



# EUROPE UNBALANCED

*EU politics now resembles a scramble of interlocking conflicts and fractured alliances with no winning coalition in sight*

• DR. AMICHAH MAGEN

**I**t was supposed to be an ever closer union in which Europe “whole and free” would stand alongside the United States in leading a liberal international order.

This would involve exporting modernization to Africa and the Middle East and socializing Russia, Iran and China into rule-based multilateralism – serving as a shining model of successful post-national cosmopolitanism for the whole world to admire and emulate.

After completing its “Big Bang” round of membership expansion to Central and Eastern Europe in 2007 and admitting Croatia into the club in 2013, the European Union of 28 states – democratic, prosperous and at peace – took its internal unity more or less for granted and thought of itself as a rising “normative power” in a largely benign global environment.

Yet within a frighteningly short period of time, the European dream has morphed into a nightmare. The once ebullient Metrosexual Superpower is now entangled in a sticky web of internal fractures, too divided to generate a coherent vision of a shared European future and too fragile to determine its own geopolitical fate.

Whether Brexit eventually happens or not, the old equilibrium that held the EU together for decades – one built around the Berlin-London-Paris triangle and embedded within the transatlantic community – is now irrevocably shattered. The Brits, always somewhat suspect in the eyes of committed integrationists, will never be trusted again to be reliable partners in the construction of the European Project.

No new European equilibrium has emerged or is likely to be found in the foreseeable future. The loss of London has come just at a time when the continent is caught in a maelstrom of centrifugal forces and lacks a cohesive organizing idea that could restore a modicum of balance to an EU battered by migration, terrorism and economic crises.

At the heart of Europe’s troubles lies a growing disconnect among European cultural and political elites, and between most of those elites and populations inside European societies. These chasms have insidiously eroded public trust in the basic efficacy of European political systems at the national and EU levels. It is a divide European elites are unlikely to be able to begin to repair any time soon since they themselves possess sharply diverging conceptions about what Europe is (and ought to be) and because none of them is strong enough to impose their vision on the rest.

EU politics now resembles a scramble of interlocking conflicts and fractured alliances with no winning coalition in sight. The European Commission is fighting Hungary and Poland. Italy and Poland are conniving to form an anti-EU league in the run

‘THE LOSS of London has come just at a time when the continent is caught in a maelstrom of centrifugal forces.’  
(Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



SICK MAN of Europe: Political cartoon by JM Staniforth, 1898. National representations of the Great Powers of Europe ‘healing’ a subdued Crete, dressed in Turkish garb – the ruling power on the island at the time – in the aftermath of the Cretan Uprising in 1898.

up to the May 2019 European Parliament elections. Germany, Austria, Finland and the Netherlands are increasingly unwilling to subsidize the poorer, more profligate southern Europeans, and everyone is resisting France’s beleaguered President Emmanuel Macron’s grandiose ideas for deeper European integration.

For the time being, the EU is unlikely to unravel. Barring a major catastrophe – a full-blown Eurozone meltdown triggered by debt-laden Italy or a new tsunami of refugees escaping a failing Algeria or Nigeria, for example – Europe will sputter along in fits and starts, as aging empires have done throughout the ages. Like the Romans in the 5th, the Holy Roman Empire in the 18th and the Ottomans in the 19th century, the EU is more likely to gradually slouch toward paralysis and decay than to experience any form of dramatic collapse.

The EU is now the sick man of Europe. Unless it is able to generate a convincing new equilibrium, built around an energizing and unifying centrist vision, we should not expect a lot of bangs from Europe, but perhaps quite a bit of whimpering. ■

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