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European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

Imagining a Different Europe: Brexit and the Future of NATO

By Gary Leupp
July 7, 2016

Everyone's talking about the future of the European Union after the Brexit. Should we not also be wondering about the future of NATO?

The two organizations substantially overlap. Twenty-two countries are members of both; that is, the twenty-two nations are both military allies of the U.S. (which pays two-thirds of the alliance's cost and controls its politics) and members of an economic union, which—while it of course does *not* include the U.S., which is 5000 miles away—is of much interest to the world's only surviving superpower.

Of course the EU and NATO have very different purposes. As we all know, the EU represents an effort to create a common market throughout the continent, allow for free travel and employment between member-states, the formation of common standards, policies etc. We know there have been major downsides for some member countries, involving reduced sovereignty, uncontrolled immigration, indebtedness and austerity programs, etc. But the stated goal, to spread general affluence, and therefore prevent war, has been stated since the EU's forerunner, the European Coal and Steel Community, was formed in 1951.

Thus, while it's arguably none of the U.S.'s business, U.S. leaders express opinions on EU composition. (You might think that, as leaders of a competing trading bloc, with the same relationship to the EU that Boeing has to Airbus, they would maintain a politic silence. But both presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have urged the EU to admit NATO ally Turkey's admission. And Obama recently raised a ruckus in the United Kingdom when he urged its electorate to reject Brexit.)

The purpose of NATO is less clear than that of the EU. Formed in 1949 in line with the "Truman Doctrine" pledging that the U.S. would fight communism wherever it threatened the "Free World," it was supposed to be a defensive alliance between the U.S. and its European client states versus some future (imagined) Soviet aggression against those states.

That aggression needless to say never happened. In retrospect the Cold War appears a long period of stability, with the exception of the horrific wars the U.S. inflicted on Korea and Vietnam while the Soviets stood aside, and the war the Soviets waged in Afghanistan to suppress the rebels opposed to the secular Soviet-backed government (who were then backed by the CIA, because they were so *anti-communist*, that being the main thing), who went on to became the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Europe itself was actually remarkably stable during that Cold War, from 1945 to 1989. Since then there's been horrific violence, especially in southeastern Europe, much of it exacerbated by the U.S. and NATO.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (formed in 1955 in belated response to NATO, after NATO decided to include West Germany) in 1991, you might have thought that NATO would dissolve too. But no; it redefined its mission as maintaining "security" in a newly insecure situation. Its purpose is in fact stated in the vaguest terms. Its real function is to preserve U.S. hegemony over post-Soviet Europe, expand to surround Russia and ultimately create the conditions for a Yugoslavia-type fracturing of the Russian state—which for

some reason U.S. military leaders keep referring to as the "number one threat" or even "existential threat" to the U.S.!

How the U.S. Uses the EU

The U.S. attempts to use the EU for its own geopolitical ends, particularly for this confrontation with Russia.

For example: from late 2013 to February 2014 the U.S. State Department spent $5 billion in Ukraine in order to (in the words of Under Secretary of State for Eurasia Victoria Nuland, a former Dick Cheney aide, neocon married to neocon Robert Kagan and key Hillary crony) "support the Ukrainian people's European aspirations"—meaning the hopes of many Ukrainians for their country to join the EU.

But what Nuland, the Pentagon and NATO leaders in Europe really wanted to do was to pull Ukraine into NATO, completing the creeping encirclement of Russia that had begun with NATO's expansion to include Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1999.

NATO now already includes 11 countries formerly part of the Soviet bloc (Warsaw Pact) or Yugoslavia, most added during Bush's administration but two (Albania and Croatia) admitted since. In all cases, by the way, these states first received admission into NATO, then into the EU.

Bulgaria: joined NATO 2004, EU 2007

Croatia: NATO 2009, EU 2013

Czechoslovakia: NATO 1999, EU 2004

Estonia: NATO April 2, 2004, EU May 1, 2004

Hungary: NATO 1999, EU 2004

Latvia: NATO April 2, 2004, EU May 1, 2004

Lithuania: NATO April 2, 2004, EU May 1, 2004

Poland: NATO 1999, EU 2004

Romania: NATO 2004, EU 2007

Slovakia: NATO, March 29, 2004, EU May 1, 2004

Slovenia: NATO, March 29, 2004, EU May 1, 2004

Notice a pattern? First a country commits itself to an anti-Russian alliance with the U.S., committing 2% of its GDP to military expenses and pledging to go to war against Russia when called upon to do so. Then it gets access to the benefits of EU membership.

Back to Ukraine. Ukraine in early 2014 included the Crimean Peninsula, home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the 1780s, a vital naval port for the Russian state that has only a few warm-water ports. (Crimea had been turned over from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by half-Ukrainian Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. After the break-up of the USSR in 1991, Russia retained its traditional military presence on the peninsula by a treaty with the Ukrainian leaders.)

But the U.S. would like to expel the Russians and make Sevastopol a NATO port. (This is not only Vladimir Putin's nightmare; it would be a nightmare for *any* Russian leader. Look at a map.)

