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Europe: Identity Crisis or Schizophrenia?

P. Iskenderov

THE YEAR 2011 will be remembered as a period of unprecedented uncertainty in the history of modern Europe. On the one hand, contrary to widespread apocalyptic expectations, the EU did not crumble and the amplitude of the oscillations in the value of the relatively young European currency did stay within tolerable limits. On the other, it is clear that the integrated Europe's worst crash tests are still ahead and that the difficulties confronting the EU are a lot more systemic than circumstantial...

The controversial resolutions produced by the December, 2011 EU summit reflected the new reality of the alliance which in its better days used to function in an automatic regime but from now on will require "manual control." The fundamental reason why tough measures like the establishment of the European stability fund or the promulgation of a fairly intrusive fiscal pact for the EU member-countries have to be taken – and why clashes multiply within the EU over the economy, foreign policies, etc. – is the epic failure of the European integration principles adopted in the 1990s. Assessing the severity of the situation, French minister for European affairs Jean Leonetti bluntly warned that "the Euro and the entire Europe could break up if the leaders of the European Union fail to tackle the bloc's financial crisis."

While, in the majority of cases, outbreaks of instability that can easily go global invite conspiracy theories, it must be recognized that external influences have contributed little if anything to the EU nosedive. The U.S., the country that typically draws anti-conspiratorial invectives, obviously does not stand to benefit from the current European crisis. U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner de facto made it articulated when he suggested that the EU heavyweights help their less resourceful peers by absorbing the debt crisis costs and that the European policy mak-

Pyotr Iskenderov, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Slavonic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Candidate of Science (History); turantz@land.ru

ers in concert with central banks “erect a firewall” to put an end to the problem. Considering that U.S. President B. Obama faces budgetary battles of his own and the economies of the U.S. and the EU are tightly interwoven, Washington should be keenly interested in the viability of the EU.

Other global players, including China and forces of politicized Islam, must be watching the situation closely, but blaming on them the widening gap between Great Britain and France or South European countries' credit rating misfortunes would be as unrealistic as saying that Ronald Reagan, Deng Xiaoping or Osama bin Laden personally brought about the collapse of the USSR.

In other words, it may be expedient for the European top duo dubbed Merkozy by the media to cite isolated circumstances such as Great Britain's lack of openness to compromise or the Greeks' habit to take too much time off, but the root causes behind the European problems in the pursuit of integration are to be found in Brussels, in the very EU institutions whose headquarters lend a futuristically characterless appearance to a whole district of the city. The simple truth is that the European bureaucracy started drafting the architecture of the united Europe without much care for those who were supposed to inhabit it. The authors of the Maastricht, Lisbon, and likewise treaties seemed naively convinced that the new Europe would be the home of some new people free from racial or other prejudices, knowing no entrenched national grievances, and eager to give up whatever traditions they had been steeped in.

However, it transpired as soon as the crisis popped up on the horizon that the division lines in Europe, regardless of its visa-free travel and common currency, were sharper than even in the 1970s or 1980s. The key idea expressed in a recent opinion piece in *La Repubblica* is that today's Europe is enduring an identity crisis rather than a financial one. It takes a European nation with a strong sense of cohesion to cement the united Europe, but this is not what the empirical reality is presenting the EU architects with. As noted in the same *La Repubblica* paper, never before Lithuanians, Cypriots, Maltians, Slovaks, Italians, Estonians, Brits, and Austrians – not to mention Germans and Frenchmen – have coexisted within integrated statehood, sharing economic resources, thoughts, and sentiments. Due to two attempts to build a continental empire around a dominant nation – one made by Napoleon, another – by Hitler – being on Europe's record, the nationalist renaissance across the continent evokes unwelcome similarities with the atmosphere of the past epochs.

Euro is a currency similarly stuck somewhere between the past and the future. Scrapping national currencies under pressure from Brussels, the EU countries did retain their individual financial institutions, budgets, and central banks. As a result, the stronger EU players predictably ended up donating resources to keep the balance sheets of the weaker in decent shape. In the settings, Euro looks like an orphan adopted by seventeen parents who are visibly at odds with one another and is unlikely to achieve credibility or ignite political enthusiasm, says *La Repubblica*.¹

The EU has a common currency, but the European taxpayers continue to live in different countries and thus remain separate constituencies with occasionally diverging preferences.

