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Europe’s Embers of Nationalism

BRENDAN O’LEARY

Though cosmopolitans, imperialists, theorists, and jihadists wish it were otherwise, nationalism is the most potent principle of legitimacy in the modern world. The principle of national self-determination holds that nations should be freely and severally institutionally expressed, and ruled by their co-nationals in sovereign nation-states or in power-sharing arrangements with their peers in multinational states. A typical contrast exists between exclusivist nationalists who insist there is or should be but one nation on their soil, and pluralists who recognize they must share the same place with other nationalities.

Resurgent Nationalism

Sixth in a series

Debate persists on when nationalism first emerged—“primordialists,” “perennialists,” and “modernists” respectively posit ancient Egypt, early medieval Christendom, and post-Napoleonic Europe as the founding sites; and modernists dispute among themselves where nationalism first became vigorous. Benedict Anderson, for example, makes a case for “creole pioneers” in the Americas, but it is more common to regard nationalism as a phenomenon that diffused from Europe to the rest of the world—through imitation of European templates, and in reaction to European imperialism. Yet, however deep their disagreements on these matters, historians and political scientists usually agree that nationalism has proved more disruptive, destructive, and disastrous in Europe than elsewhere.

A century after the assassinations of the Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife

Sophie ignited World War I, contemporary voices are observing or prophesying renewed nationalist conflagrations in Europe. They prompt the question of whether the dark continent, as the historian Mark Mazower has called Europe, is regaining its thoroughly deserved reputation for violent national, ethnic, and religious conflict. After all, however one defines world war, Europe has been the epicenter of three since the 1790s. In their formation, maintenance, and downsizing, Europe’s empires caused more wars and insecurity than their equivalents on any other continent. Throughout the last two centuries, some of its officers, militias, and foot soldiers engaged in wars, genocides, and ethnic expulsions around the globe. The Enlightenment and human rights are European gifts to the world, but Europe’s intellectuals also invented “scientific” racism and justified colonial civilizational missions. So the continent warrants watching. How worried should we be?

SECESSIONIST STIRRINGS

The first exhibits for renewed fears of turmoil present themselves in Western Europe. In September 2014, Scots voted on whether to secede from the parliamentary Union of Great Britain, established since 1707. They voted “No,” by a margin of 55 to 45 percent. But to win, the No parties had to promise more restructuring of the UK’s territorial government; and the Yes side will seek another referendum soon, especially given how well the Scottish National Party mobilized among the young. It stands poised to displace the Labour Party from one of its founding bastions in the parliamentary elections scheduled for May of this year.

Shortly before the Scots voted, Ulster loyalists had rioted within their Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland when the laws regulating the use of the Union flag, often known as “the Union Jack,” were changed in the city of Belfast. They

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did so shortly after US-led mediation stalled on outstanding contentious “legacy issues” from the long conflict between 1969 and 1998. The stability of Northern Ireland’s power-sharing institutions seemed threatened. In both the North and South of Ireland, Sinn Féin, a left-wing nationalist party that once supported the insurrection of the Irish Republican Army, is at new heights of popularity. It may emerge as the best-supported party in the South in the spring 2016 elections, and aspires to become the leading party in the North.

Inspired by the Scots, Catalans demonstrated throughout 2014, demanding the right to hold a referendum to secede from the Kingdom of Spain, into which they were forcibly incorporated in 1714; their language was outlawed under General Francisco Franco’s dictatorship. In November, they held an unrecognized and allegedly illegal referendum asserting their right to self-determination. Spain’s Constitutional Court had caused the crisis by rejecting as unconstitutional proposed extensions to Catalonia’s autonomy. Those who voted affirmed their wish to have the right to secede by a margin of 4 to 1, albeit in a low turnout. Meanwhile, whatever Spanish jurists and the governing party may pretend, the matter of the country’s other long-running secessionist movement—the Basque question, or the Castilian question, as it is known in the Basque lands—is also unresolved.

Flemish nationalists in Belgium—itsself founded in 1830 in a successful secession from the Netherlands—hope to be next in line to hold an exit referendum. Belgium’s complex federation is partly held together by its Brussels region, where the Flemish lack a majority—though they are a majority in Flanders and the whole country. The hollowing out of the core Belgian state has already occurred, with the transfer of many of its traditional central powers to its regions and communities *and* to the European level.

