

Would a United States of Europe work?

It could – if it federalized the few things that need scale and left the rest national. The workable version looks more like Switzerland than like America.



“Would it work” is a better question than “will it happen,” because it forces the design out of the slogans. So let’s design it honestly.

What would actually federalize

The short list is shorter than both fans and critics imagine. Defense: one command, one procurement market instead of 178 weapon systems, one deterrent doctrine. Foreign policy: one seat, one voice, so that 450 million people stop negotiating with superpowers as 27 medium-sized delegations. Money for growth: a single capital market and stock exchange deep enough that European firms stop moving to New York for funding – the gap the Draghi report prices at roughly €800 billion a year. External borders. Big-ticket science. That’s approximately it.

Notice what the list is: the things where being ten countries instead of one demonstrably costs money, security or both.

What would stay national

Nearly everything you touch in a normal week. Language, schools, healthcare, pensions, most taxes, family law, culture – in every functioning federation these live at the state level, and Europe’s version would be the most decentralized federation ever built, because its members are thousand-year-old nations, not provinces. The US federal government spends about 23 % of GDP, but the bulk is domestic welfare; a defense-and-markets federation could run on a few percent. Czech would still be spoken in Prague, and Prague would still set Czech pensions.

What the working examples teach

Two federations began as failed confederations, and both lessons transfer. America’s Articles of Confederation – thirteen states, unanimity, no common treasury or army – collapsed into irrelevance within a decade and were replaced in 1787 by a federation precisely because the loose version couldn’t defend itself or pay its debts. Switzerland fought a short war between cantons in 1847 and answered it with the 1848 federal constitution: strong cantons, four languages, layered identity. It is the standing rebuttal to “you can’t have democracy across languages.”

The limits transfer too. Both federations were built after a crisis made the status quo untenable, not from good intentions in calm weather. And both were far smaller and poorer in diversity than 24-language Europe. Nobody serious claims this is easy.

The honest objections

“Germany and France would run it.” They dominate most where there are no shared rules – in backroom intergovernmental bargains. Equal-vote institutions and courts are historically the small state’s best leverage, which is why the framers of 1787 gave Delaware the same Senate seats as Virginia. “Democracy can’t work at that scale without a European people.” The strongest objection – answered partly by Switzerland, partly by the fact that identity follows common projects, and partly by design: federate little, keep democracy’s daily substance local. “The EU is dysfunctional – why give it more power?” Because the

dysfunction is mostly the halfway design itself: a union with continental responsibilities and a unanimity rule is built to disappoint. The fix and the federation are the same object.

Verdict

A maximal United States of Europe – one culture, one big-spending Washington-on-the-Meuse – would not work and nobody sane proposes it. A minimal one – one defense, one voice, one market for capital, everything else national – violates no law of politics or economics; it mainly violates habit. Whether Europeans want it is this decade's genuinely open question: the components already poll at 81 and 90 percent. The name still scares people. The contents, apparently, don't.

All questions →

SOURCES

- Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2025 (81 % common defence; 90 % more united)
- US federal spending ~23 % of GDP (CBO); EU budget ~1 % of GNI (European Commission)
- Swiss federal constitution of 1848 after the Sonderbund war; US Constitution 1787 after the Articles of Confederation
- Bruegel/Kiel (2025): cost of European defense without the US
- Draghi report (2024): fragmentation costs and the ~€800bn investment gap

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Would national languages and cultures disappear?

No. In every working federation the states keep their languages, schools and identity – Switzerland runs four official languages. A federal Europe would centralize defense and markets, not culture.

What would happen to small countries?

They gain influence, counterintuitively. Inside shared institutions with equal rules, a ten-million-person state has votes, judges and vetoes designed for it; outside them, it is a rule-taker of bigger powers' decisions.

How big would a European federal budget be?

Far smaller than America's. The US federal government spends about 23 % of GDP, but most of that is welfare programs that would stay national in Europe. A defense-and-markets federation might need only a few percent.

Has anything like this ever worked?

Twice, instructively. America's loose confederation failed within a decade and was replaced by the 1787 federation; Switzerland turned a war between cantons into a durable multilingual federation in 1848.

Who actually wants this today?

More people than you'd guess: 81 % of Europeans back a common defence policy and 90 % want member states more united. Explicit federalists are a minority, but the components of federation poll remarkably well.