

Why isn't Europe one country?

Because for five centuries every attempt to unite Europe was made by force – and the one time Europeans tried agreement, they stopped halfway. That halfway house is where you live now.



The full story is better than the listicle version, and it explains more about today's headlines than you'd expect.

A continent built for division

Look at a relief map. Europe is a bundle of peninsulas, mountain ranges and islands – Iberia behind the Pyrenees, Italy behind the Alps, Scandinavia and Britain behind the sea. Historians like Walter Scheidel argue this is why no empire ever managed what China's flat river plains allowed: permanent unification. Geography sheltered whoever lost round one, so there was always a round two.

Rome came closest and held the Mediterranean world for centuries. After it fell in 476, the record turns into a list of failed sequels: Charlemagne reassembled a big piece around 800, and his grandsons split it three ways within a generation. The Holy Roman Empire spent a thousand years as, in Voltaire's line, neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Napoleon and Hitler tried the violent shortcut. Both united most of the continent for about five years, against its will, and left it more divided than before.

The peaceful attempt nobody remembers

There was one early attempt by agreement, and it came from Prague. In 1464, the Czech king George of Poděbrady proposed a league of European states with a permanent assembly, majority voting, a common court and a shared defense. France's king declined, the Pope – whose authority the plan bypassed – buried it, and its author died at war. Europe would need another five

hundred years and two catastrophes to take the idea seriously.

The nation-state wins

Three things hardened the divisions. The Reformation broke the one institution the whole continent shared, the Church, and a century of religious war ended in 1648 at Westphalia with the founding rule of modern politics: within your borders, you decide. The French Revolution added the potent idea that every people deserves its own state. By 1914, Europe was a continent of armed nation-states – and in the next thirty-one years it produced two world wars and tens of millions of dead.

That is the résumé the “Europe of nations” model brings to the interview. It's worth remembering, because it is exactly why what happened next happened.

The halfway house

In 1950, French foreign minister Robert Schuman proposed putting French and German coal and steel – the raw materials of war – under one shared authority, to make war between them “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.” That small, technical pool grew into the EEC in 1957 and the European Union in 1992. Today it is one market of 450 million people, open internal borders, one currency in 21 countries as of this January, and one court whose rulings bind governments.

And there it stopped. Armies, foreign policy, taxes and budgets stayed national, and the biggest decisions still require all 27 governments to agree –

a design that works just well enough, most of the time, to hide what it can't do.

So: why isn't it one country?

Strip away the history and three honest reasons remain. Language and identity: there is no European public the way there is a French or Polish one, and democracy at that scale is a genuinely hard problem. Politics: no national leader wins elections by handing power upward. And comfort: the halfway house removed the urgency – the wars it was built to prevent stopped happening.

What's changed is that the comfort is expiring. There is a war on the continent again, and the powers setting this century's terms – America, China – are continental-scale. Nine in ten Europeans now say the member states should be more united. Whether that becomes one country, nobody knows; but the question has left the history books.

All questions →

SOURCES

- Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2025 (90 % more united; 81 % common defence)
- Treaty texts and dates: Westphalia 1648, Schuman Declaration 1950, Maastricht 1992
- Tractatus pacis toti christianitati fiendae, 1464 (George of Poděbrady)
- ECB: Bulgaria joins the euro area, 1 January 2026
- Scheidel, Escape from Rome (geography argument, as one scholarly view)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Has Europe ever been united?

Almost. Rome held most of the continent for centuries, and Charlemagne briefly reassembled a large piece of it around 800. Every unification since was attempted by force – and failed within a generation or two.

What was the first plan to unite Europe peacefully?

A Czech king's. In 1464, George of Poděbrady proposed a league of European states with a permanent assembly, majority voting and a common court. France declined, the Pope buried it – five centuries too early.

Why did Europe split into so many countries?

Geography made conquest hard – mountains, seas and peninsulas sheltered separate kingdoms. The Reformation then split Christendom, and nationalism in the 19th century turned languages into borders.

How close is the EU to being one country?

Halfway, roughly. One market, open internal borders, one currency for 21 members and shared laws – but defense, foreign policy and taxes remain national, and big decisions still require unanimous agreement.

Will Europe ever become one country?

Nobody knows, but the pressure is real: 90 % of Europeans tell Eurobarometer that member states should be more united. War on the continent and competition with continental-scale powers are reopening the question.