These potential secessions suggest instability among Western Europe’s last multinational states—the United Kingdom, Spain, and Belgium—all, in different ways, the rumps of European empires, and all heterogeneous in character. Yet no one expects these secessionist projects to trigger wars or protracted violence. The United Kingdom, for example, has ratified a treaty with Ireland and passed statutes that allow for a peaceful reunification of Ireland through a referendum. Just before Christmas, the Northern Irish parties, joined by the London and Dublin governments, patched up their differences and agreed to retain

their imaginative power-sharing settlement. The referendum in Scotland took place on the assumption that a Yes vote, no matter how small the margin, would lead to a negotiated end to the Union. Irish and Scots secessionist projects do not arouse anything like the same feelings as Ireland’s nineteenth-century aspirations, partly because the English have become democratic and ceased to be an imperial people. Belgians quarrel and negotiate endlessly, but they do not resort to violence on a significant scale. The Castilians may be more centralist and nostalgically imperial than the English, but it is very difficult to imagine Spanish armies marching on Barcelona.

Moreover, most of the secessionist movements, so far, envisage independence within the European Union, and within NATO, albeit without nuclear weapons on their soil. Keen on leaving one union, they want to remain within others, with their former partners. They seek rearranged relationships, not a comprehensive divorce. The crises of these multinational states have distinct origins. What they share are the strains triggered by the recent global economic crises and their mismanagement by central governments—incompetent, corrupt, or both—which have helped vibrant autonomy movements build cases for independence. However, a sovereign Catalonia, Euskedi, Flanders, or Scotland—and the possibility of closer steps toward a reunified Ireland—will not cause the rest of the world to have sleepless nights.

DIVIDED UNION

The second set of anxiety-inducing nationalist exhibits is found in the condition of the EU, which now includes 28 member states. It has hardly been in rude health in its third decade, especially but not only in its eurozone. European Parliament elections in May 2014 resulted in victories for large numbers of far-right and far-left candidates who called either for their member states to secede from the EU or for the restoration of traditional governmental powers to their nation-states—particularly, but not only, over immigration.

As its name advertises, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the poll-topper in England, wishes to leave the EU. The Conservative Party competes with it by promising to renegotiate the UK’s membership before offering its citizens an “in or out” referendum. Across a large swath of Western Europe (in Ireland, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden), parties of protest and independents

also polled remarkably powerfully. In most member states, the incumbent center-right and center-left parties felt their voters' wrath, though they survived. Had these elections been held in May 2015, however, they would have registered victories for new far-left parties in Spain and Greece. In Greece, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), which pledges to end austerity policies imposed by the EU and renegotiate the country's debt, won parliamentary elections in January and formed a government with a smaller right-wing party with similar anti-austerity views.

Four crises distress the EU. Its constitutional crisis has not been resolved since 2004 when it failed to ratify its own draft constitution (which was longer than 500 pages, not including the appendices). Instead, it settled in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 for a revision of its treaty rules without popular ratification—except in Ireland. The EU has failed to constitutionalize itself with its constituent peoples, perhaps because it has naively presented itself as offering a post-national rather than a multinational future. Its “democratic deficit” has long been evident. Significant economic regulatory powers have been granted to European institutions, but these are not significantly checked either by the European Parliament or by the member states' parliaments. Europe's executive powers are divided between ministers from member states, political appointees, and nondemocratic offices, detached from visible accountability mechanisms. In crisis conditions they manage to make US policy making appear robust, transparent, cohesive, and popular.

The EU's third crisis is also self-imposed. After the Cold War it grew from 12 to 28 member states to cover most of the continent, including most of its peninsulas and major islands. These events were celebrated as the victory of Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment vision of perpetual peace for cosmopolitan Europe. The ingestion of new members is, however, leading to major difficulties. Western Europe refused to be as generous to the East as it had been to its own citizens and farmers. Many Eastern Europeans have adjusted painfully to democratization, the transition from communism, and the nonnegotiable adoption of EU laws—all now designed in the interests of a capitalist market, except in agriculture. Decision-

making requirements approximate unanimity among diverse states, which means the unhappy can be kept that way by a happy minority. On top of these problems, and worsening their unintended effects, Europe is undergoing a major crisis of economic stagnation, by far the worst since the 1930s in its impact on growth and the employment of labor and capital.

