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If the European Union Is the Titanic, Bet on the Iceberg

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It wasn't long ago that Germany's Angela Merkel was anointed as the last defender of liberal Western values. She was even expected to hold America's Donald Trump to account. But that vision died with her announcement that she supported prohibiting Muslim women from wearing a "full veil" face covering.

Far from being the West's guardian, Merkel turned out to be a Western politician. And even she cannot ignore illiberal currents buffeting Germany as well as the rest of Europe. The postmodern European Union, which was supposed to push the retrograde peasantry into the progressive new age, has run aground and is taking on water. And it might not be possible to bail fast enough to keep Europe from sinking.

The EU's beginnings were valuable, even essential: economic cooperation among Belgium, France and Germany. The expanded Common Market promoted growth and prosperity, offering an example of freer trade that even Donald Trump might have supported. The early version of the European Union appeared determined to eliminate more economic barriers than it created.

But the Eurocrats, the bureaucratic, political, business, academic and journalistic elites centered in Brussels, now filled with sterile office buildings of the sort that dot Washington, DC, wanted more. Europe needed to become a Weltmacht, but a special postmodern variant. The EU would become a consolidated government that eschewed the usual concerns of nation, community and tradition. And the EU would take little, if any, note of what European peoples desired.

For a while, the Eurocrats got their way. Crush historic national differences through harmonization. Add ever more complex regulations that channel more aid than economic development. Turn a commercial union into a redistributionist union. Socialize debt and risk, encouraging the improvident to spend at everyone else's expense—all in the name of "solidarity."

Treat the free movement of people as the same as the free movement of capital, despite their dramatically different impacts. Dismiss any objections as coming from unenlightened bigots. Propose continued EU expansion even to lands with very different political, religious and social traditions and values. Insist on Brussels' right to mandate acceptance of outsiders, overwhelming national borders, communities and governments—contra the wishes of residents.

Push for ever greater powers in an organization with three presidents, none of them popularly elected, and an elected parliament that cannot write the budget or initiate legislation. If the people vote down the proposed constitution, switch to a treaty. If people in the one country to vote on treaties say no, make them vote again. If the common currency totters because there is no common fiscal policy, use the predictable crisis to push further political consolidation. Shout down opponents with the mantra, “More Europe, more Europe.”

The point is not that the EU’s objectives and values are necessarily unattractive. I rather like the organization’s resistance to warmongering and support for cosmopolitanism. But the attempt to create the first postmodern empire against the will of its own people is an affront to the principles of self-government. People are right, and have the right, to be concerned about what their society is and is to become.

Moreover, the European Postmodern Project is turning out to be politically unsustainable. If the moderates and centrists who for so long dominated European politics—in practice, there never was much difference between, say, modern Germany’s nominally right-wing CDU and nominally left-wing SPD, and there is virtually none today—prove unwilling to represent their peoples, those peoples will find other, less respectable politicians, to do so. Which is happening all over Europe today.

There was a great sigh of relief across the continent last weekend because Norbert Hofer, the presidential candidate of Austria’s Far Right Freedom Party, received “only” 46.7 percent of the vote. However, candidates for the traditional governing parties in the middle didn’t even make the runoff. And the presidency is largely ceremonial. In Austria’s fractured parliament, the FP won’t need a majority to influence Austrian policy: in the latest poll, the FP leads the Social Democrats 35 to 27 percent, with the other parties behind.

The same weekend, Italian Matteo Renzi lost his reform referendum by a crushing margin and has resigned. Italy’s heavily indebted economy is one of Europe’s largest, and Italy’s banking sector is one of Europe’s weakest. Since joining the Eurozone, Italy’s productivity actually has fallen 5 percent. The major governing parties are considering revising election law before a possible early vote, lest the populist Five Star Movement triumph. Although the Italian people are not noticeably anti-EU, they, like the Greeks, may have erred in tying themselves monetarily to their more efficient and productive northern neighbors. And all three opposition parties, including Forza Italia and Lega Nord, support leaving the Euro.

