The Return of Europe’s Nation-States

The Upside to the EU’s Crisis

By Jakub Grygiel, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Sept/Oct, 2016

Europe currently finds itself in the throes of its worst political crisis since World War II. Across the continent, traditional political parties have lost their appeal as populist, Euroskeptical movements have attracted widespread support. Hopes for European unity seem to grow dimmer by the day. The euro crisis has exposed deep fault lines between Germany and debt-ridden southern European states, including Greece and Portugal. Germany and Italy have clashed on issues such as border controls and banking regulations. And on June 23, the United Kingdom became the first country in history to vote to leave the EU—a stunning blow to the bloc.

At the same time as its internal politics have gone off the rails, Europe now faces new external dangers. In the east, a revanchist Russia—having invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea—loomed ominously. To Europe’s south, the collapse of numerous states has driven millions of migrants northward and created a breeding ground for Islamist terrorists. Recent attacks in Paris and Brussels have shown that these extremists can strike at the continent’s heart.

Such mayhem has underscored the price of ignoring the geopolitical struggles that surround Europe. Yet the EU, crippled by the euro crisis and divisions over how to apportion refugees, no longer seems strong or united enough to address its domestic turmoil or the security threats on its borders. National leaders across the continent are already turning inward, concluding that the best way to protect their countries is through more sovereignty, not less. Many voters seem to agree.

As Europe’s history makes painfully clear, a return to aggressive nationalism could be dangerous, not just for the continent but also for the world. Yet a Europe of newly assertive nation-states would be preferable to the disjointed, ineffectual, and unpopular EU of today. There’s good reason to believe that European countries would do a better job of checking Russia, managing the migrant crisis, and combating terrorism on their own than they have done under the auspices of the EU.
EVER-FARTHER UNION

In the years after World War II, numerous European leaders made a convincing argument that only through unity could the continent escape its bloody past and guarantee prosperity. Accordingly, in 1951, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany created the European Coal and Steel Community. Over the next several decades, that organization morphed into the European Economic Community and, eventually, the European Union, and its membership grew from six countries to 28. Along the way, as the fear of war receded, European leaders began to talk about integration not merely as a force for peace but also as a way to allow Europe to stand alongside China, Russia, and the United States as a great power.

The EU’s boosters argued that the benefits of membership—an integrated market, shared borders, and a transnational legal system—were self-evident. By this logic, expanding the union
eastward wouldn’t require force or political coercion; it would simply take patience, since nonmember states would soon recognize the upsides of membership and join as soon as they could. And for many years, this logic held, as central and eastern European countries raced to join the union after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Eight countries—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—became members in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007.

Then came the Ukraine crisis. In 2014, the Ukrainian people took to the streets and overthrew their corrupt president, Viktor Yanukovych, after he abruptly canceled a new economic deal with the EU. Immediately afterward, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, and it soon sent soldiers and artillery into eastern Ukraine, too. The EU’s leaders had hoped that economic inducements would inevitably increase the union’s membership and bring peace and prosperity to an ever-larger public. But that dream proved no match for Russia’s tanks and so-called little green men.

Moscow’s gambit was not, on its own, enough to cripple the EU. But soon, another crisis hit, and this one nearly pushed the union to its breaking point. In 2015, more than a million refugees—nearly half of them fleeing the civil war in Syria—entered Europe, and since then, many more have followed. Early on, several countries, especially Germany and Sweden, proved especially welcoming, and leaders in those states angrily criticized those of their neighbors that tried to keep the migrants out. Last year, after Hungary built a razor-wire fence along its border with Croatia, German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the move as reminiscent of the Cold War, and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said it did “not respect Europe’s common values.” But early this year, many of these same leaders changed their tune and began pressuring Europe’s border countries to increase their security measures. In January, several European governments warned Greece that if it did not find a way to stanch the flow of refugees, they would expel it from the Schengen area, a passport-free zone within the EU.