In 2013 the president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, democratically elected in an internationally monitored election in 2010, negotiated with the EU for his country's eventual entry into the union. A substantial portion of the population, especially in the western part of the country, favored this. But when Yanukovych realized that steps towards admission would involve accepting an austerity regime comparable to that inflicted on Greece, he opted out, instead accepting a generous Russian aid offer.

Nuland & Co. depicted this as a pro-Russian leader's capitulation to Russian pressure; again, their talking point was "Ukrainian people's European aspirations." (In fact, Ukrainians were divided on the issue, with fewer than 50% in favor of EU membership.)

Ukraine is ethnically divided between ethnic Ukrainians (who speak a language related to Russian, although the two languages are not mutually intelligible) and ethnic Russians who have always spoken Russian. (Russian has always been a recognized official language in the country.) There has been much intermarriage between the two, but among the ethnic Ukrainians there are many Russophobes including neo-fascists who glorify Stepan Bandera, an anti-Russian Ukrainian leader who worked with the Nazis to round up Jews and fight the Soviets in 1941. (He was declared a "national hero" by Yanukovych's predecessor Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-U.S. advocate of NATO admission. Yanukovych withdrew this award, but it has been reinstated by the current regime.)

Taking advantage of this Russophobia, the U.S. depicted Yanukovych's change of mind as a betrayal of "European" dreams. Working with the neo-fascist Svoboda Party, among others, it assisted in the brutal putsch of February 22, 2014, that caused the president to flee for fear of his life. A new, pro-NATO government was immediately installed, with Arseniy Yatsenyev as prime minister.

"Fuck the EU!" …and then *Use* It!

This is where the story gets interesting, because it reveals what the EU means to the U.S., and what it doesn't. In an intercepted phone conversation between Nuland and the U.S. ambassador

to Ukraine a month before the coup, they discuss who will succeed Yanukovych once he's toppled. She favors NATO proponent "Yats." The ambassador mentions the the EU favors a different candidate, whom she thinks is inappropriate. They discuss how Yatsenyev will be legitimated by a UN official sent by Ban Ki-moon.

"So that would be great, I think, to help glue this thing and to have the UN help glue it," she concludes, "and, you know, Fuck the EU." (In other words, this is *not* about any European's aspirations. It's about *ours.*)

So the coup comes off as planned. The obviously prominent role of neo-fascists in the new regime, and the immediate revocation of the existing law protecting language rights frightened and angered the primarily Russian inhabitants of the Donbass region (where Yanukovych had his base of support). They refused to accept its legitimacy. (Their resistance is invariably represented by the U.S. press in the service of the State Department as a Moscow-inspired rebellion or even Russian "invasion.")

Russia refused to recognize the new government and quickly moved to re-annex its historical territory of Crimea. The Russian-majority population of Crimea overwhelmingly voted in a credible referendum to reunite with Russia. The U.S. media often refers to this as another "invasion" although it was nothing of the sort; there were tens of thousands of Russian troops in place by longstanding agreement, who simply secured government buildings and the borders.

Hillary Clinton, among others, likened this move to Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938. That is to say: something that must not meet with *appeasement.* And so (people are taught to believe), the practical Russian response to U.S. efforts to complete the expansion of NATO is the problem, not NATO's relentless advance against Russia itself. Russia under Putin is the worrisome aggressor, not the U.S. leaders who invade a new country like clockwork every few years, boasting that they need to do it because theirs is the "exceptional" nation.

Some in the Obama administration favored a military response to the separatists in the east; they wanted to further arm the new regime and encourage it to assert control over the Donbass if not Crimea. It is clear this was the view of U.S. Gen. Philip Breedlove, the "Supreme Allied Commander" of "NATO Allied Command Operations" in Europe. We know from intercepted emails exchanged between him and Nuland (whom he refers to affectionately as "Toria") that he was frustrated by the failure of Obama to order the Ukrainian puppets to more forcefully invade the east. (Initial efforts to do this had resulted in mass desertions, or soldiers retreated in the face of unarmed citizens including old women shaming them into abandoning their mission. It was a tremendous embarrassment to the Kiev regime.)

Obama decided not to heed Breedlove. In place of hot warfare he chose economic warfare. Here is where the EU comes in. In July 2014 the union (that Nuland wanted to fuck) dutifully voted to impose economic sanctions on Russia. (Again, 22 of the 28 EU members are also NATO members; the only ones that aren't are Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta.)

The U.S. is of course not an EU member but it had a reliable surrogate within the union: the United Kingdom, which has strongly argued for sanctions, their expansion and extension to the

present. (Frank Holmes, managing editor of *US Global Investors*, calls Britain "the bloc's strongest supporter of restrictions." The conservative Washington D.C. website *The Daily Caller* calls it the U.S.'s "strongest E.U. ally against Russia").

The UK, which had far less to lose from the sanctions that many other EU nations, was urging its partners to shoot themselves in the foot. It was asking them to punish Russia (and damage themselves). The continental Europeans went along, some grudgingly.