Economic crisis threatens Greece again. There has been little serious reform of the sort necessary to encourage productivity and growth. Past bailouts have done more to protect French and German banks than average Europeans. The increasingly unpopular Tsipras government, which stoked resentment against the rest of Europe while complying with the latter’s demands, faces pressure to undertake another round of austerity. Germany and the Netherlands, European institutions and the International Monetary Fund are bickering among themselves and with Athens.

French politics is shifting dramatically rightward. President Francois Hollande, with single digit approval ratings, is not running for reelection. His socialist party has been given up for dead. Most observers expect the National Front’s Marine Le Pen to reach next year’s presidential runoff. While unlikely to win, her party received more than 27 percent of the vote in regional

elections last year. The likely winner is Francois Fillon, who, in the right's primary, unexpectedly trounced both former president Nicolas Sarkozy and Alain Juppe, who had been leading the opinion polls. Fillon is a social conservative who supported economic reform while emphasizing traditional values and taking a hard line on security issues. Still, a Le Pen triumph no longer is viewed as impossible, and she pledges to support France's costly welfare state and hold a referendum on EU membership if elected.

Then there is Germany. A month ago, the *New York Times* called Angela Merkel "the last powerful defender of Europe and the trans-Atlantic alliance" and "the liberal West's last defender." That was before she joined politicians in Belgium, Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland in targeting Islamic residents.

A sympathetic Charles Lane complained in the *Washington Post*, "At a time when the world badly needs a stable, confident Germany, her decisions fractured the rock upon which that stability and confidence have rested since World War II: domestic political consensus mediated by broad-based political parties." Merkel's image as the politician with "safe hands" ran afoul of last year's refugee crisis.

The Christian Democratic Union's Bavarian-based sister party, the Christian Social Union, publicly criticized her approach. For the first time, polls found support for the grand coalition of the CDU/CSU, with the Social Democratic Party occasionally dipping below 50 percent. The Alternative for Germany, which began as a liberal party critical of the Euro, turned into an anti-immigration party. It is running at 12 percent in the polls and has broken 20 percent in some state elections. Although the AfD is unlikely to enter government, Germany now has a party to the right of the CDU/CSU with unpredictable, but likely negative, impacts on German politics.

Populist and nationalist currents flow elsewhere: the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands and Poland. Established ruling parties have crashed and burned in Portugal and Spain. Belgium barely survives as a country. And voters in the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU entirely.

British politics has grown ever more convoluted. Another Scottish independence bid is possible. The Labor Party has returned to the socialist policies of the bad old days when the country was "the sick man of Europe." Prime Minister Theresa May of the Conservative Party has abandoned Margaret Thatcher's (classically) liberal approach for nationalism and social conservatism. If the EU pushes harsh terms for London's departure, the May government might choose a "hard" Brexit and distance itself from the continent.

In short, the celebrated European Project is a wreck. The *New Yorker's* John Cassidy warns that "the disheartening reality of economic disappointment, political paralysis, racial tensions, and terrorist threats has gravely undermined the dream of unity that drove the construction of the European Union." But more fundamental is the fact that the EU being created has changed. It started as a loose collection of European states cooperating for common ends, but has turned into a consolidated continental state run by a heavy-handed bureaucracy with little concern for what European peoples desire.

Yet today's troubles don't stop some Eurocrats from urging the Titanic further forward into the ice floes. For instance, *Financial Times* columnist Wolfgang Muenchau insisted that the answer

to French and Italian economic and political problems is “a road map towards a full fiscal and political union.” However, outside Brussels there is little support for such a proposal, especially in more prosperous states. Even people who might like being bailed out by the Germans don’t want to turn their fiscal affairs over to Berlin—just ask the Greeks. Such an approach would be more likely to destroy than save the EU.

Liberalism, at least of the classical variety, desperately needs a strong defender. But it won’t be Angela Merkel. Nor will it be Europe. Popular currents are running strongly in the other direction. The question no longer is how fast will postmodern continental government emerge? The question is becoming: what form of continental government can long survive?

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