SOWING THE WIND

The global financial crisis may have had primarily American-driven roots and responsibilities, but European institutions and policy makers accentuated all its primary and secondary consequences, especially because of the way the euro was designed to conform with German prejudices. The union's responses to the difficulties that were initially experienced by Portugal, Ireland, Greece, and Spain (gracelessly labeled the PIGS in the financial markets), which then spread to Cyprus and are now lapping at the shores of Italy and perhaps

France, have almost made a mockery of the idea of European solidarity. They have certainly punctured talk of a European demos. With maximum feasible macroeconomic illiteracy, most of Europe's elected leaders embraced austerity—the

maxims of balanced budgets, debt-reduction programs, tax hikes, and public expenditure cuts—in a deep and widening depression.

One might have expected such policies from Europe's center-right parties, which eclipsed the center-left in many countries as the crisis broke, but the timing could not have been worse. And then they determined to enshrine this collective folly in a treaty, the fiscal compact. The treaty is a textbook case of what not to do in a major economic downturn, sowing the wind for every would-be little Hitler or Stalin to mobilize among the angry and unemployed. European leaders erroneously—and deliberately—generalized from the Greek case, where there was a crisis in the public finances and the integrity of state institutions, to the other member states that fell into crises because their banks and private sectors had gotten into difficulties, as did German, French, and British banks.

Few EU leaders have shown impartiality, solidarity, or consistency in crisis management. Immovable in their parsimony, they wonder why they are unloved—when they are not despised. The EU's

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institutions—remote, opaque, and inscrutable—offer an inviting target for nationalist discontents. They are viewed as the scene of national leaders' treacheries. In his last book, the late Peter Mair, a political scientist at the European University Institute in Florence, described Europe's leaders and parties as "ruling the void," faced with a detached, bored and indifferent citizenry. The void has since seemed to be filling rapidly with angry, resentful, and anxious parties and movements. Established governing parties, known as "cartel parties" (more concerned with keeping power and public funds for themselves than with their voters' interests), show symptoms of morbidity.

Existing xenophobia, expressed toward immigrants, and Islamophobia have been intensified by the austerity programs. Islamophobia has at least some rational roots in the outrageous actions of jihadist militants among inadequately integrated Muslims. Nativists have sought scapegoats for the numerous crises of the EU and its constituent member states in traditional quarters (among Jews, Roma, and gays), but also among newer ones (especially but not only extra-European Muslims, and the union's *metics*: resident noncitizens, guest workers, and refugees). Citizens of the member states wonder, with cause, why their elites bail out rich bankers but do little to address unemployment. They question why there is no action to slow or stop immigration—which cannot be blocked within the EU after member states' accession is complete, but can be regulated at the borders of the union as a whole—even amid levels of unemployment not seen for over half a century.

DIFFIDENT HEGEMON

Germany has been the prime beneficiary of the new Europe built since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Reunified, it is the most economically powerful and populous EU member state, and in many ways an exemplary rule-governed federal democracy. It is, however, an economic lion currently led by political donkeys. After 1990 it undertook probably the most extensive internal fiscal transfer program (from West to East) in world history; without it, German unification would have failed. But now, under Chancellor Angela Merkel (the East German daughter of a Lutheran pastor) the mainstream German leadership, terrified by its

voters' fears and neuroses, absolutely refuses to see that internal fiscal transfers may be required to make the eurozone work effectively, and has inhibited the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt from imitating the far more successful policies of the US Federal Reserve. The ECB did too little early in the financial crisis—it actually made matters worse with a premature interest-rate increase—and only recently has been allowed to be more proactive under the leadership of Mario Draghi. But the ECB's sloth has been far exceeded by that of the major member states.

