SCUSA 71 Table Paper: Europe

Introduction

The democracies of Europe, in partnership with the United States, were once seen as the vanguard of a new, liberal democratic world order that would lead humanity to “the end of history.” But in some ways, however, European politics today seem closer to the dark decades of the early twentieth century than the optimistic hopes that were once held for the twenty-first. In some European states, extreme right-wing parties now hold governing majorities and are well into the process of rolling back core democratic institutions. The European Union, distracted by Brexit and the populist wave, the lingering aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and often hostile or ambiguous political signals from the U.S. administration, has been unable to take decisive action in defense of European democracy. Confidence in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the most powerful guarantor of European security, has been shaken. As the democracies of Western Europe grapple with crises on multiple fronts, Russian President Vladimir Putin tightens his grip on Crimea and eastern Ukraine while encouraging more discord among his democratic adversaries. What do the current crises roiling Europe mean for the United States and what should U.S. policy towards the region be? Will the United States be able to frame coherent and effective policies toward Europe while it struggles with its own domestic political divisions? In order to help answer these questions, this paper first provides a broad theoretical perspective and then describes major trends in European politics. It concludes by exploring several ways in which these trends may strengthen, evolve, or decay in the future.

Theoretical Perspectives

Political science theory helps advance our understanding of European politics and the U.S. relationship with Europe. A particularly important theoretical lens focuses on the quality and character of political elites and leaders. Scholars from Machiavelli to Waltz have considered individuals as an important factor in international politics. This is certainly true of contemporary European states and leading institutions such as the European Union and NATO.

As Europe struggles to redefine collective security and shared prosperity, populations across the continent have turned to some new and some old faces for leadership. Consider the rise of Boris Johnson, the United Kingdom’s most recent Prime Minister and this decade’s third occupant of the office. Among his many promises, the Prime Minister claims a unique ability to deliver the United Kingdom out of the European Union and toward a new, if uncertain, economic era. In contrast, Germany is led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose fourteen-year incumbency is often synonymous with pan-European stability. Despite multiple challenges of financial crises, partner state insolvency, a refugee crisis, strained relations with the United States, and renewed aggression by the Russian Federation, the German Chancellor remains a stalwart defender of European and German interests. From Finland to Cyprus, Ireland to Poland, Europeans are selecting a variety of leaders. Observers across the Atlantic have taken notice.

Indeed, Americans have long associated domestic European politics with political leaders. It is hard to imagine a discussion of the recent turn of French politics against traditional political camps without reference to Emmanuel Macron and his bold formation of a new political party (En Marche), or the rise of Hungarian nationalism and illiberalism absent the role of Viktor Orban and his adroit weakening of the culture and institutions of democracy. This approach seems appropriate as
European leaders will undoubtedly be America’s partners in some of the most pressing international challenges.

Populations and policymakers understand the vital role of political leaders. In democratic Europe, millions go to the polls and elect representatives on a recurring basis. During each election season, the public inquires and learns about a leader's personal background, educational profile, marriage status, military experience, and record of public service. Presumably, individuals assess leaders along these and other variances in personal details. In the cases of Prime Minister Johnson and Chancellor Merkel, the differences are striking. In the British case – Johnson - an American-born, Eton/Oxford educated, conservative grew up privileged and entered a career in the contentious world of British media before entering public life. He served as London’s Mayor and UK’s Foreign Secretary prior to his premiership. In contrast, Merkel grew up in totalitarian East Germany and earned a doctorate in quantum chemistry before entering political life. Beginning in 1990 with German reunification, Merkel served in the Bundestag for the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern until her election as Chancellor in 2005.

Two other prominent intellectual paradigms - neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism – often explicitly reject the role of individuals in their theoretical architecture. From this perspective, individuals might matter, for journalists, biographers, and historians - but not for political science. For many political scientists, the differences between Johnson, Merkel, or any other European leader are simply epiphenomenal. Their background and behavior – though interesting – are not generalizable in meaningful ways. This is certainly the position of mainstream scholarship that privileges structural variables and more parsimonious theories such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism.

**Neorealist Accounts**

Neorealists deploy structural explanations to account for European integration throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. Given the reality of international anarchy and the primacy of states in the international system, neorealism focuses on the distribution of power in the international system. Specifically, imbalances in power drive states towards certain behaviors. For example, neorealists contend that the alliance between France, UK, and the Soviet Union during World War II simply reflected a tendency for states to balance against rising powers, in this case Nazi Germany (Mearsheimer, 2014). In a similar way, neorealists argue that European integration following the war reflected a continent-wide impulse to balance against a new power, the Soviet Union (Rosato, 2010). Similarly, the subsequent rejection of European integration in the early 21st century by populists and other forces results from the absence of a rising, threatening power – Russia today does not pose the same threat as did its processor, the Soviet Union, and another such threat is not on the horizon.

