

Europe? What's That?

by George Friedman - May 5, 2025

Europe has become a lightning rod in the United States lately, particularly with regard to the U.S.' desire to stop guaranteeing European security. It's become vogue to ask how Europe will respond to this or that event in the world. But those very events raise an important question: What is Europe?

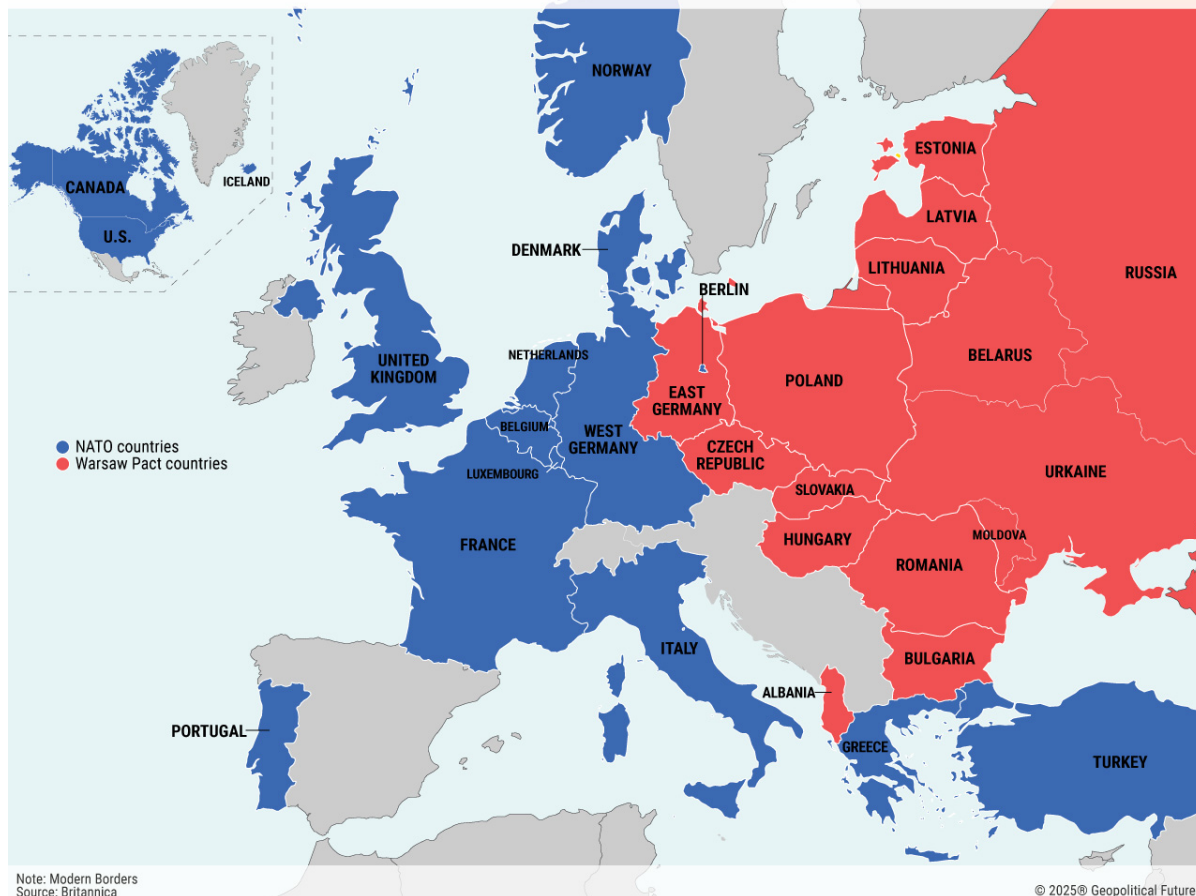
Crucially, Europe is not a country. It is a continent containing, according to the United Nations, some 44 countries. They have different languages, cultures and histories, which include wars with neighbors and mutual loathing. I was born in Hungary and brought to the United States as a young child. My first language was Hungarian, which was all that was spoken at home. I learned English later. I don't speak a word of Polish, Russian, Slovak or Romanian, all languages spoken in neighboring countries to Hungary. (I do speak some German, though badly.) My parents did not trust Hungary's neighbors. My mother still lamented the Trianon pact, the post-World War I treaty that gave Transylvania to Romania. When a cousin married a Romanian, the rancor of Trianon followed us to the Bronx.