Consciously or not, the European politicians advocating open borders have failed to prioritize their own citizens over foreigners. These leaders’ intentions may be noble, but if a state fails to limit its protection to a particular group of people—its nationals—its government risks losing legitimacy. Indeed, the main measure of a country’s success is how well it can secure its people and borders from external threats, be they hostile neighbors, terrorism, or mass migration. On this score, the EU and its proponents are failing. And voters have noticed. The British people issued a strong rebuke to the bloc in June when they voted to leave the EU by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent, ignoring warnings from the International Monetary Fund, the Bank of England, and the United Kingdom’s Treasury that doing so would wreak economic disaster. In France, according to a recent Pew survey, 61 percent of the population holds unfavorable views of the EU; in Greece, 71 percent of the population shares these views.

Back when Europe faced no pressing security threats—as was the case for most of the last two decades—EU members could afford to pursue more high-minded objectives, such as dissolving borders within the union. Now that dangers have returned, however, and the EU has shown that it is incapable of dealing with them, Europe’s national leaders must fulfill their most basic duty: defending their own.
A migrant is rescued by an Italian Navy helicopter in the Mediterranean Sea, August 2015.

BACK TO BASICS

The EU’s architects created a head without a body: they built a unified political and administrative bureaucracy but not a united European nation. The EU aspired to transcend nation-states, but its fatal flaw has been its consistent failure to recognize the persistence of national differences and the importance of addressing threats on its frontiers.

One consequence of this oversight has been the rise of political parties that aim to restore national autonomy, often by appealing to far-right, populist, and sometimes xenophobic sentiments. In 2014, the UK Independence Party won the popular vote in an election for the European Parliament—the first time since 1906 that any party in the United Kingdom had bested Labour and the Conservatives in a nationwide vote. Last December in France, Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Front won the first round of the country’s regional elections; then, in March in Germany, a right-wing Eurosceptical party, Alternative for Germany, won almost 25 percent of the vote in Saxony-Anhalt. And in May, Norbert Hofer, a candidate from the far-right Freedom Party, narrowly lost Austria’s presidential election. (Austria’s Constitutional Court later annulled that result, forcing a rerun of the election that will be held in October.)
Some of these parties have benefited from the enthusiastic support of Russia, as part of its campaign to buy influence in Europe. Until recently, Moscow could rely on European leaders who were friendly to Russia, including former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. But now, as new parties take the place of established ones, the Kremlin needs fresh partners. It has given money to the National Front, and the U.S. Congress has asked James Clapper, the U.S. director of national intelligence, to investigate the Kremlin’s ties to other fringe parties, including Greece’s Golden Dawn and Hungary’s Jobbik. Yet such parties would be surging even without Russian backing. Many Europeans are disenchanted with politicians who have supported EU integration, open borders, and the gradual dissolution of national sovereignty; they have a deep and lasting desire to reassert the supremacy of their nation-state.

Of course, most of Europe’s Euroskeptical politicians don’t seek to disband the union entirely; in fact, many of them continue to see its creation as a historic victory for the West. They do, however, want greater national autonomy on social, economic, and foreign policy, especially in response to overreaching EU mandates on migration and the demand for controversial continent-wide laws on issues such as abortion and marriage. Many in the United Kingdom, for example, pushed for a British exit from the EU, or Brexit, out of frustration with the number of British laws that have come from Brussels rather than Westminster.

The bet against sovereignty has failed. But sovereignty’s resurgence has conjured up many dark memories of the nationalism that twice brought the continent to the brink of annihilation. Many observers now worry that European politics are coming to resemble those of the 1930s, when populist leaders spewed hate to whip up support. Such fears are not wholly unfounded. The strident xenophobia of Austria’s Freedom Party recalls the early days of fascism. Anti-Semitism has risen across Europe, sprouting up in parties that span the ideological spectrum, from the United Kingdom’s Labour Party to Hungary’s Jobbik. And in Greece, some members of the radical left-wing party Syriza have advocated Greek withdrawal from NATO, a prime example of a growing anti-Americanism that could undermine the foundation of European security.

Yet affirming national sovereignty does not require virulent nationalism. The support for Brexit in the United Kingdom, for instance, was less an expression of hostility toward other European countries than it was an assertion of the United Kingdom’s right to self-govern. A return to nation-states entails not nationalism but patriotism, or what George Orwell called “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life.” It’s also worth noting that one of the greatest threats Europe faced in the twentieth century was transnational in nature: communism, which divided the continent for 45 years and led to the deaths of millions.

