

The EU Is Looking Like Europe's Next Failed Empire

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It needs the U.S. and NATO help to avoid the fate of the Austro-Hungarians.



Not-so-secret handshake.

Photographer: Akos Stiller/Bloomberg

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Walking the streets of Budapest along the banks of the Danube, one is constantly reminded of the glories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The grand buildings hearken back to an unwieldy political entity that eventually disintegrated in the aftermath of the First World War. Today in Europe, we see another awkward federation — the European Union — under extreme centrifugal forces of its own, threatening to pull apart the dream of unifying the continent.

Spending a long weekend in Hungary, I've gained a palpable sense of those destabilizing forces at work. This vibrant and proud nation of roughly 10 million sits uneasily on the fault line between the EU and Russia. And it's pretty clear which way

things are now leaning — witness Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, and Russian strongman Vladimir Putin at Tuesday's [press conference](#) in Moscow announcing the strong state of their nations' relationship.

In discussions I've had with Hungarians ranging from shopkeepers to government officials, the sense of engagement with Moscow came through strongly. I could see why Putin counts the Hungarian leader as his strongest supporter within the EU and NATO — Orban was just [censured](#) by the EU for instituting "illiberal democracy," which includes dominating the media and undermining any political opposition.

There are similar currents in Poland, where the judiciary has been [suspended](#) from the EU's governing body of justice over concerns that it has lost its independence from political influence. In Italy, an avowedly anti-EU government has taken power with widespread support for its resentments over immigration policy and financial controls.

And, in the biggest blow of all, the U.K. continues to stagger toward its exit from the EU, with deepening uncertainty of what kind of post-departure structure will be in place. Despite efforts to hold another Brexit referendum by some leading politicians (including the influential mayor of London, Sadiq Khan), the odds are that the world's fifth-largest economy will depart the union in 2019.

All of this is bad news for the U.S., which benefits greatly in the international system from a Europe pulling together. A unified continent has the largest economy in the world, a highly capable military with the second-largest defense budget after our own, and a shared sense of the values that truly make nations great — democracy, liberty, personal freedoms, gender and racial equality. Americans will never have a better pool of partners.

Yet, despite some positive traction out of France under President Emmanuel Macron and the continuing influence of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany, the forces tugging at Europe seem to be growing. Russia, of course, is the principal beneficiary, and will do all that it can — in subtle and direct ways — to accelerate the process of decomposition.

What can the U.S. do to help avert the demise of the European Project?

First, based on a year of extensive travel throughout Europe, I can testify that there is still a hunger for U.S. engagement and leadership — but without overt preaching or obvious interference. Americans should be talking at every level about the value of a unified Europe; conducting high-level discussions not just with officials from partner nations but also from the European Parliament and European Union; expanding trade and cultural missions at the EU level; coordinating economic policies through the IMF and World Bank; and supporting EU institutions wherever we can.

Second, NATO is at the absolute center of a unified Europe — the overlap between the EU and the security alliance is almost perfect (just a few countries are in one but not the other). Anything the U.S. can do to support NATO ultimately supports the idea of a unified continent. Even in Hungary, where the EU is viewed with increasing skepticism, NATO remains very popular. I heard again and again how proud Hungarians are to be in the alliance, and for all the current friendliness with Russia they remember well the harsh times under the Warsaw Pact and the 1956 invasion by Soviet troops.

We should take advantage of this sentiment not only in Hungary, but in Poland, Italy and other NATO member-states where anti-EU attitudes are growing. This could involve conducting NATO exercises locally in ways that help the economy; appointing representatives from these nations to key positions in the NATO standing command; conducting frequent high-level visits by U.S. and NATO senior officers such as the supreme allied commander; and praising the efforts of these nations on operational missions from Afghanistan to the Balkans to counter-piracy. NATO can be one element in a broader strategy to maintain the strength of the trans-Atlantic bridge, and thus of efforts to keep the EU moving forward.

Finally, the U.S. should continue to explore wider economic and trade relationships with Europe in the broadest sense. At the heart of this could be a revitalized Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the on-again/off-again effort to bind the U.S. and European economies in the largest free-trade zone in world history. Despite the antipathy of the Donald Trump administration to multilateral trade agreements (it canceled the Pacific version of this, the Trans-Pacific Partnership), there is an extremely compelling geopolitical case to be made that T-TIP should be back on the table — especially if Russia continues to make inroads against EU and NATO unity.

A few days among the ghosts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire reminded me not only that unwieldy political structures are prone to collapse, but that they often do so at inopportune moments. The EU is anything but an empire, and this is hardly the chaotic end of World War I. But the cracks in Europe's structure are becoming evident just as Russia is looking to regain its former glories. The U.S. can help hold Europe together, and it is strongly in our interest to do so.

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