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The Potential Twilight of the European Union

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU) trillion-dollar loan package succeeded in quelling the financial maelstrom spawned by Greek debt. Nonetheless, the financial crisis has taken a painful toll on many EU members, and high national debts and the uncertain health of the continent's banks may mean more trouble ahead.

Although these economic woes have of late captured the headlines, they pale in comparison with a more serious malady: Europe's historic experiment in political union is faltering. As the poisonous politics that delayed the EU's rescue of the eurozone revealed, Europe is experiencing a renationalization of political life. The project of European integration, which has steadily advanced since the bitter years after World War II, has been thrown into reverse as its members claw back from the union the traditional powers of national sovereignty. And the causes run much deeper than the ongoing financial crisis, suggesting they are here to stay. Generational change, a backlash against globalization, and the absence of a compelling vision of Europe's place in the world may well mean that the European Union is running out of steam.

The EU's uncertain future has enormous stakes for Americans as well as Europeans. Europe remains the United States' go-to partner on every front—from stewardship of the global economy to curbing global warming to bringing stability to Afghanistan. With U.S. debt soaring and Americans tiring of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington could certainly use a collective EU capable of shouldering greater global burdens. Instead, the renationalization of the EU threatens to consign its twenty-seven individual member states to geopolitical irrelevance. The recent backsliding, if it continues, has the potential to compromise one of the most significant and unlikely accomplishments of the twentieth century—an integrated Europe at peace with itself, seeking to project power as a cohesive whole.

The Comeback of the Nation

Germany has been the economic and political engine behind European integration, motivated by its obsession with banishing the national rivalries that long subjected Europe to great power war. But Berlin's recent reluctance to come to the rescue of Greece—Chancellor Angela Merkel resisted the bailout for months—constituted a breach of the spirit of common welfare that is the hallmark of a collective Europe. Only after the Greek crisis threatened to engulf the eurozone did Merkel override strong popular opposition and approve the loan. Voters in local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia promptly punished her party for doing so, delivering the Christian Democrats their most severe defeat in the postwar era.

Such stinginess on economic matters is only the tip of the iceberg. The bigger problem is that German enthusiasm for the EU seems to be fast disappearing. In one of the few signs of life in the European project, member states last December embraced the Lisbon Treaty, endowing the union with a new presidential post, a foreign policy czar, and its own diplomatic service. But Berlin then played a leading role in selecting as the EU's new president and foreign policy chief Herman van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton—two low-profile individuals who would pose little threat to the visibility and authority of national leaders. Even the courts are putting the brakes on the power of EU institutions. Last year, the German Constitutional Court issued a ruling strengthening the sway of the national parliament over EU legislation. As *Der Spiegel* commented, the ruling “threatens future steps toward European integration.”

This renationalization of politics has been occurring across the EU. A stark sign of trouble on the horizon came in 2005, when Dutch and French voters rejected the European Constitutional Treaty, which would have consolidated the EU's legal and political character. The Lisbon Treaty, a watered-down version, was then rejected by the Irish in 2008. The Irish changed their minds in 2009, but only after ensuring that the treaty would not jeopardize national control of taxation and military neutrality.

British voters in May brought to power a coalition dominated by the Conservative Party, which is well known for its Europhobia. Although constrained by their partnership with the pro-EU Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives last year showed their true colors by withdrawing from the European People's Party—the main center-right bloc in the European Parliament—to join a far-right bloc that is a bastion of antipathy toward the EU.

Meanwhile, right-wing populism is on the upswing in many EU member states. It is the product primarily of a backlash against immigration (particularly of Muslims), not against European integration. Nevertheless, this hard-edged nationalism aims not only at minorities but also at the loss of autonomy that accompanies political union. Hungary's Jobbik Party, which borders on xenophobic, won forty-seven seats in elections earlier this year—up from zero in 2006. Even in the historically tolerant Netherlands, the far-right Party of Freedom recently won over 15 percent of the vote, giving it only seven fewer seats than the leading party.

