The Fragmentation of the European Union

by George Friedman - January 28, 2020

At the end of this week, the United Kingdom, the second-largest economy in Europe, will exit the European Union. Meanwhile, Poland is under intense attack by the bloc for violating EU regulations by attempting to limit the independence of Polish judges; Hungary is also under attack for allegedly violating the rule of law; and one of the major parties in Italy has toyed with the idea of introducing a parallel currency that would allow the country to manage internal debt without regard for EU regulations and wishes.

The founding principle of the EU was the unification of hitherto warring nations into a single bloc, built around common economic and political principles and a common European identity. The assumption was that given Europe's history, putting aside differences was a self-evident need for all European countries. But as we see in the case of Italy, it is not clear that there is a common European economic interest. Given the tensions with Poland and Hungary, it's also unclear if there is a common political interest. And the U.K.'s decision to leave also raises questions over whether these common interests persist and whether national identity can be subsumed under a European identity. The tensions within the EU do not reflect marginal disagreements; they represent fundamental questions over whether national interests and identities can be reconciled with poorly defined European interests. The EU, therefore, is moving toward an existential crisis. It may survive, but only as a coalition of nations representing a fraction of Europe.

Self-Determination or Nothing

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The fundamental issue is national identity and sovereignty. The U.K., Italy, Poland and Hungary are all European nations, but they have different histories and therefore different sensibilities. What it means to be Italian is not the same as what it means to be British. They in turn have a different sense of self from the Germans or Romanians. The question, therefore, is: What is this European sensibility? The common assumption is that it is liberal democracy. The problem is that there are many types of liberal democracy and, more to the point, the fundamental principle behind liberal democracy is national self-determination – the idea that the nation must select the government and that the government is answerable to no one other than the nation. If you sever the idea of national self-determination from liberal democracy, you undercut liberal democracy's fundamental principle and, with it, the European identity. Liberal democracy is national self-determination or it is nothing.

The governments in the U.K., Italy, Poland and Hungary all have been elected. Some politicians who were defeated in elections have made the claim that these elections were the result of fraud or illegitimate manipulation of public opinion, as was the case with the Brexit vote. But the fact is that those of us who know these countries know that the views the governments hold are not alien to the countries. Poland and Hungary have their own understanding of what state power should look like; Italy has a long history of complex and fragmented government needing to control its own economy; and the United Kingdom's constituent parts have national identities that are very different from those of other countries.

Europe's nations are all different, and while history made each adopt the garb of liberal values beyond just national self-determination, they never gave up their own identities because they could not. They are what history made them, and while German or Soviet occupation shaped them, a few decades of horror – and the adoption of the idea that national self-determination must be determined through elections – was not enough to cause them to abandon who they were. France was France before it held its first election. In other words, national identity may exist prior to and outside of liberal democracy for some countries. This is not the case for the United States; its very identity from its founding was liberal democratic. German identity, however, has varied dramatically over the decades, and Germans were still German in spite of the variations. Hitler represented the national will well after he abandoned elections.

This takes us to extreme places we need not go, but it also points out that national identity and national self-determination can be expressed in ways that are faithful to the national will but violate the liberal democratic methodology in nations with ancient and complex foundations.

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The Illusion of European Identity

If the idea of national identity is so complex, then how can we define the European identity? The European identity that the Maastricht treaty embodied was a snapshot of a unique moment in European history in which the Anglo-American occupation of Western Europe and the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe were ending. The liberal democracy that was imposed on Germany's destroyed cities seemed to be part of German identity, history notwithstanding. The Poles and Hungarians yearned to be Europeans, and the liberal democracy that emerged from World War II was their template, as it was for Italy.

But I would argue that that European identity was an illusion to which Europe clung, fearing that the only alternative was a return to its own bloody past. After the Berlin Wall came down, there finally appeared to be one Europe, and all would be gathered into it. The problem, as I have said, is that the histories of Italy, Germany, the U.K., Poland and Hungary were all wildly different. At that moment, they all yearned for the same thing, but as the moment passed, each country recollected what it was, and they are now – without the shame it would have brought in 1991 – resurrecting it. The European invention of technocratic liberalism was alien to them, and the right of national self-determination was both an empirical reality and a moral principle.

And so they begin to go their own way, with EU officials hurling threats and condemnation over frustration that the EU bureaucracy is not only no longer authoritative but also no longer frightening. The British economy grew in January, an indication that the catastrophe Brussels had wished for the U.K. may not visit London, or Italy, if it should decide to go its own way with its currency. And certainly, neither Poland nor Hungary, having survived Stalin and Hitler, is likely to be cowed into submission by increasingly small EU subsidies. The weakening of the EU has undercut its ability to pay for conformity.

Europe once had a magnificent idea, a free trade zone called the European Economic Community whose main focus was trade, not inventing identities. It was replaced by the European Union, but the EU can now look to another example, the North American trade zone, which has a slightly larger gross domestic product than the EU. The two are fundamentally different; the North American bloc does not claim to represent a North American identity, its members sometimes dislike each other intensely, and it does not have a secretariat to dictate how they should live. But then, the North Americans did not live through what the Europeans lived through and they are not trying to suppress who they were and, of course, still are.

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