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The U.N. definition of Europe stretches from Iceland to Russia, from the Atlantic to the Urals, from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. But when we speak of Europe today, we speak of the part of the peninsula that juts out of Europe's mainland and the countries that are members of political and economic structures developed after World War II, namely NATO and the European Union. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, that part of Europe was the dividing line drawn between the Soviet army and Anglo-American armies, the former occupying the east and the latter occupying the west. When the Soviet Union fell, so did the dividing line, and the countries previously occupied by Russia became part of what I would call the American zone.

Nato and Warsaw Pact Countries, 1960



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The parts the U.S. occupied had been the center of the global system since the 18th century, with Atlantic Europe conquering much of the outside world. The Atlantic-Mediterranean countries conquered the Western Hemisphere, much of the African continent and vast parts of Asia. Even a small country like the Netherlands held vast empires. Italy, France and Britain divided Africa. Spain and Portugal claimed much of South America, while Britain and France fought over North America. Yet it was Britain – technically part of Europe but separated from the rest by the English Channel – that created the most impressive empire, with India as its jewel.

The line between Eastern and Western Europe thus existed well before the Cold War. Western Europe had access to the global oceans; Eastern Europe did not. The not-yet- united states of Germany were the buffer between east and west. Western Europe was vastly wealthier and more

powerful than Eastern Europe, which was largely excluded from imperial adventures.

This changed, to some degree, after Germany consolidated in 1871. Its unification was in part a reaction to Napoleonic France and in part to the Austrian Empire, a German-based entity. The distinction between Germany and Austria was due somewhat to religion – Austria was generally Catholic, Germany generally Protestant – but it was also a matter of dynasty, with one branch represented by the German Hohenzollerns and another by the Austrian Habsburgs. Put simply, the appearance of a powerful German nation-state created a new geopolitical dynamic.

The unification of Germany also created a geopolitical crisis. It was bordered by three countries (Poland, Austria and France) and was both powerful and insecure. Germany courted Austria, eyed Poland and dreaded France. For a newly consolidated government, the worst-case scenario was a tripartite alliance aimed at returning Germany to its former fragmented state. The result of this mutual dread and intrigue was a 30-year war starting in 1914 and ending in 1945, interrupted by a temporary truce. The result of the war was the redivision of Germany, its eastern and western portions dominated by the Soviet Union and the U.S., respectively.

Now, with Russia in decline and the U.S. utterly indifferent, the fundamental question is whether the old European geopolitical fault lines will come back and, if so, what Europe will do. The European reality remains the same. It cannot speak with one voice because it does not speak in one language or share a singular cultural or historical tradition. The fiction of Europe – that we refer only to Western Europe when we speak of the Continent and that Western Europe is a united entity – is an idea imposed on the Continent by the Americans. When minor tensions rise between Germany and France or between Germany and Poland, they are simply recollections of old nightmares. The truth is that there is no such thing as Europe; it's merely a place where small countries have bad memories of each other.

So any question about what Europe will do in response to this or that event assumes there is a Europe. This is a faulty assumption built on an American invention. Perhaps the most important question today, then, is whether Europe will remain what the United States invented – a region of many languages but common interests – or revert to its more traditional and natural condition – small nations that have in common only fear of each other. Eighty years ago, the world shuddered at this question. But Europe is no longer a divided global empire. It is just a region like any other, and the imperial imperative of war is gone. How Europe decides to treat its ancient grudges and animosities will go far in answering the question of what Europe will do going forward.

We must understand what Europe is now. Western and Eastern Europe are still very different places, and it is now Eastern Europe, not Germany, that divides the Continent. The war in Ukraine, divisive though it may be, has shown Europe that, for now, it does not have to fear Russia. But Russia can recover and regain its revanchist designs. Thus, Eastern Europe, not Germany, is now the pivot of European history.

Eastern Europe, despite its distrust of itself and its former occupiers in Russia and Germany, must make a decision that will define the Continent. Will it stand together, or will it stand apart? True, it's poorer than Western Europe, but united, it could rapidly become the Continent's geopolitical anchor. Its populations are as educated and sophisticated as any. Its biggest weakness is a deeply held faith in its inferiority and thus its inevitable victimhood. The only thing that binds Eastern European nations together is the European disease of mutually incompatible and incomprehensible languages, cultures and histories. The single thing they have is fear, usually activated by European, Russian or, at times, American manipulations.

If Eastern Europe can unite, it can redefine the history of the past century. If it cannot, then I fear the dynamics that defined the years between 1871 and 1945 will reemerge. I have no faith in the effectiveness of NATO or the United Nations. Europe remains a key to the world, but Europe has always been a reckless and heedless place posing as a civilization. The U.S. has spent the past century sending its youth to European wars or standing guard at its bases. Now, a pivot is possible. As an American, I would personally welcome Eastern Europe's lightening our load.

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