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As Liberal Europe Withers, Whither The European Union?

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Germany's Angela Merkel recently was anointed as the last defender of liberal Western values. But that vision died with her announcement that she supported prohibiting Muslim women from wearing a "full veil" face covering. Even Merkel could not ignore illiberal currents buffeting Germany as well as the rest of Europe.

The European Union began with 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, wanted more. The EU would become a consolidated government which 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. Add ever more complex regulations.

Turn a commercial union into a redistributionist union. Socialize debt and risk, encouraging the improvident to spend at everyone else's expense — in the name of "solidarity." Insist on unlimited immigration, even for people with very different political, religious, and social traditions and values.

Push for ever greater powers in an organization with three presidents, none of them popularly elected, and an elected parliament which cannot write the budget or initiate legislation. Manipulate the process to override people's desires. Shout down opponents with the mantra, "More Europe, more Europe."

The point is not that the EU's objectives and values are necessarily unattractive. But the attempt to create the first post-modern empire against the will of its own people is misguided.

In fact, the European Post-Modern Project is turning out to be politically unsustainable. When the moderates and centrists who for so long dominated European politics proved unwilling to represent their peoples, those peoples found other, less respectable politicians to do so.

There was a great sigh of relief across the continent when Norbert Hofer, the presidential candidate of Austria's far-right Freedom Party, received "only" 46.7% of the vote. However, for Austria's fractured parliament the FP leads the Social Democrats 35% to 27%, with the other parties behind.

The same weekend, Italian Matteo Renzi lost his reform referendum by a crushing margin and resigned. 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 support leaving the euro.

Economic crisis threatens Greece again. There has been little serious reform of the sort necessary to encourage growth. Past bailouts have done more to protect French and German banks than average Europeans.

The increasingly unpopular Tsipras government 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. French President Francois Hollande, with single-digit approval ratings, is not running for re-election. His socialist party has been given up for dead.

The likely winner is Francois Fillon, a social conservative who supported economic reform while emphasizing traditional values and taking a hard line on security issues. But most observers expect the National Front's Marine Le Pen to reach next year's presidential runoff, with an outside chance of winning.

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany, which began as a liberal party critical of the euro, turned into an anti-immigration party. It is running 12% in the polls and has broken 20% 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 impacts on German politics.

Populist and nationalist currents flow elsewhere. Voters in the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU entirely. 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 EU 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.

Liberalism, at least of the classical variety, desperately needs a strong defender. But it won't be Angela Merkel. Nor will it be Europe.

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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