Merkel leads Germany like Germany leads Europe: from the rear, and with the rear more evidently engaged than the brain. She and the leaders in her grand coalition believe (or pretend) that Germany became economically competitive again through minor wage and benefit cuts executed in the early 2000s. But Germany's recent gains really came through Chinese demand for German capital goods, the deep devaluation German exporters received after the abolition of the Deutschmark

and its replacement by the euro, and the benefits from completing German reunification within the European single market. No state has benefited more from the euro than Germany; no state contributed more to its de-

sign; and no state exercises more weight over the ECB. The results are now visible in the "periphery," as the southern Mediterranean states and Ireland are increasingly called, but they are also visible in stagnant cities and towns throughout the continent. Austerity programs have reignited nationalist sentiments and have acted as aversion therapy for European integration, at least in its current guise.

Ironically, Europe now has what most of its states and citizens have always wanted: a generally passive and inward-looking Germany, reluctant to project its power. Its current leaders are not from the contrite and imaginative post-Nazi cohort, which included the exemplary chancellors Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, and Helmut Kohl—true European Germans. Merkel's political class, unlike the country's intellectuals, in the main is almost unimaginably provincial, when not serving on the boards of Russian enterprises. A pacifist Germany, in the light of modern history, is a very good thing, but a trivial, pfennig-pinching, finger-pointing Deutschland is not.

Most of the secessionist movements seek rearranged relationships, not a comprehensive divorce.

Its heavy veto power over the management of the euro, and its protection of German banks, threaten to collapse the remarkable post-1958 experiment in European cooperation and cause untold economic damage. Most of southern Europe is locked by German policy into debts that resemble those of developing countries that have borrowed in a strong foreign currency. Greece is not alone in expressing rage against existing European policies and leaders who collaborate with the nostrums of Merkel, the diffident hegemon.

REMARKABLE RESTRAINT

These exhibits of nationalist anxieties within the EU should cause concern. If the world's largest market is stagnant, it is a global problem. If its currency union breaks up chaotically, the material impact would be felt throughout the world. But barring further evidence, this crisis does not portend war among European states. If the eurozone does break up, or downsize, one can hope that slightly greater care will be taken in its rationalization than was evident in its construction, and that efforts will be made to protect the rest of European treaty agreements outside monetary union.

And despite all these difficulties, Europe's citizens, when not voting for non-mainstream parties, have arguably been remarkably restrained and measured in their discontent. They have not, in large numbers, endorsed overtly antidemocratic parties. They have sought replacements for their traditional parties because these have let them down. The EU is in trouble, but it is not doomed. Even anti-immigrant parties feel obliged to deny that they are racist—they argue, like the Swedish Democrats or the French National Front, that they merely fear Islam. Throughout Europe gay rights, as in the United States, have increased amid austerity. And mainstream Europeans have certainly not been bellicose. For the most part, they welcomed Barack Obama's presidency precisely because it promised a less frenetic and adventurous use of American hard power. French and German policy makers have strained relations, but they are not increasing their military budgets in an arms race against one another.

A peace of exhaustion seems to have settled in this decade over the post-Yugoslav Balkans, disciplined by NATO and the EU as the twin instruments of trusteeship. Unless Bosnia and Herzegovina breaks up there are no new sovereign states foreseeable in the Balkans, though Spain still refuses to recognize an independent Kosovo,

thereby blocking its accession to the EU. (Spain argues that Kosovo needs to negotiate its status with Serbia, but the policy has no local merit: Madrid is focused on locking the Catalans and Basques within Castile's sovereignty.) Even though the EU is a less attractive proposition than it once was, it is still true that typical Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians, Macedonians, and Montenegrins still want to join the confederation in which Croats and Slovenes already abide, albeit with limited enthusiasm. The latter nations turned out in the recent European parliamentary elections at rates of 25 and 21 percent, respectively, making American midterm turnouts look respectable.

DELUSIONS OVER UKRAINE

Renewed national and ethnic conflagrations are certainly occurring on the EU's "oriental" frontier. In 2014, the conflict in and over Ukraine was triggered by a winter revolution against a corrupt president who was equivocating between rival offers of economic partnership from Moscow and Brussels. What most Westerners saw as a legitimate popular uprising, most Russians saw as a coup d'état. There was a high truth quotient in both perspectives. A largely Western (and Westernized) Ukrainian elite has returned to power, intent on seeing a whole Ukraine enter the EU and NATO. Some in this new government were foolishly determined to demote the status of the Russian language, and they incorporated a small number of neo-fascists in an anti-Russian political front. In response, Russia annexed Crimea after a referendum held in the presence of Russian troops wiping snow from their boots. Armed ethnic Russians elsewhere in eastern Ukraine demanded the right to follow Crimea, establishing two regions that declared their independence from Kiev. They were backed by Russian intelligence and special forces.