If these obstacles to a stable union were not sobering enough, in July the EU's presidency rotated to Belgium—a country whose Dutch-speaking Flemish citizens and French-speaking Walloons are so divided that, long after elections in June, a workable governing coalition has yet to emerge. It speaks volumes that the country now guiding the European project suffers exactly the kind of nationalist antagonism that the EU was created to eliminate.

The Causes of Renationalization

This striking renationalization of European politics is the product first and foremost of generational change. For Europeans who came of age during World War II or the Cold War, the EU enjoys a sacred status; it is Europe's escape from its bloody past. Not so for younger Europeans, who have no past from which they seek escape. A recent poll revealed that French citizens over fifty-five are twice as likely to see the EU as a guarantee of peace as those under thirty-six. Whereas new European lead-

ers tend to assess the value of the EU through a cold calculation of costs and benefits, their predecessors viewed the European project as an article of faith. It is no surprise that matters of European integration no longer animate national politics as they used to.

Meanwhile, the competitive demands of the global marketplace, coupled with the financial crisis, are putting severe strains on Europe's comfortable welfare state. As EU members struggle to bring down mountainous debt, retirement ages are rising and benefits dwindling. Although European integration does more to improve than impede economic performance, the EU is often the scapegoat for economic hardship. In France, for example, anti-Europe campaigns have focused their ire on the EU's "Anglo-Saxon" assault on social welfare and on the "Polish plumber" who takes local jobs due to the EU's open labor market.

Finally, the EU's rapid enlargement to the east and south has further sapped it of life. Absent the cozy and familiar feel the smaller union had before the Berlin Wall fell, its original members in Western Europe have turned inward. And the new members from Central Europe, who have enjoyed full sovereignty only since the collapse of communism, are none too keen to give it away again—even to consensual institutions in Brussels rather than autocratic ones in Moscow. As Poland's late president Lech Kaczynski asserted soon after taking office in 2005, "What interests the Poles is the future of Poland and not that of the EU."

A cautious weariness also stems from European participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, missions for which popular support has been sparse. In Germany, roughly two-thirds of the public opposes the presence of German troops in Afghanistan, and the Dutch have already withdrawn their troops. Such widespread aversion to far-flung commitments rests uneasily with the Lisbon Treaty, which is intended in part to give the EU more geopolitical heft. Indeed, projecting Europe's voice on the global stage is one of the union's *raison d'être*. But this vision has no constituency; wars in distant lands, coupled with plunging defense expenditures stemming from the economic downturn, are tempering the European appetite for greater geopolitical responsibility. After all, member states have never shown much enthusiasm for extending the EU's authority over security issues, instead jealously guarding their sovereignty on matters of defense.

Buying Time

The EU has thus far reacted to this stunning loss of momentum by entering a holding pattern. As a leading member of the European Parliament recently explained, "The EU is now just trying to keep the machine going. The hope is to buy enough time for new leaders to emerge who will reclaim the project."

Buying time may be the best the EU can do for now, but its slide is poised to continue, with costs even for those outside Europe. The Obama administration has already expressed frustration with an EU whose geopolitical profile is waning. As Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates complained in February 2010 to a gathering of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officials, "The demilitarization of Europe—where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it—has gone from a blessing in the twentieth century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the twenty-first." As the United States tries to dig

itself out of debt and give its armed forces a breather, it will increasingly judge its allies by what they bring to the table. In Europe's case, the offering is small and shrinking.

When other unions stumbled, they suffered bloodshed. The United States enjoyed over seven decades of prosperous federation after 1789, only to descend into civil war in 1861. Yugoslavia suffered a similar fate in the 1990s—and is now gone for good. Europe is hardly headed back to war; its nations have lost their taste for armed rivalries. Instead, less dramatically but no less definitively, European politics will become less European and more national, until the EU becomes a union in name only. This may seem no great loss to some, but in a world that sorely needs the EU's aggregate will, wealth, and muscle, a fragmented and introverted Europe would constitute a historical setback.

Six decades ago, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, and Konrad Adenauer were Europe's founding fathers. Today, the EU needs a new generation of leaders who can breathe life into a project that is perilously close to expiring. For now, they are nowhere to be found.

About the Author

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