**Neoliberal Institutionalism**

Scholars in this tradition claim that European integration in the second half of the twentieth century resulted from a collective embrace of the tenets represented in liberal theory. Following the catastrophe of World War II, European policymakers, often under the leadership of the United States, designed multilateral institutions to ameliorate the great horrors of failed economies and industrial warfare. This vast project produced the continent’s most formidable collective security institution (NATO) and its most successful joint economic enterprise (European Union). In both cases, states voluntarily sacrifice some of their sovereignty over economics and security and receive greater advantages in both arenas by working together.
Although both neoliberal and neorealist traditions have largely and long ignored the central role of leaders, some theorists are now bringing the concept of the individual back to provide more complete explanations of the behavior of states. For example, Byman and Pollack present one of the early rebuttals to detractors and offer thirteen individual-level hypotheses for scholars to explore (Byman and Pollack, 2001). Among their recommendations, “[a] more complete assessment of how individuals influence the factors that make up military and diplomatic power would be highly useful.” and, “work on the impact of individuals outside the role of the state leader is essential. The personalities of generals, diplomats, religious authorities, and other shapers and implementers of policy cannot be ignored.” Recently, even some neorealists have offered meditations on the so-called first image (Jervis 2013; Mearsheimer 2013).

The ongoing debate among scholars over levels of analysis suggests that more than a single theoretical tool or perspective may be required to fully understand the behavior of states. For example, although leaders are clearly important, they often confront significant constraints that reflect the power of political groups and institutions both domestically and externally. In this regard, European leaders operate under certain conditions that make them unique among world regions. For example, European leaders are highly interdependent on one another. This is a critical, if overlooked, feature of the region. It is nearly impossible for the Prime Ministers of the Netherlands or Spain to successfully advance their political agendas without cooperation from their European allies. By comparison, we do not observe this level of interdependence in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa or the Western Hemisphere. We might hypothesize what personal traits could make a European leader more or less successful in this unique environment. Should they possess a cosmopolitan background; speak multiple languages; attend schools around the world; travel broadly; or serve in one of the many European institutions?

European states also remain overwhelmingly democratic.¹ We can readily observe democratic phenomena throughout the Western Hemisphere, but the sustained, high level of democracy is striking in Europe. European leaders for the most part still remain constrained by basic democratic institutions such as legislatures, courts, political parties, and free media. To be a successful European leader, one still must have significant political skills such as the ability to compromise, persuade, and build coalitions.

Potential Threats to European Identity, Prosperity, and Cohesion

While most European leaders today operate under peaceful and prosperous conditions within the confines of a highly interdependent and democratic atmosphere, the European order as a whole is under increasing pressure from adverse domestic and external forces. These include insurgent leaders and elites willing to challenge dominant identities and institutions. Three threats are particularly important: to European democracy; to NATO; and to European economic prosperity.

**Threats to Democratic Institutions**

Shared democratic values are hallmarks of U.S.-European cooperation, but Europe’s democratic institutions increasingly struggle with the threat from populist political parties. The term “populist” can apply to political parties on either the left or right side of the political spectrum. For the populist, a society can be divided into two groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” In the populist narrative, the institutions of democracy have been hijacked by the corrupt elite, and since only the populist party represents the pure people, they claim the power to transform the institutions of democracy as they see fit. The threat to European democracy presented by populists could have profound implications for the transatlantic partnership. From where do populist forces come from and how can their threat to democracy be mitigated?

**Populism and Democracy**

Populism is strongly related to shocks from globalization: the spread of markets and institutions across state borders. The form a populist movement takes reflects the way in which a society has experienced disruption from globalization. When globalization shocks are phrased in terms of cultural forces and anti-immigration rhetoric, populism manifests in a right-wing form; when in terms of job displacement from trade and capital market volatility, populist parties tend toward the left-wing variant. In Europe, right-wing populist parties emphasize the purity of the state and argue that immigrants bring with them alien culture and values that put society at risk. Examples include the UK Independent Party (UKIP) in the UK, the National Front in France, the German Alternative for Deutschland, the Sweden Democrats, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, the Freedom Party in Austria, and Fidesz in Hungary. In contrast, left-wing populist parties focus on the regulation of capital markets, increases in government spending, and inflationary monetary policy as their goals, particularly where the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent eurozone crisis were most keenly felt. Examples include Podemos in Spain, the Italian Five-Star Movement, and Syriza in Greece.

Not only does Europe’s domestic unrest pose a threat to the democratic values Europe shares with the United States, but many populist movements are skeptical of the value of supranational organizations such as the EU. Instead, some favor stronger ties with Russia and turning away from partnership with the United States, despite shared membership in NATO.