Europe's unsuccessful –

from Spain and Portugal to the Baltic republics – have no intention to shed their national identities in the name of the United Europe or to sacrifice their economic egos. The spirit has never quite waned in any of the European countries and at the moment increasingly draws verve from the allergy to the model of faceless existence imposed by Brussels. When the people mindful of their unique national histories are urged to convert to a pan-European identity and bow to the directives churned out by the Brussels bureaucracy, the offer meets with explainable resistance which takes diverse forms from anti-globalist protests in West Europe to rallies in defense of national uniqueness and distinct religious mentality in Greece. No doubt, the intensity of the resistance will be growing in the foreseeable future.

Europeans certainly looked more united back in the 1990s, but things started to change when the EU put on its agenda the hyperambitious task of bracketing within the integrated Europe the nations which historically used to belong to unfriendly camps. Instead of opening up untapped markets, the hasty incorporation of Central and East European countries brought the EU in contact with a world of provincial attitudes and parasitic inclinations. The British conservatives' calls for a withdrawal from the EU are not in the full sense of the word isolationist – they are premised in the understanding that marriage between Europe's oldest democracy and this rising second-grade Europe is simply out of question.

The EU, or at least its leaders, look at Russia as an “inevitable evil” which sits on the deposits of energy fuels and supplies “Europe” with oil and gas.

According to *The National Review* “The island of Britain is, and is not, a part of Europe – carefully pulling out when things heat up, terrified that it will be pulled back in when things boil over. British prime minister David Cameron knows the old script well, as he adamantly and publicly insists that Great Britain is still a part of the crumbling European Union while privately assuming that it is not.” The American journalists' final diagnosis is not very optimistic either: “That schizophrenia is what we should expect from dozens of cultures and histories squeezed into too small a continent full of lots of bright – and quite proud – people.”²

Another corrosive tendency which threatens the EU and gained additional momentum in 2011 is the intensification of the internal stratification process. It has already left the alliance split into communities of different levels openly competing over financial, natural, and other resources. Today's key strata are the Merkozy-led French-German tandem, Scandinavia with the Baltic republics trailing, the Mediterranean region, and the countries of Central and East Europe.

To further complicate the picture, a swelling conglomerate of affiliated formations permanently skirts the EU, making it ever more amorphous and hard to manage. As a prime example, Poland is busily cultivating the so-called Eastern Partnership, even though Brussels seems increasingly skeptical about admitting the “eastern partners” in any foreseeable future and prefers to limit its involvement to pledges of financial assistance. The resolutions of the Eastern Partnership's September forum said that the EU would in 2010-2013 pour Euro 1.9b into the group's bilateral and regional programs, but Brussels declined to announce any political obligations with regard to Ukraine or other post-Soviet republics.³ The EU administration lightheartedly admits that the Eastern Partnership serves the purpose of keeping East European countries at bay least they start drifting politically towards Russia.⁴ German observer K. Müller stresses that essentially the initiative reads as an attempt at Europeanizing East European nations by exporting the European institutional system to them and thus seriously infringing upon their sovereignty.⁵

At the same time, Germany is scoring geopolitical points in the Balkan region, and France is particularly active in South Europe where N. Sarkozy patronizes the Union for the Mediterranean. The combination is powered by the escalating rivalry between Berlin and Paris, which surfaced during the campaign in Libya and the dispute over Serbia's entry into the EU and has a potential to become a fundamental European prob-

lem already this year. *Der Spiegel* remarked with irony that Berlin would soon have to decide how it is going to bite into Russia's and Asia's emerging markets but remain loyal to its traditional allies – West European countries and the U.S.⁶ In *Der Spiegel's* description, the line of conduct taken by Berlin amounts to a dual personality syndrome. The latter, it should be noted, is a symptom of schizophrenia.

