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Strategic Insights: The Coming Perfect Storm of Europe

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A collection of social and security trends are at play in Europe that may threaten the peace and stability of the continent. The array of challenges, threats, and frictions could converge at such a point that an unintentional spark could ignite a major crisis or even a regional war of some type.

The most obvious security threat to Europe is Russia and its evident willingness to employ force, including proxy forces, like it did to reshape national borders in Ukraine. Russia does not, of course, view this operation as expeditionary expansionism, but rather as a necessity to stabilize a crisis on its border. Russia sees the Ukraine annexation as not of its own making, but rather like that of a tornado that drew in Russia against its desires.[1] This narrative conveniently overlooks the fact that Russian economic warfare, to prevent Ukraine from entering into an Association Agreement with the EU, was the catalyst for the eventual Euromaidan protests and subsequent violence.

Russia's basic national security strategy is to keep its "neighboring belt stable," NATO weak, China close, and the United States focused elsewhere.[2] A weak NATO is hardly anything new, but it is the stable neighboring belt goal that is the most challenging to Europe, since stability is in the eye of the beholder. Ukraine was stable, right up to the point when Russian actions led to the Euromaidan crisis and started a war. It should come as no surprise to Russia observers that the Ukraine crisis illustrates that Russia sees stability in its neighboring belt as being loyal to Russia. Following this line of reasoning, the Baltic States, as NATO members, might be at risk of being viewed by Moscow as an unstable region.

It is by no means a certainty, or even a high probability, that Russia will conduct a Ukraine-style hybrid operation to destabilize and seize any or all of the Baltics. However, there is enough of a possibility that NATO cannot ignore the risk; otherwise, the very legitimacy of NATO itself would be threatened should Russia act and NATO be unprepared and unable to protect an alliance state. Additionally, since budgets and military forces are finite resources, then every euro spent toward strengthening NATO's Russian flank against the possibility of Russian aggression is one less euro spent elsewhere; for example, toward counter-terrorism, refugee and immigrant programs, and domestic law enforcement among others. This is not necessarily an argument against spending for enhanced NATO defense against Russian aggression, it is simply a fact that causes friction.

However, among the general European Union (EU) population, terrorism is viewed as the one of greatest threats to European security, and Russian aggression is not even mentioned.[3] Obviously there is very good reason for Europeans to be concerned with terrorism. Besides the Charlie Hebdo/Jewish Market attacks and the Bataclan Theater and associated attacks in Paris in 2015, London witnessed a gruesome public beheading of a soldier in May 2013 and a foiled ISIS-motivated stabbing in a subway station in December 2015. There was also the thwarted Paris train attack in August 2015, foiled by three American passengers. In February, 2015, two victims died in a terrorist shooting in Copenhagen. Overall, Europol reports that the EU regularly experiences a triple-digit number of terror attacks each year (2009 – 316; 2010 – 249; 2011 – 174; 2012 – 219; 2013 – 152; 2014 – 199),[4] and there are no indications this trend will change.

In addition to terrorism, immigration is a major concern of the general population. In March 2015, 19% of EU citizens identified immigration as one of the greatest threats to European security.[5] In November 2015 the response were drastically different, 58% identified immigration as the most important issue facing the EU.[6] 1,046,599 migrants and refugees reportedly arrived in Europe in 2015, and nearly 150,000 have already arrived in 2016. Of these migrants, 82% arrived in Greece, 14% arrived in Italy, 3% in Bulgaria, and less than 1% in Spain, Cyprus, and Malta combined.[7]

In response to these terrorism, refugee, and immigrant trends, several European countries are initiating actions to protect themselves. While many of these actions are justifiable under the current circumstances, they set an uncomfortable precedent, particularly when compared to Europe's 20th-century history of human rights atrocities.

Following the November terrorist attacks in Paris the French government declared a state of emergency granting law enforcement additional powers. Under the original 1955 French law that gives the government the authority to declare a state of emergency, the authorities may set curfews, conduct raids, searches, and arrests without judicial approval, limit the movement and gathering of people, and other measures.[8] The 2015

state of emergency, originally set to expire in February 2016, was extended another three months until May 2016. When asked how long the state of emergency could last, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls replied, ". . . as long as is necessary . . ."[9] The Geneva-based United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, among others, has expressed concern about France extending its extra-judicial authorities currently in place, and it questions if the French state of emergency complies with international human rights law.[10]

In January 2016, Denmark passed a law authorizing police to seize assets from asylum-seekers worth more than $1,500 USD. The stipulated purpose is to offset the cost to the state of supporting the refugees. In addition, Denmark also extended the period from 1 to 3 years that family members must wait before joining a refugee in Denmark.[11] Denmark is not the only European country seizing refugee assets. In Germany, the amount asylum seekers must surrender varies among the states. In Bavaria, they may only retain €750, while in Baden-Württemburg the retainable amount is only €350. Switzerland also seizes assets from asylum seekers.[12] While these laws are legal under both national and international law, the effect is that it essentially leaves asylum-seekers destitute and sends the message that refugees are not welcome.