**Threats to NATO**

NATO is an unusual kind of military alliance, as most alliances in history have been marriages of convenience, formed to counter a particular threat and terminated when the threat is no longer present. The founding members of NATO had grander ambitions. As former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson explained to the U.S. Senate, “the North Atlantic Treaty is far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common.” So, what does it mean for the viability of the Alliance when some NATO members’ commitment to democracy weakens?

**Russian Influence**

Any answer depends on the country and how open its particular populist parties might be to Russian influence. In Poland, the populist Law and Justice Party may be dismantling democratic institutions, but they are vehemently anti-Putin and pro-NATO. Elsewhere in Europe, however, Russia has seized
on European populist movements as an avenue to undermine NATO and the EU. In pursuit of this end, President Putin’s United Russia Party signed formal cooperation agreements with several populist parties including the Freedom Party in Austria, the Lega Nord in Italy, and the Alternative for Deutschland in Germany. In France, when French banks refused to do business with the populist National Front, a now defunct Russian bank came to the rescue with a 10 million euro “loan.” This was widely seen as a reward for the National Front’s pro-Russia advocacy. But the problem of NATO member loyalty is most acute in Hungary and Turkey. Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary and leader of the populist party Fidesz, is a vocal critic of U.S. sanctions on Russia and has cultivated strong ties with Vladimir Putin. In the words of a former NATO official, “everyone thinks Hungary is compromised.” In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has maintained a state of emergency since a failed coup in 2016, jailing 60,000 political opponents and curtailing civil liberties so severely that Freedom House no longer classifies Turkey as a democracy.

**Burden Sharing**

Any discussion of threats to NATO unity would be incomplete without addressing the hostility exhibited by President Donald J. Trump. President Trump has called NATO “obsolete” and claimed that Europeans are not carrying their fair share of the security burden. The centerpiece of President Trump’s complaints. The issue of burden sharing between the United States and Europe has long been a point of contention within NATO. When considering burden sharing there are a few points to understand. First, there is a common NATO budget to which each member contributes based on the size of its GDP. This budget is used to maintain NATO facilities around Europe and the United States. There are currently no delinquent payers into the common NATO budget; therefore, no NATO member is “behind on their dues” as has been suggested. The defense spending guidelines are a separate goal intended to encourage member states to maintain their own defense forces. Only six of the 29 NATO members meet that guideline: the United States, the UK, Estonia, Romania, Poland, and Greece. However, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused NATO to create a new plan to get all members up to the two percent goal by 2024. Currently, 16 of the 29 members are on track to reach two percent by 2024. Europeans are quick to point out that although U.S. defense spending is about 3.3 percent of GDP, only a fraction of that spending actually contributes to European defense versus the pursuit of other U.S. interests around the world.

It is noteworthy that the only time in the history of NATO that a member state has invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty – calling upon all NATO members to come to its defense – was when the United States invoked it in the wake of 9/11. Thirteen NATO members contributed to the execution of 360 sorties in the skies above the United States in the months following 9/11. In summary, although the issue of burden sharing within NATO will continue to be source of tension, it is an issue as old as the Alliance itself and NATO members have made some progress on the issue.

**Threats to the European Union**

The European Union is the institution that most prominently represents the Europeans’ hope to never again experience the privation, extremism, and bloodshed of the early twentieth century. U.S. leaders have long recognized that a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Europe contributes to U.S. interests. Today’s EU is wrestling with threats on several fronts. The British exit from the EU (Brexit), sluggish economic growth, and the euro-skeptic challenge posed by populism highlight the need for institutional reform on several fronts if the EU is to remain a force for prosperity and democracy into the twenty-first century.
**Brexit**

In 2016, the British voted in a national referendum to leave the EU. The departure of 65 million of its 500 million citizens represents a major crisis for the EU and likely could have significant consequences for the U.S. relationship with Europe. The British have always had an awkward relationship with the project of European integration. Although it was Winston Churchill who coined the term “United States of Europe,” Churchill never saw the UK as being one of those “united states.” Today, this attitude is reflected in the way in which British politicians of all stripes refer to the EU in the cold terms of national self-interest. The populist UKIP aggressively spread the fear of migrant workers during their 2016 “leave” campaign, claiming that migrant workers would steal British jobs and swamp public services.

As the Brexit date approaches, British leaders are struggling to develop a plan for the UK’s post-Brexit relationship with the EU that satisfies both the EU and her own governing coalition. While Brexit is likely to cause some disruption to the UK economy, the most profound consequences of Brexit are likely to be political rather than economic. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain and is a major beneficiary of EU development funds. Brexit may deepen Scottish animosity and cause the Scots to reexamine the question of Scottish independence. Brexit might also create a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This barrier could inflame Republican sentiment in Northern Ireland leading to a new push for Irish unification. Worse yet, Brexit could spark a chain of events that leads the UK to lose 5 million citizens and more than a third of its land mass.