The state of mentality which the EU members demonstrate raises havoc in the minds of the nations camping at the doorstep of this club for the chosen few. In mid-January, Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, was swept by rallies of those who were prepared to say “No” to EU membership. This means that in this seemingly prospering Balkan state society remains divided. Speaking at one of the meetings leader of the Croatian Pure Party of Rights, Josip Miljak, said that the European alliance “was falling apart at the seams” and that it remained to be seen what sort of the EU his country would join in 2013. He also said, with good reason, that the EU bureaucracy might exploit Croatia as “fresh blood” to address the Union’s own problems.⁷

No wonder, in Croatia, a shop window of the Balkans, European integration is supported by slightly more than half of its population. In Serbia the situation is even more dramatic: The West which put pressure on the country’s leaders to force them drop their claims on Kosovo scared away a large number of those who had favored EU membership; for the first time, they are outnumbered by their opponents. Professor of Humboldt University Heinrich August Winkler has aptly pointed out: “It seems that the EU is stumbling for lack of a project around which it can orient itself.”⁸

Contradictions inside the Union are rapidly piling up; the gaps between its members are widening while the radical nationalist forces in many of the member states are gaining popularity; the number of Euro skeptics along the Union’s external boundaries is rising. It is a too heavy burden to be carried into the 2012 year.

The place the European Union has assigned to Russia deserves special mention. At no time could geographers agree on Europe’s eastern borders. In antiquity, Greek philosophers preferred to see the easternmost borders of their country as the limits of Europe. In the Middle Ages, Europe came to be identified with Christendom – specifically, western Catholicism. In the Modern Era, geographers recaptured the initiative: Their quest for the natural boundaries of Europe took them to the vast expanses of Russia’s eastern region and the Enisei. “During the cold war,

however,” writes British author Frank Jacobs in *The New York Times*, “the opposite tendency triumphed more often: all of the Soviet Union, including Vilnius, Riga and other cities that today lie within the European Union, were excluded from Europe entirely. At times, even the Soviet satellite states in the Warsaw Pact were left out as well, so much had ‘Europe’ come to be synonymous with ‘the West’ and its associated political values.”⁹

Today, when the Soviet Union and the Soviet satellite states have left the scene there is still no agreement about how to treat the vast Russian territory. In Europe and outside it there is any number of people prepared to abandon the old ideologically biased approaches in the spirit of “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals” or even a single security expanse from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The European elites still want to see new dividing walls along the EU eastern borders. This is what all sorts of EU regional programs are about – from Eastern Partnership with former Soviet republics to the Mediterranean Partnership with North Africa. This means that Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Libya, and Tunisia can be accepted as Europe’s partners. One wonders: what about Russia? Is it a source of energy fuels as far removed from the European values as, say, Angola?

The energy fuels issue perfectly fits the geographical context. In his article “Playing Chess in Eurasia” (which appeared in *The Asian Times* of Hong Kong) well-known Brazil political scientist Pepe Escobar wrote: “Virtually all current geopolitical developments are energy-related.”¹⁰ This clarifies the EU geographical exercises: the EU, or at least its leaders, look at Russia as an “inevitable evil” which sits on the deposits of energy fuels and supplies “Europe” with oil and gas. “Europe,” therefore, is the consumer concerned with uninterrupted supplies of Russian fuels and willing to prevent Moscow from becoming too independent.

Meanwhile, inside the European Union there is no agreement on What is Europe? Many of the states, those badly hit by the economic crisis and those which had to shell out money to the “problem countries” identify Europe with the Brussels bureaucracy. As soon as the issue of illegal immigrants, EU membership for the Balkan countries or liberalized visa regime with Russia come to the fore Europe immediately turns supercilious as befits “the bulwark of civilization.”

In America geography presents no problems. To quote Zbigniew Brzezinski: “Its [American. – *Ed.*] military legions are firmly perched on the western and eastern extremities of Eurasia... American vassals and

tributaries, some yearning to be embraced by even more formal ties with Washington, dot the entire Eurasian continent.”¹¹ No comments are needed.

NOTES

¹ *La Repubblica*, 22.12.2011.

² *The National Review*, 12.29.2011.

³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/124843.pdf

⁴ <http://www.euractiv.com/east-mediterranean/eu-nato-keep-eastern-countries-bay/article-177760>

⁵ Müller K. “‘Countries in Transition’: Entwicklungsfade der osteuropäischen Transformation,” *Osteuropa*. 2001. H.10, S. 1163.

⁶ *Der Spiegel*, 29.08.2011.

⁷ RIA Novosti, 14.01.12 23:16.

⁸ Winkler H.A. “Politics without a Project,” *IP Global Edition*. Vol. 12, 2011, Sept-Oct.

⁹ *The New York Times*, 01.09.2012.

¹⁰ *The Asia Times*, 22.12.2011.

¹¹ Brzezinski Z. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, p. 23.

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