Outsiders' arguments centered on who was being manipulated and the core causes of the conflict. One side believes that Russian President Vladimir Putin's alleged ambitions to restore the Soviet empire are the driver of antagonism. A more self-critical and realist thesis focuses on the joint carelessness of the EU and NATO in thinking they could openly encourage Georgia and Ukraine to join their alliances without provoking Russia, which had repeatedly declared that such extensions would damage its strategic interests. Plainly, however, the Ukrainian crisis owes a great deal to the illusion that post-Soviet Ukraine can be treated as if it were a homogeneous nation-state. There

is a clash between Westernizing mononationalists, determined to remake Ukraine as a France of the East, and multinationalists, who think that Ukraine is and should remain what its name means—"the Borderland"—in which Ukrainians, Russians, Hungarians, and others must coexist in conditions of mutual recognition if the place is to remain unified.

Wars involving two or more European states have returned to the continent's east. With luck, subsequent historians will dub them the Wars of Russia's Decline. In the first, Russia quickly punished Georgia in 2008, after the latter's hotheaded president tried forcibly to reincorporate secessionist entities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The second is unfolding in Ukraine. No one is rushing to claim that these events disprove "democratic peace theory," the idea that democratic states do not go to war with another. That is because the relevant entities' democratic credentials are so threadbare. Moreover, the conflicts have been occurring outside the EU, not within it.

But the Ukraine crisis has undoubtedly refuted the theory that the EU could use its soft power to expand quietly to all the non-Russian states in its neighborhood. This theory was based on naive estimations

of the EU's capacities for forward engagement and crisis management—and on the cavalier assumption that Putin would allow the EU and NATO to advance their respective borders to the plains over which Russia has been repeatedly attacked throughout history. European and American leaders were emphatically warned, and it is fatuous to pretend otherwise. They sleepwalked into antagonizing the Russian bear—not when it was hibernating, but when it was loudly huffing.

The EU and the United States have protested the transformation of borders by force. Yet some leaders have quietly admitted that Crimea's status was absurd—the legacy of a truly arbitrary decision by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev—and that Crimea's autonomy had been questioned by Ukrainian nationalists. Unelected officials also privately acknowledge that they intended to bring Ukraine into the Western alliances—through a regime change, and against Russian warnings. They have had a rude reality check. Great powers rarely allow smaller neighbors' nationalism to threaten their perceived national interests. Meanwhile, the

Russians have been protesting furiously against interference in the internal affairs of another state—rich hypocrisy on their part, while they employ scarcely covert operatives to support secessionist entities within Ukraine and seek to make the country ungovernable in order to compel its geopolitical submission.

CONTAINING CONFLICT

Once known as Russia's Scotland, Ukraine seems set to be the site of protracted conflict, a low-intensity war punctuated by intermittent cease-fires, balloting, and artillery bombardments. The events in Kiev, eastern Ukraine, and Crimea have not only deepened tension between NATO and Russia, they have also reemphasized European dependence on Russian energy supplies and recapitulated the central point of Europe's history since 1945—namely, that major confrontations and their resolutions are determined by the Americans and Russians. Sanctions and counter-sanctions are under way. These have visibly damaged the Russian economy (though

the falling prices of oil and gas have been more important), but whether they will reduce Russia's determination to halt the Westernization of Ukraine is much less obvious. Many of the EU's eastern member states, and

Germany, stand to lose as the sanctions against Russia bite into their trade balances. Brussels and Washington show little appetite to bail out the bankrupt Ukrainian government on the scale required to make it function. Moreover, since they need Russian cooperation to deal with Iran's nuclear program, Syria's civil war, and the US exit from Afghanistan, implacable Euro-American opposition to Putin's interests in Ukraine is unlikely.