In summary, Brexit may result in a weaker, more divided UK, and a weaker Europe that is more skeptical of the United States. When former British foreign minister and staunch Brexiteer Boris Johnson (and now Prime Minister) said that the UK and EU could “have their cake and eat it too,” EU Council President Donald Tusk coldly replied, “The brutal truth is that Brexit will be a loss for all of us. There will be no cakes on the table for anyone. There will be only salt and vinegar.”

**Economic Stagnation**

Economic stagnation is strongly associated with the rise of populist parties and less trust towards domestic and international institutions. Therefore, to stabilize the challenges to democracy and the transatlantic partnership, the EU will have to resolve the contradictions in its economic institutions that continue to hamper economic growth. Both the United States and Europe were hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis. Many European countries suffered a contraction in real GDP worse than what they experienced during the Great Depression. In Greece, real GDP contracted by nearly 25 percent, unemployment climbed to 27 percent, and the proportion of Greek children in poverty increased from 23 percent to over 40 percent. While the United States came roaring back from the crisis, the European recovery has been much more anemic. The euro and Europe’s half-way economic integration explain much of the difference. Since 2007, U.S. GDP has increased by almost 10 percent. The GDP in European states which are not on the euro increased by around 8 percent. But within the eurozone, productivity increased by only one-half percent.

When many diverse states all share a single currency, the central bank is presented with a problem: should they set low interest rates to help the poor states and risk causing inflation in the rich states or set high interest rates to stop inflation in the rich states while stagnating the growth of the poor states. The European Central Bank must set an interest rate appropriate for all 19 states in the eurozone.
With no fiscal policy to tax hot states and invest in cold states and a central bank raising rates to stave off inflation, the European system is causing economic divergence. The divide between the eurozone’s rich and poor states is actually growing larger. Politically, this economic divergence stokes animosity between the rich states of northern Europe and the poorer states of southern Europe. Europe must move towards greater integration – developing a common European fiscal capacity and other complementary institutions, or else watch the euro continue to weaken the EU like a broken bone left unset.

**Protecting Democracy**

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union states “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” In order to defend these principles, the treaty arms the EU with several mechanisms to deter member states from breaching them. Article 7 provides the EU with the ability to suspend various rights of a member state, to include their voting rights, due to violations of Article 2 principles. The invocation of Article 7 punishments requires a two-thirds majority vote of the European Parliament and a unanimous vote of the European Council not including the vote of the targeted member state. Article 7 was invoked by Parliament for the first time in 2017 when it voted to initiate proceedings against Poland. Those proceedings were subsequently blocked by Hungary in the European Council. On September 12, 2018, the European Parliament also voted to invoke Article 7 proceedings against Hungary. In both cases, the effect of Article 7 on altering the behavior of the leaders in Poland and Hungary is still unclear. However, the EU does have other tools at its disposal, including the EU judicial system and the coercive ability to curtail infrastructure spending in those countries.

Elections to the European Parliament in May 2019 underscored the political divisions in Europe. In the run-up to the elections, populist parties in EU member states reached out to each other in attempts to form a pan-European right-wing movement that decried immigration and privileged conservative definitions of Europe’s cultural and religious identity. Their opponent invoked the need to defend European traditions of pluralism and liberalism. In the results, both sides could claim victory, reflecting the fragmentation of European politics. The populist parties held their own but did not surge in strength as many had expected. Yet the pro-EU Christian and Social Democrats, Liberals, and Greens, still failed to garner sufficient political strength in individual countries to rule without recourse to coalition government.

**Conclusion**

The transatlantic partnership between the United States and Europe represents a bulwark of peace, democracy, and prosperity. This extraordinary cooperation has been sustained by their shared democratic values, the powerful NATO Alliance, and the ever-closer integration of the European Union. With all three of these pillars under assault by insurgent populists and other forces in Europe, will the conditions that have bound together Europe in the post-war era – the democratic institutions of the region and the inter-dependence of political elites within the EU – revive or decay? Will the United States continue to play its traditional role of supporting cohesion and cooperation in the region or will it retreat into a variant of insular nationalism? Ultimately, it would seem that the success of the post-war liberal European project will depend on the quality of leaders and elites on both sides of the Atlantic.
Bibliography


Churchill, Winston. Speech delivered at the University of Zurich, September 19, 1946. https://rm.coe.int/16806981f3


Seddon, Max and Michael Stothard, “Putin awaits return on Le Pen investment,” *Financial Times*, May 4, 2017, [https://www.ft.com/content/010ecc62-30b5-11e7-9555-23ef563ccf9a](https://www.ft.com/content/010ecc62-30b5-11e7-9555-23ef563ccf9a)


**Recommended Reading**

**General European Current Events**


**Populism**


**NATO / Transatlantic Partnership**


**The EURO**


**The EU**
