland, Australia and Belgium are federations. A confederation is looser: its members can veto many decisions and can leave.

Is the EU a federation?

No. It has federal features: its law takes precedence over national law, its court binds governments and 21 countries share a currency. But it has no army, a budget of about 1 % of GNI and unanimity on foreign policy and taxes, and members can leave. Many scholars call it a federal system, not a federal state.

Who wants a European federation?

Federalists in most pro-European parties and movements. Germany's 2021–2025 government wrote it into its coalition agreement as a goal; the European Parliament asked in 2023 for treaty changes in that direction; Mario Draghi called in 2025 for a "pragmatic federalism". Sovereigntist parties oppose it.

Who is against a federal Europe?

Sovereigntist and national-conservative parties, which want a Europe of nations. The Patriots for Europe alliance, launched in 2024, pledged in its founding manifesto to "prioritize sovereignty over federalism" and warned against a European "superstate".

How could Europe become a federation?

Only by treaty change. Under Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union, every one of the 27 governments must agree and every member state must ratify, some by referendum. That makes it the hardest change in EU politics.

SOURCES

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Federalism (rev. 11/2022) – a territorial division of power entrenched in a constitution that "neither a member unit nor the common government can alter unilaterally"; examples United States, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, Belgium; confederal members can veto and exit
- European Union: The Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950 – "the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace"
- EUR-Lex: Treaty on European Union, Article 1 (consolidated 2016) – "an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe"; EUR-Lex: Treaty on European Union, Article 50 – withdrawal; EUR-Lex: Treaty on European Union, Article 48 – treaty revision by common accord of all member states, ratified by each
- European Parliament (EPRS): The road to the 1984 Spinelli report (2/2014) – Draft Treaty establishing the European Union approved on 14 February 1984 by 237 to 31 with 43 abstentions
- SPD: Koalitionsvertrag 2021–2025, p. 104 – "zu einem föderalen europäischen Bundesstaat"; Koalitionsvertrag 2025, p. 138 – open to treaty changes under Article 48 "where necessary"
- European Parliament: Future of the EU – Parliament's proposals to amend the Treaties (11/2023) – report 305–276–29, resolution 291–274–44; more qualified majority voting; new shared powers including public health and industry; existing powers in external security and defence developed further
- European Parliament: Answer given by the Council to question E-001619/2024 (11/2024) – "No decision on this matter has yet been adopted by the European Council"; European Parliament: Resolution of 25 November 2025, para. 9 – urges the European Council to discuss convening a convention
- Le Grand Continent: Mario Draghi – the pragmatic federalism doctrine (10/2025) – text of the Oviedo speech, 24 October 2025
- Hungarian Conservative: Orbán, Kickl and Babiš announce new European alliance (6/2024) – Patriots for Europe manifesto of 30 June 2024: "We prioritize sovereignty over federalism"; a European "superstate"
- Kelemen and McNamara: State-building and the European Union, Comparative Political Studies 55(6) (2022) – the EU as a federal system
- European Commission: The EU's long-term budget 2021–2027 – about 1 % of EU GNI; ECB: Bulgaria joins the euro area (1/2026) – 21 members