

LECTURE

DELIVERED NOVEMBER 1, 2018

No. 1300 | DECEMBER 4, 2018

A New Approach to Europe: U.S. Interests, Nationalist Movements, and the European Union

Ted Bromund

Abstract: *Current European policy combines low growth, low levels of job creation, high levels of unskilled immigration, increasing levels of supranational control, a rejection of the assimilative force of national identity, and lashings of deeply felt guilt. The first error of U.S. policy toward Europe is supporting the errors of its fiscal and monetary systems. The second error the U.S., and Europe, have made is to neglect security. The threats to European security today come from two quarters: Russia and the Mediterranean, the latter due in large part to the effects of Chancellor Angela Merkel's cataclysmically irresponsible open-borders policy.*

Introduction

I want to thank Alex Tiersky and Kyle Parker of the Helsinki Commission for conceiving of and organizing this briefing. It is an important subject, because U.S. policy towards Europe has changed fundamentally since 1945. But the shifts in U.S. policy have not been well-considered or well-understood, in part because most of the relevant scholars, policymakers, and funding derive from a single perspective, that of the European Union (EU).

Therefore the U.S. does not need a new policy toward Europe: It has had a new policy since the end of the Cold War. It needs to return to its former policy, from which it has thoughtlessly strayed.

Populism

Inevitably, this briefing—like any discussion of Europe—raises the question of “populism.” I am not sure what is meant by “populism,” except that the term is only used to describe parties, movements, or

KEY POINTS

- Part of the reason for the rise of “populism” in Europe is that a narrow and anti-national elite political consensus left no space for nationalism.
- You do not have to go far to the left or—especially—to the right before you fall outside the narrow political consensus of Europe—or, especially, the EU.
- The apple of the EU’s eye is the euro, which it believes, as the Obama Administration agreed during the Euro Crisis, must be preserved at all costs.
- The EU therefore pushes the forces of change away from its economic system and into the political systems of its member nations such as Greece—and now Italy. The U.S. supports the EU in this error.
- Americans are remarkably gullible in their belief that the EU is our friend—and are remarkably willing to overlook repeated EU statements that it views the U.S. as a rival.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1300>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

beliefs that the speaker dislikes. At the level of politics, what is happening is that in many European nations—except Britain, interestingly—established parties on the left, in particular, but also on the right, are losing votes to new parties, which are often described as “populist” or “nationalist.”

It is important to understand why this is happening. I have been struck over the past several years by the uncurious approach that has been taken toward the rise of the new parties and the decline of the old ones. Sometimes, the explanation that is offered is that it is all the fault of the Russians—which is so simplistic an explanation that it does not merit a rebuttal. It should be obvious that when large numbers of people vote for new parties, they are doing so because the old ones are not meeting their needs. If lots of people did not vote for the new parties, there would be no rise of “populism” to worry about.

Political Consensus

One problem is the narrowness of the political consensus in Europe. You do not have to go far to the left or—especially—to the right before you fall outside of it. In these circumstances, anyone who disagrees with part of the consensus will have to look for a new party for whom to vote. And given that support for the European Union and ever-deeper integration is a core part of the elite European political consensus, it is inevitable that a good deal of that rebellion is going to be associated with nationalism.

Nationalism

Nationalism is a dirty word in Europe. That is because nationalism has been tarred by association with Nazism. Precisely why Adolf Hitler, a racist imperialist, is regarded as a nationalist, while the nationalists in Poland, France, and Britain who resisted Hitler and fought to restore or to save their political independence are treated as the heroes of Europe’s anti-nationalist rebirth is an interesting question.

But the broader fact is this: Every single stable democracy in the world—every one of them—grew out of a national state and was fortified by a sense of nationalism. Without nationalism, there is no political community, and without a political community, there can be no democracy. This is not an original argument on my part: Philosophers such as J. S. Mill regarded it as a commonplace. Historians of almost every European nation, from Linda Colley in Britain

to Eugene Weber in France, have pointed out the importance of a felt sense of national identity to the making of the political nation.

All of these historians also point out something else: National identity is not inherent. Babies are not born French or Polish. National identity is learned and constructed. In other words, you do not just, in Eugene Weber’s phrase, make peasants into Frenchmen once. You have to do it every generation. And you have to do it with immigrants too.

Too many in Europe believe that Europe can rest forever on the nation-making achievements of past generations—or even that it should degrade those achievements by denigrating nationalism for the sake of a shallowly rooted Europeanism. This is a fundamental error. Nations are not made forever, and if they are not being sustained, they are being destroyed.

I would not myself say that nationalism is a good thing, full stop. Like any group identity, it offends against God’s truth that we are all individuals. Nor would I say that all the nationalism in Europe will necessarily be for the best. You cannot spend 70 years equating nationalism with illiberalism and then be shocked when the belief you have demonized is represented, at times, by illiberals. If liberals do not own nationalism, it will become the property of illiberals.

But I would say that nationalism is a necessary thing—and that, if you do not have it, or if you try to repress it, its space will be filled by other kinds of group identities that are incompatible with democracy. In other words, I regard nationalism as an important and necessary force. I disagree with those who argue that it was responsible for Europe’s fall. I agree instead with Adam Smith: Europe rose because it was divided into competing units. Nationalism was the cause of Europe’s rise, not its fall.

Policy Errors

Thus, part of the reason for the rise of “populism” in Europe is that a narrow and anti-national elite political consensus left no space for nationalism. Nationalism has therefore made its own space. But this is only part of what is going on. Another part are specific policy errors that Europe has made and that the U.S. has—since the end of the Cold War—indulged and supported.

If we go back to the immediate post-1945 years, we will see that the U.S. approach to stabilizing and democratizing Europe—or at least Western Europe—rested heavily on the belief that democracy

cannot exist without reasonably high and steady levels of economic growth. At the least, there can be no Great Depressions.

