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Union or Unionless: Federalism, Sovereignty and the Future of European Integration

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Introduction

This book asks a deceptively simple question: what kind of political union do Europeans want, and what kinds are actually achievable? Between the poles of a fully federal Europe and a collection of sovereign states cooperating à la carte lies a spectrum of constitutional, fiscal and political designs. Rather than treat these as abstract ideals, we examine them as actionable blueprints with real-world trade-offs. Our premise is straightforward: institutional form should follow function, democratic legitimacy must accompany authority, and any proposed reform must be judged by its feasibility as well as its desirability.

We proceed on two tracks—analytical and practical. Analytically, the book clarifies the concepts of sovereignty, subsidiarity, and federalism, disentangling legal and economic meanings that are too often conflated. Practically, it maps reform options onto concrete policy arenas where integration either creates value or strains consent: the single market, the euro and financial architecture, migration and borders, energy and climate, digital and industrial policy, foreign and security affairs, and the rule of law. In each domain we test proposals against a common yardstick: problem-solving capacity, democratic accountability, fiscal sustainability, distributional fairness, and resilience to shocks.

The debate is not a binary referendum between “more Europe” and “less Europe.” It is a design problem about “which Europe, where, and how fast.” Multi-speed and variable-geometry models can reconcile ambition with diversity, but only if their guardrails are clearly specified—who participates, what governance applies, how costs and benefits are shared, and which rights and obligations are portable across circles. Equally, sovereignty-retaining options are not synonyms for paralysis: they can deliver targeted cooperation if they are transparent about limits, enforcement, and exit ramps. The choice set thus includes federalist pathways, differentiated integration, and looser cooperations that still protect the single market’s integrity.

To move beyond slogans, we present roadmaps calibrated to political reality. Each blueprint identifies the legal pathway (treaty change or treaty-free), the coalition arithmetic among member states and party families, the timing and sequencing of steps, and the budgetary implications, including own resources and burden-sharing. We specify transitional arrangements, accountability mechanisms, and indicators to track progress. Where proposals depend on high-stakes decisions—mutualized debt, qualified majority voting in sensitive areas, or defense commitments—we show the minimum winning coalitions and credible compensations for reluctant partners.

The book is written for academics who seek conceptual clarity and for policymakers

who must make choices under constraint. Scholars will find an integrated framework that links constitutional design to policy outcomes and political incentives. Practitioners will find checklists, decision trees, and scenario maps designed to support real negotiations. Throughout, we draw lessons from recent crises not to relitigate them, but to stress-test institutional options against hard realities: asymmetric shocks, fragmented public opinion, and geopolitical uncertainty.

Finally, we make a normative commitment to democratic consent. Any durable settlement—federal, differentiated, or sovereignty-retaining—must command legitimacy at multiple levels. That requires clearer allocation of competences, honest communication about trade-offs, and participatory channels that matter before choices are locked in. The aim is not to prescribe a single destination but to illuminate the viable routes, their costs, and their risks, so that Europeans can choose with open eyes.

The chapters that follow build cumulatively: from concepts and history, to domain-specific reforms, to institutional mechanics, and finally to scenarios that model how Europe could plausibly evolve by 2040. Along the way, we invite readers to treat this book as a toolkit. Whether one prefers deeper union or a union of sovereigns, the central question is the same: how to design European cooperation that solves common problems while honoring democratic choice.

CHAPTER ONE: The European Idea: From Confederation to Federation?

The notion of a unified Europe is far from a modern invention. Echoes of a consolidated continent can be found as far back as the Roman Empire, which, in its vastness, laid a precedent for the idea of a single political entity governing diverse peoples and lands. While not a federation in the contemporary sense, Rome's administrative and legal frameworks provided a powerful, if ancient, example of large-scale integration. This historical resonance has, for centuries, fueled various attempts at unity, from the Holy Roman Empire to the Napoleonic ambitions, each leaving its own mark on the European consciousness.

However, the devastation of the two World Wars in the 20th century provided the most potent impetus for a genuinely transformative approach to European unity. The sheer scale of suffering and destruction ingrained a profound desire to transcend the destructive excesses of nationalism and to forge a new path built on cooperation rather than conflict. The continent's political climate after 1945 overwhelmingly favored unity among democratic European nations, viewed as the only escape from the nationalistic ideologies that had ravaged the land.

Visionaries and politicians alike began to articulate concrete proposals for a more integrated Europe. Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, in the interwar period, advocated for a Pan-European Union, while French Prime Minister Aristide Briand, in a 1929 speech to the League of Nations, proposed a federation of European nations rooted in solidarity and economic prosperity. These early ideas, though differing in their precise mechanisms, shared a common thread: the conviction that peace and prosperity could only be secured through some form of political coordination.

Winston Churchill, in a notable 1946 speech at the University of Zurich, famously called for a "United States of Europe," a powerful rhetorical image that captured the aspirations of many. Yet, it is crucial to note that Churchill's vision, as often less-quoted remarks from the same speech reveal, did not initially include Britain as part of this proposed union. This early divergence in perspectives on Britain's role foreshadowed future debates about the depth and scope of European integration.

The intellectual currents of the post-war era also saw the rise of different theoretical approaches to integration. Federalism, championed by figures like Altiero Spinelli in his Ventotene Manifesto, advocated for overcoming national sovereignty through the transfer of powers to democratic supranational institutions, ultimately aiming for a European federation. Functionalism, on the other hand, proposed a more pragmatic,

step-by-step approach, believing that integration in specific, non-controversial sectors would gradually lead to deeper political ties.