Other countries are imposing limits on the number of refugees they will accept. The EU attempted to place quotas on member states in order to more evenly distribute the burden. In defiance of Brussels, numerous countries ignored the EU quotas and set their own limits, such as Austria which will only process 80 applicants per day and will only allow 3,200 refugees per day to transit Austria enroute to Germany.[13] The Visegard Four countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) also jointly announced that EU-imposed quotas were unacceptable to them.[14] Most of these decisions are based upon the argument that refugees impose a financial burden on the host country.

Other arguments are based on a perception that Middle East and North African refugee and immigrant flows allow terrorists to enter Europe. However, a look at the origins of recent terrorist attackers challenges this theory. According to Europol, there have been isolated instances of terrorists using immigration routes, but for the most part they are EU nationals using genuine and/or false documents.[15] For example, all of the attackers in November 13 attacks were EU nationals, either French or Belgian.[16] The two Charlie Hebdo perpetrators were French nationals.[17] The perpetrator of a suicide bombing in Bulgaria in 2012 was a dual Canadian-Lebanese citizen and used his genuine Canadian passport to enter Bulgaria, as did one of his Hezbollah accomplices; the other accomplice used his legitimate Australian passport.[18] Other examples exist to debunk the theory that refugee flows facilitate the entry of terrorists into Europe.

While the financial burden argument and the terrorist argument have some tangible basis, the Eurobarometer polling data appears to indicate a rising attitude against outsiders in general, and Muslims in particular. In the October 2015 Eurobarometer

report, a perception of discrimination against people based on ethnic origin was up from previous polls, 64% of respondents indicated that discrimination based on ethnic origin is widespread in their country, up from 56% in 2012. Similarly, 50% responded that discrimination based on religion is also widespread in their country, up from 39% in 2012.[19] In its conclusions, the report states that "respondents are less tolerant towards Muslim people . . . ."[20] The sentiment highlighted in public opinion polling data is mirrored in the political arena with the rise of several right wing political parties with anti-immigration/anti-Islamic platforms, including PERGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) in Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) Independence Party in the UK led by Nigel Farage, and Marine La Pen's National Front Party in France.[21]

Further stressing the European social fabric is a growing mistrust of the Europe experiment. Euroscepticism is on the rise and with the upcoming British exit referendum in June it could rise even further. According to data by the Eurobarometer polling, 55% of respondents tend not to trust the EU, up 9% from previous polls. Although this is still lower than the mistrust of national parliaments (64% mistrust) and national governments (66% mistrust), the sharp 9% increase against the EU is alarming (only +2% and +3% against the national institutions, respectively).[22] Should Great Britain choose to leave the EU, it is possible that other countries will follow. Already, the Schengen system is showing cracks as several countries are reimposing border controls and border checkpoints, a move which further demonstrates that at least some states are putting themselves before Europe.[23]

The downfall of Europe is by no means inevitable, however, neither is the preservation of a secure, stable, and peaceful Europe. The various factors stressing the system could set the conditions for a "perfect storm" of friction points, all culminating at once, that gets ignited by an otherwise inconsequential event of some sort. In addition to a resurgent and aggressive Russia, nearly certain continued terrorist attacks, a continuous and perhaps an ever-increasing flow of refugees and immigrants, a growing anti-immigration sentiment, and a rising set of right-wing nationalist parties, there are still unresolved 20th century tensions in some spots. The division of Cyprus, for example, still exists. Serbia still claims Kosovo as an autonomous region of Serbia and does not recognize it as an independent state, although it recognizes the legitimacy of the Kosovo institutions. There are wide economic gaps between southern, eastern and western Europe, and throughout all of this, Russia continues to employ legal methods of supporting far-right movements to influence Europe.[24] Any one of these could provide the spark that sets off a chain of possible events which challenges European stability. Perhaps it will be the rise of an undemocratic, authoritarian regime. Perhaps a military coup or maybe a resurgence of ethnic violence in the Balkans. Regardless of whatever does eventually happen, the United States must stand ready to help Europe weather the coming storm to maintain a Europe that is, as the National Security Strategy puts it, free, whole, and at peace.[25]

ENDNOTES

1. Andrey Bezukov, *et al.,* "How to Avoid War with Russia," *The National Interest*, January 29, 2016, available from *nationalinterest.org/feature/how-avoid-war-russia-15054*, accessed January 29, 2016.