BEYOND THE EU

A renationalization of Europe may be the continent’s best hope for security. The EU’s founders believed that the body would guarantee a stable and prosperous Europe—and for a while, it seemed to. But today, although the EU has generated wealth through its common market, it is increasingly a source of instability. The euro crisis has exposed the union’s inability to resolve
conflicts among its members: German leaders have had little incentive to address Greek concerns, and vice versa. The EU also suffers from what the German Federal Constitutional Court has called a “structural democratic deficit.” Of its seven institutions, just one—the European Parliament—is directly elected by the people, and it cannot initiate legislation. Finally, the recent dominance of Germany within the EU has alienated smaller states, including Greece and Italy.

Meanwhile, the EU has failed to keep Europe safe. Since 1949, Europe has relied on NATO—and, in particular, the United States—to secure its borders. The anemic defense spending of most European countries has only increased their dependence on the United States’ physical presence in Europe. The EU is unlikely to create its own army, at least in the near future, as its members have different strategic priorities and little desire to cede military sovereignty to Brussels.

Many of the EU’s backers still insist that in its absence, anarchy will engulf the continent. In 2011, the French minister for European affairs, Jean Leonetti, warned that the failure of the euro could lead Europe to “unravel.” In May, British Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that a British exit from the EU would raise the risk of war. But as the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in the 1940s, “the fear of anarchy is less potent than the fear of a concrete foe.” Today, the identifiable enemies that have arisen around Europe, from Russia to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), seem far more worrying to most people than the potential chaos arising from the dissolution of the EU. Their hope is that individual countries will provide the kind of safety that Brussels can’t.

SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS

From the United States’ perspective, the fraying of the EU presents a serious challenge—but not an insurmountable one. In the decades after World War II, Washington sought to contain the Soviet Union not just through nuclear deterrence and a sizable military presence in Europe but also by promoting European integration. A united continent, the thinking went, would pacify Europe, strengthen the economies of U.S. allies, and encourage them to cooperate with Washington to ward off the Soviet menace. Today, however, the United States needs a new strategy. Because the EU no longer seems up to the task of protecting its borders or competing geopolitically, more American pressure for Europe to integrate will simply alienate the growing number of Europeans who have turned their backs on the EU.

Washington need not fear the dissolution of the EU. Fully sovereign European states may prove more adept than the union at warding off the various threats on its frontiers. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU had no answer besides sanctions and vague calls for more dialogue. The European states that border Russia have found little reassurance in the union, which explains why they have sought the help of NATO and U.S. forces. Yet where the EU has failed, individual countries may fare better. Only patriotism has the kind of powerful and popular appeal that can mobilize Europe’s citizens to rearm against their threatening neighbors. People are far more willing to fight for their country—for their history, their soil, their common religious identity—than they are for an abstract regional body created by fiat. A 2015 Pew poll found that in the case of a Russian attack, more than half of French, Germans, and Italians would not want to come to the defense of a NATO—and thus likely an EU—ally.
A return to nation-states in Europe does not have to end in tragedy.

The return of nation-states need not lead Europe to revert to an anarchic jumble of quarreling governments. Increased autonomy won’t stop Europe’s states from trading or negotiating with one another. Just as supranationalism does not guarantee harmony, sovereignty does not require hostility among nations.

In a Europe of revived nation-states, countries will continue to form alliances based on common interests and security concerns. Recognizing the weakness of the EU, some states have already done so. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, for example—normally a disjointed group—have joined forces to oppose EU plans that would force them to accept thousands of refugees.

The United States, for its part, needs a better partner in Europe than the EU. As the union dissolves, NATO’s function in maintaining stability and deterring external threats will increase—strengthening Washington’s role on the continent. Without the EU, many European countries, threatened by Russia and overwhelmed by mass migration, will likely invest more heavily in NATO, the only security alliance backed up by force and thus capable of protecting its members.

It’s time for U.S. leaders and Europe’s political class to recognize that a return to nation-states in Europe does not have to end in tragedy. On the contrary, Europe will be able to meet its most pressing security challenges only when it abandons the fantasy of continental unity and embraces its geopolitical pluralism.