The crucial turning point came on May 9, 1950, with the Schuman Declaration. Proposed by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, and inspired by Jean Monnet's vision, this declaration was not merely an economic proposal; it was a visionary strategy to make war between historic rivals France and Germany "not only unthinkable but materially impossible." It proposed placing Franco-German coal and steel production under a common High Authority, an organization open to other European countries.

The Schuman Declaration explicitly stated that this pooling of basic production would be "the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace." This was a clear articulation of a federalist ambition, even if the immediate steps were functional in nature. The declaration emphasized that Europe would not be made "all at once, or according to a single plan," but rather "through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity." This philosophy would become a hallmark of the European integration process.

The direct result of the Schuman Declaration was the Treaty of Paris, signed on April 18, 1951, by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg – often referred to as "the Inner Six" or "Original Six." This treaty formally established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which entered into force in July 1952. The ECSC was groundbreaking as the first international organization based on the principle of supranationalism, where negotiated power was delegated to an authority by member state governments.

The ECSC created a High Authority with the power to make autonomous decisions concerning the coal and steel sectors, overseeing the market, monitoring competition, and ensuring price transparency. It also established a Parliamentary Assembly (whose members were initially selected by national parliaments), a Council of Ministers, and a Court of Justice, laying the blueprint for the institutions that would evolve into today's European Union. This initial foray into sectoral integration was seen by its founders as merely the first step towards a "European Federation."

Following the success of the ECSC, and spurred by the Cold War and the desire for West German rearmament, proposals emerged for extending supranationalism beyond coal and steel. In 1952, the idea of a European Political Community (EPC) was put forward, aiming to combine the ECSC with a proposed European Defence Community (EDC). The draft EPC treaty, prepared by an Ad Hoc Assembly chaired by Paul-Henri Spaak, envisioned a federative structure with a directly elected assembly and a supranational executive with legislative powers over foreign policy, defense, and economic coordination.

This ambitious proposal for a unified political authority, effectively a European federation, faced significant hurdles. Debates raged over federal versus confederal elements, and the proposed transfer of national sovereignty proved to be a major sticking point. Ultimately, the EPC project failed in 1954 when the French National Assembly, fearing an unacceptable loss of national sovereignty, declined to ratify the European Defence Community. This rejection served as a stark reminder of the enduring power of national interests and the complexities of achieving deep political integration.

Despite this setback, the momentum for integration continued. The Messina Conference of 1955, convened after the collapse of the EPC, proved pivotal. The foreign ministers of the six ECSC member states tasked a committee, again chaired by Paul-Henri Spaak, with exploring expanded economic integration. The Spaak Committee's report, finalized in 1956, concluded that a comprehensive, horizontal integration of the economy through the gradual elimination of trade barriers was the most viable path forward, leading to the creation of a customs union.

This report laid the groundwork for the Intergovernmental Conference on the Common Market and Euratom, which culminated in the signing of the Treaties of Rome on March 25, 1957. These treaties established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). Unlike the ECSC Treaty, which had a 50-year lifespan, the Treaties of Rome were concluded "for an unlimited period," endowing them with a quasi-constitutional status.

The EEC's primary objective was to establish a common market based on the "four freedoms": the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital. This marked a significant step beyond the sectoral integration of the ECSC, aiming for a broader economic union. The Euratom treaty, on the other hand, focused on coordinating the supply of fissile materials and research programs for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, reflecting the technological aspirations of the era.

These early treaties, while establishing a framework for closer cooperation, also highlighted the ongoing tension between intergovernmental and supranational approaches. The EEC and Euratom further entrenched institutions like the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Court of Justice, building on the blueprint provided by the ECSC. The common European project, initially limited to six countries, was always conceived as being open to other nations desiring peace and prosperity.

The journey from the initial glimmerings of a unified Europe to the establishment of the European Communities was a complex interplay of idealism, pragmatism, and reaction to the harsh realities of war and geopolitical shifts. The path was not linear, marked by ambitious federalist aspirations often tempered by national reluctance to

cede sovereignty. The rejection of the EPC demonstrated the limits of political will for immediate, wholesale integration, leading to a more gradual, functionalist approach embodied by the Treaties of Rome.

This early period of European integration was characterized by a deliberate strategy of "spillover," where successful cooperation in one sector (coal and steel) created the impetus and necessity for further integration in related areas (a common market). The goal, articulated from the outset, remained a deeper form of union, even if the precise nature and timing of that "federation" were left open to future negotiation and evolution. The legacy of these formative years is a framework that, despite its incremental development, harbored a clear trajectory towards a more integrated political and economic entity.

The idea of a single currency, for instance, was already being explored in this early period. The Werner Report of 1970, commissioned by the six EEC member states, set out a path towards Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), defining it as a process to be achieved in three stages over a decade. The report envisioned irreversible convertibility between currencies, the complete liberalization of capital movements, and ultimately, the irrevocable fixing of exchange rates, even potentially leading to a single currency.

While the Werner Report encountered challenges due to international crises and its recommendations were not fully implemented at the time, it underscored the early ambition for a monetary union and laid conceptual groundwork that would later resurface. It also acknowledged that achieving EMU would necessitate a transfer of powers from the national to the Community level, particularly in budgetary and monetary policy, implying a fundamental political shift.

Thus, the European idea, even in its nascent stages, contained within it a duality: the desire for unity and the safeguarding of national sovereignty. The choice between confederation and federation was not a settled matter but an ongoing negotiation, a dynamic tension that would continue to shape the trajectory of European integration for decades to come. The initial steps, pragmatic and often incremental, were consistently framed within a larger, more ambitious vision of a united and peaceful continent.

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