Thus, all of the U.S.'s initiatives in post-war Europe, from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to the International Monetary Fund to the Marshall Plan to the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], and, yes, even to NATO, were fundamentally about promoting economic growth. This belief drew on an American diagnosis of the cause of the rise of the Nazis and the origins of the Second World War. The resulting strategy was well-informed and successful. If I had to sum up that post-1945 U.S. strategy, it was to make economic changes to preserve the political order.

What do we do now? We do precisely the opposite. The apple of the EU's eye is the euro, which the EU believes, and which the Obama Administration agreed during the Euro Crisis, must be preserved at all costs. The EU therefore pushes the forces of change away from its economic system and into the political systems of its member nations such as Greece—and now Italy. And the U.S. supports the EU in this error.

The Low-Growth Model. The EU likes to boast that the European economic model is different from that of the U.S. By this, the EU means that the European model is low-growth. And the EU regards that as a good thing, regardless of how much youth unemployment it creates in Spain. But it is worse than that. With the EU's approach to Brexit, and the EU's impending copyright law, the EU has reached the stage where it simply tries to chain the other guy down or to make as much money as possible by suing him. In other words, the EU does not just back a low-growth model: It has abandoned its hopes of becoming a leading digital power and is now more interested in trying to insulate its low-growth model by reducing growth elsewhere.

Of course, Europe's growth problem is not all the EU's fault. All over Europe, national policies mirror and exacerbate the EU's follies. But virtually everyone recognizes that, just as the EU claims, the EU and European economic models value social protection over growth. But at some point—and we are well past that point—Europe needs to emphasize growth, for

the same reason that it needed growth after 1945: Democracies cannot tolerate persistently high levels of unemployment. It is a sure bet that voting publics will react to low growth somehow, likely by blaming the parties in power.

Security. The second major policy error the U.S. and Europe, have made is to neglect security. More specifically, the U.S. has sought to outsource the responsibility for European security to the Europeans and the EU. This is the culmination of a long-held American wish, one expressed almost as vehemently by President Eisenhower as by Presidents Obama or Trump. But no matter how long or vehemently we have wished for it, it will not work, because the Europeans—and in particular the EU—lack the willingness to provide for their own security. I regret this, but I see no point in kidding ourselves about it.

Russia. The threats to European security today come from two quarters: Russia and the Mediterranean. The European response to the Russian invasion and dismemberment of Ukraine has been a set of modest and symbolic sanctions and, except in the NATO member states that border on Russia, no meaningful increases in defense spending. In other words, Europe has failed completely.

The Mediterranean. In the Mediterranean, Chancellor Merkel, in line with Germany's dual role as America's worst ally and Europe's most selfish power, adopted a cataclysmically irresponsible open-borders policy—a policy which rested on no consultations at all and which embodied nothing more than a politically foolhardy sense of guilt.

Friend or Foe?

But the problem is deeper than that. Americans are remarkably gullible in their acceptance that the EU is our friend and are equally and remarkably willing to overlook repeated EU statements that it views the U.S. as a rival. As EU President Donald Tusk put it in early 2017, "It must be made crystal clear that the disintegration of the EU will not lead to the restoration of some mythical, full sovereignty of its member states but to their real and factual dependence on the great superpowers: the United States, Russia[,] and China. Only together can we be fully independent."¹

1. Council of the European Union, "'United We Stand, Divided We Fall': Letter by President Donald Tusk to the 27 EU Heads of State or Government on the Future of the EU before the Malta Summit," January 31, 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31/tusk-letter-future-europe/> (accessed November 20, 2018).

The point of this is indeed crystal clear: President Tusk classes the U.S. with Russia as a great power seeking to impose dependence on Europe. I suggest we take him at his word and treat him with as much consideration as he treats us. For the EU, the greater the U.S. role in Europe, the less room there is for the EU, and the more the European states will depend on the U.S. It is time for us to recognize that the EU is an open and declared enemy to the role the U.S. assumed in Europe after 1945.

The fundamental problem is that for the EU, everything is political.

- The point of EU defense initiatives is not to improve Europe's defense: It is to reduce the defense sovereignty of the EU's nation states and to diminish NATO.
- The point of the euro is not to make Europe's economy work better: It is to be a political instrument for European unity.
- The point of having an EU foreign policy, or a border force, is not to do these things better: It is to elevate Brussels and subordinate the nation-states of Europe.

A Show of Greatness

This strategy has been remarkably successful on its own terms, but it neglects one key point: Security, the economy, the border, and foreign policy—all are issues with realities of their own. By treating them merely as political instruments for the greatness of the EU, the EU shows it prefers a show of greatness to the reality of achievement.

At the level of national politics, the rise of “populism” is not surprising. If you are an established political party in a democratic political system that offers little meaningful choice, I would suggest that an approach that combines low growth, low levels of job creation, high levels of unskilled immigration, increasing levels of supranational control, a rejection of the assimilative force of national identity, and lashings of deeply felt guilt is unlikely to increase your vote share. If you want to provoke people into voting against you, on the other hand, this is an excellent strategy.

Conclusion

That is the path Europe has followed, and it is the path that the U.S. has endorsed and enabled. This path is a foolhardy one. The problem is that we are now so far down this path that backing out will be difficult. In too many European countries there are few credible voices outside the consensus who can lead a move away from it and back to a path of sovereign national democracies, a restored balance between social protection and economic growth, and a transatlantic security alliance that rests on controlled borders and credible deterrence. But that is the right path nonetheless.

—Ted R. Bromund, PhD, is Senior Research Fellow in Anglo-American Relations in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered to the Helsinki Commission Briefing in Washington, D.C., on November 1, 2018.