Regrets (and Maybe Rebellion?)

Many have come to regret it. The Czech and Hungarian leaders have long been questioning the sanctions and expressing displeasure. Of course they want, as new members of the EU and NATO, to be team players. But their people are suffering from lost trade and pressuring them to protest. Thus Czech President Milos Zeman has called the sanctions "not merely inefficient; on the contrary, they are counterproductive." (Only 35% of Czechs according to a 2015 Gallop poll support the sanctions.)

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban calls the sanctions a "risk in the EU…very deep, of a strategic nature." (European Council president Donald Tusk, a Pole, calls Orban a "Trojan Horse" for Russia while Orban says Tusk is "on the other side" for opposing an easing of sanctions.)

In May, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that his government *"definitely cannot accept that a decision [by the EU, on extending sanctions] was made behind the scenes, that is, we are against using an automatic procedure."* *(In Hungary, only 29% of those polled favor the sanctions.)*

The Polish regime has been among the most supportive of the U.S. position; anti-Russian sentiment is deep in that country for various historical reasons, and 70% of those polled support sanctions. But the Polish farmers are suffering from them. One-third of the apples harvested in Poland two years ago went to Russia; now the trade is forbidden.

Meanwhile in Spain farmers burn EU flags over piles of rotting peaches to protest the collapse of their relations with the Russian marketplace. The European Commission keeps having to pay out millions of euros to partly compensate farmers and merchants for their losses due to sanctions.

French MPs in April this year voted for a resolution to lift EU sanctions on Russia. Minister of Economy Emmanuel Macros has vowed to work towards lifting them. Italian cabinet ministers and the lawmakers in Italy's Upper House of Parliament also want to rethink them. Maybe they're all Trojan Horses, but if so, that's good.

The role of Germany in the EU, as the most populous and wealthiest country in Europe, is more important than ever following the Brexit. While it has been, along with France, a strong supporter of the sanctions and their continuation, public support is waning. In May a German pollster found that 36% of Germans want the sanctions scaled down, while 35% want them scrapped entirely.

The sanctions have had disastrous impact on the German economy. Since they were imposed exports have declined by about 20 billion euros. Alstom has lost a huge contract for the construction of the Beijing-Moscow railway line. The business community generally wants the sanctions dropped.

There appears to be a general feeling that the U.S. (which is feeling few effects from the sanctions it itself imposed on Russia) pressed the EU (especially through Britain) to take measures that are not in Europe's interest. And some surely realize that what this is all really about is the U.S.'s desire to punish Russia for thwarting its effort to bring Ukraine into NATO— through that cynical device of Victoria ("Fuck the EU") Nuland of supporting Ukraine's "European aspirations.

As it happens, 67% of Germans oppose bringing Ukraine into NATO, and 45% oppose bringing it into the EU. Most importantly, German support for NATO has been plummeting; it was 73% in 2009 but was 55% last year. And when asked whether Germany, in the event of a Russian attack on an east European border state that is a NATO member, should fight on the side of that state, only 38% say yes according to a Spring 2015 Pew poll.

According to the same poll, that figure is 40% in Italy, 47% in France, and 48% in both Poland and Spain. In other words, over half the people of these countries oppose the very nature of NATO as "mutual defense" alliance.

This raises the real possibility of countries leaving NATO, as well as the EU. Czech president Milos Zeman has called for referendums on his country's membership in both. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has criticized the recent joint maneuvers in Poland, in which 14,000 U.S. troops, 12,000 Polish troops, and 800 from Britain participated as "saber-rattling."

"Whoever believes," he warns, "that a symbolic tank parade on the alliance's eastern border will bring security is mistaken. We are well-advised to not create pretexts to renew an old confrontation." In other words, the U.S. is steering NATO towards war with Russia, which the Germans know is not a good idea.

Who would have imagined a few years ago that the UK would ever leave the EU? Imagine the Czech Republic leaving this confrontational NATO alliance, joining its prosperous neighbor Austria by opting for neutrality. Imagine the Germans (who have many reasons to be angry towards the U.S., including the fact that the NSA spies on all of them) becoming fed up enough to hold their own referendum and quitting the bloc.

There is something of a precedent. France shocked the U.S. when it pulled out of the NATO Integrated Military Command Structures in 1966, in order to, as President Charles DeGaulle put it "preserve French independence in world affairs." (It remained committed in theory to the defense of alliance members but only rejoined with conditions in 2009.)

France, which has military bases all over the world and deploys troops routinely in Africa and elsewhere (it cooperated with the U.S. in overthrowing Aristide in Haiti in 2004, as if to apologize for having opposed the U.S. war in Iraq), is very different from Germany with its stiff

constitutional limits on the use of its military and generally pacifistic population. Within the EU, it is likely to replace the UK as its most important hawkish member, while Germany is likely to urge reconciliation with Russia.

There are contradictions within both the EU and NATO. They are interwoven, and some look irresolvable. That again is a good thing.