The Ukrainian debacle is a major alteration in the status quo; it has occasioned civilian and combat deaths on a significant scale, and territory has changed hands through force, even if a majority in Crimea would have wanted to rejoin Russia in a free and fair referendum. Yet by historic standards, the war has so far been a bloody scuffle between incompetents rather than an escalating major war between increasingly efficient belligerents. The Russian Army is not marching on Kiev, and containment of the Ukraine conflict remains in the interest of both Russians and Americans.

Americans and Europeans divide between those who advocate Ukraine's entry into NATO and the EU

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(notably the Poles), and those who prefer to leave it as a “buffer state.” Their irresolution deepens Russian fears. In its post-Soviet life, Ukraine has had a disastrous and volatile set of “transitions” and reversals. These demonstrate that to remain one country (without Crimea), Ukraine’s constitutional order must provide credible commitments and institutions to Russian speakers and ethnic Russians; that is, it must mandate power sharing and federalization, and declare international neutrality. Such steps, however, would amount to a domestic and external status that Ukraine’s new leaders reject. They do so partly because Russia advocates such a status, but also because they insist on what they deem to be the preferences of the Ukrainian majority.

Ukraine’s new nationalist leaders have been foolishly encouraged in their fantasies. They have insisted that Ukraine is—or should be—a mononational state. They now seem most unlikely to obtain major economic and military aid from Europe or the United States, let alone membership in the EU. The fact is that all of Ukraine’s postcommunist peers that became members of the EU—against Russia’s express preferences and its memories of promises made to Mikhail Gorbachev—did so by first becoming members of NATO. The nuclear umbrella underpinned access to the single market, not the other way around. This policy was not followed in Ukraine, and that is probably just as well. Since bringing Ukraine into NATO now would undoubtedly deepen conflict with Russia, it not going to happen—not on Obama’s watch, at any rate.

A FEDERALIST FUTURE?

All of Europe is not afire, or about to catch fire. There are dangerous sparks and embers of national, ethnic, and cultural conflict throughout the continent, capable of causing new conflicts and reanimating old ones, but they are mostly subdued by historical standards. The multinational states in the West—the UK, Spain, and Belgium—will have to restructure consensually if they are to hold together. They also need contingency plans for peaceful downsizing. Their peaceful dissolution is feasible, and will pose no threat to local or regional security. Rhetoric to the contrary may safely be ignored as special pleading.

To reconnect with their citizens, the member states of the EU must reappraise the economic neoliberalism that has provided guarantees and wel-

fare to bankers but not to the middle and working classes. They need fiscal federalism to match monetary federalism, or else the eurozone will go the way of the gold standard. There have been many European miracles, but there is no known miracle that bypasses the axiomatic truth that debts that cannot be repaid will not be repaid.

No war between civilizations is afoot, within Europe or on its borders. The grotesque excesses of jihadists who seek a caliphate occur wherever there are aggrieved Sunni Muslims, but not among all of them. Jihadists need to be policed out of existence, but they will not trigger new intergovernmental wars in Europe, or outside it. Policies to reconstruct social democracy in Europe will help quell the threat they pose.

The EU’s weak-willed fantasy of incorporating more states to the East—Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia—must be abandoned to avoid a purposeless war with a declining great power. Appeasement is not required, just clarity on the limits of expansion. If there is to be any further enlargement, it should explicitly be focused on the more feasible project of incorporating the remaining Balkan states.

The Ukraine conflict is a crisis of nationalism that could lead to major war in Europe. De-escalating the crisis requires concessions from Russia and from the EU (and its US ally). It requires concessions from the new regime in Ukraine and from the secessionists in the east and southeast. A political settlement that approximates federal power-sharing is necessary to avoid further ratcheting up hostilities and to resolve what could become an only partially “frozen conflict.” The EU’s alignment, intended or unintended, with Ukrainian mononationalists has contributed fuel to the fire.

If Europeans want to make security policy autonomously for their own continent—if they want to avoid being the buffer continent between Washington and Moscow—then they must jointly centralize their security and foreign policy powers in a true federation, raise taxes to fund large armed forces, and provide their citizens with a credibly democratic union that delivers welfare, full employment, and reduced inequality—not just a common market for bankers. That vista might indeed be troubling for the rest of the world, but no one is expecting it to materialize any time soon. ■