2. *Ibid.*

3. The European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 84 – Autumn 2015, "Public opinion in the European Union, First Results,"* Project Number 2015.6899, December 2015, available from *ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2098,* accessed January 14, 2016.

4. Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2015,* Europol Strategic Analysis Reports (Te-Sat), July 6, 2015, p. 8, available from *https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2015*; and Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2012,* Europol Strategic Analysis Reports (Te-Sat), April 25, 2012, p. 8, available from *https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/publication/te-sat-2012-eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-1569*, accessed March 2, 2016. The overwhelming majority of the attacks are separatist or anti-government attacks, not Islamic extremist attacks. However, the high body counts in Paris in January and November 2015 from Islamic extremists account for most casualties.

5. The European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 432 Europeans' Attitudes Towards Security,* April 2015, p. 20, available from *ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2085*, accessed March 2, 2016.

6. The European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 84,* p. 13. The fieldwork for *Standard Eurobarometer 84* occurred November 7-17, 2015. Only 19% identified terrorism as the greatest challenge. The Bataclan Theater and associated targets were attacked by ISIS on the night of November 13, so 8 days of surveying already occurred before the attacks. Most likely, had the attacks occurred one week earlier, the *Standard Eurobarometer 84* results would have been very different. However, this survey data also precedes the Köln New Year's Eve events in which a very significant number of women were allegedly sexually assaulted or robbed by men who were apparently recent Middle Eastern immigrants or refugees.

7. International Organization for Migration, *Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals in 2016 Approach 150,000; Deaths Reach 455*, Press Release, March 3, 2016, available from *iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-2016-approach-150000-deaths-reach-*

455, accessed March 3, 2016. This data only refers to Middle Eastern (including Syria and Iraq) and North African refugees and immigrants. Immigration from other regions is negligible.

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9. "Migrant crisis: EU at grave risk, warns France PM Valls," January 22, 2016, BBC News, available from *bbc.com/news/world-europe-35375303*, accessed March 9, 2016.

10. The United Nations, "UN experts urge France to protect fundamental freedoms while combatting terrorism," UN News Centre, January 19, 2016, available from *un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53045#.VucMGTZf3cu*, accessed March 9, 2016.

11. "Denmark approves law letting police seize valuables from refugees," Fox News, January 26, 2016, available from *foxnews.com/world/2016/01/26/denmark-approves-law-letting-police-seize-valuables-from-refugees.html*, accessed March 9, 2016.

12. Lizzie Dearden, "Germany follows Switzerland and Denmark to seize cash and valuables from arriving refugees," *The Independent*, January 23, 2016, available from *independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-follows-switzerland-and-denmark-to-seize-cash-and-valuables-from-arriving-refugees-a6828821.html*, accessed 9 March 2016.

13. James G. Neuger and Arne Delfs, "Europe's Refugee Impasse Deepens With More Balkan Border Checks," Bloomberg Business, February 18, 2016, available from *bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-18/europe-s-refugee-impasse-deepens-with-more-balkan-border-checks*, accessed March 9, 2016.

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15. Europol, *Migrant Smuggling in the EU*, Europol Strategic Analysis Reports (Other Reports), February 22, 2016, p. 12, available from *https://www.europol.europa.eu/category/publication-category/strategic-analysis/other-reports,* accessed March 9, 2016.

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response-to-paris-attacks, accessed March 9, 2016.

   17. Oren Durell and Kevin Johnson, "French terror suspect linked to al-Qaeda in Yemen," *USA Today*, January 9, 2015, available from *usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/01/08/french-terror-attack-suspects/21434139/,*accessed March 10, 2016.

   18. Stewart Bell, "Bulgaria bus bombing suspect had real Canadian passport, lived in B.C. before return to Lebanon at age 12," *National Post*, February 5, 2013, available from *news.nationalpost.com/news/canadian-citizen-confirmed-as-suspected-organizer-of-deadly-bulgaria-bus-bombing*, accessed March 10, 2016.

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   24. Alina Poyakova, "Why Europe Is Right to Fear Putin's Useful Idiots," *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2016, available from *https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/23/why-europe-is-right-to-fear-putins-useful-idiots/*, accessed March 8, 2016.

   25. Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015, p. 25.

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