

STEVEN ERLANGER

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Ali ASLAN

Another fine newspaper is the New York Times, and that is why I am delighted to have with us its Chief Diplomatic Correspondent in Europe. I am sure all of you are familiar with his work, with his writing; he was based in Berlin, Paris, Moscow, London and now currently in Brussels. Steven, nobody needs to tell you about Europe; this is a continent you have been covering for a very long time, and that is why I am curious to hear your take on the future of the EU.

Steven ERLANGER

We have all been waiting for Europe to grow up for a very long time; I think I will be dead before it reaches its teenage years, but we will see. It is always hard to follow Rick, but I want to encourage you in one thing – if you are troubled by Donald Trump’s indifference to Europe, think how troubled you would be if he was really interested in Europe. I think he has basically decided, not liking multilateral institutions, that the EU is silly, but if you want it, it is okay, and that is kind of the way he feels about NATO – maybe it is not great, and maybe the US is being taken advantage of, but it seems important and the people around him think it is important, so it is okay.

I am very ambivalent right now about the state of the EU. It has got some of its mojo back, there is no question; Brexit has been a wake-up call, and it has made sure that no other country will vote to leave the EU, at least not for quite a long time. It has reinvigorated the idea that Europe needs better leadership. Growth is back, though still very slow. We have heard in the excellent economic and finance panels that unemployment is less but still bad, particularly for youth. The big problem remains the diversity of 28 countries – what worked at 15 does not really work so well at 28, perhaps soon to be 27, but Britain was never really the problem inside the EU. It was an irritant, but not a problem.

My friend Ivan Krastev wrote a little essay that was turned into a book called *After Europe*. His worry is not North-South but East-West; it is the conflict in values between Eastern and Central members – which implies that Russia is a member of Europe, though I am not sure it really wants to be or is. These countries, which are still pretty newly sovereign, are very reluctant to give up that newly re-found sovereignty to Brussels. They really oppose the idea of a stronger European institutional basis. There is a big debate going on whether we need more Europe for the Eurozone. It is not clear to me that the argument is won in Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic or Slovakia. They do not like Brussels or the Euro. They are very pro-European to some degree – they get aid, their citizens can work and travel – but some of these countries are really fascinating, like Slovakia, with five or six million people, which makes more cars per capita than any country on earth, and all because of EU companies. It is very pro-European, yet it resists taking any migrants and resists this notion that EU membership should have costs to it, not simply benefits. That is a value issue, but it will also take quite a long time to resolve.

The other thing we talk about is the Franco-German couple. It is no longer enough in a Europe this size. The Germans are desperate to have a France that is in better shape, partly to share the responsibility and the blame for European leadership, because there is a lot of anti-German feeling in Southern and Eastern Europe. The feeling is that, if you think Trump is “America First,” Germany has been acting as “Germany First” within Europe for quite a long time, even though its myth is altruism. But no one in the EU believes in that myth anymore, and Merkel understands that.

That is part of the problem, and you see it in defense – already in new ideas for European defense you have a big fight between Germany and France, because Germany wants a big club and France wants capabilities, not surprisingly. France wants more money spent on equipment and training, and the Germans just want a club, and if you look at German opinion polls, we want Germany to do more, we want Germany to play a bigger role, but Germans themselves are extremely ambivalent about doing that.



Finally, we have Brexit. I have just moved from Britain where I spent nine years of my life, and it has become a country I do not even recognize anymore; its allies do not recognize it either. I have just done a piece, if you care, in today's *New York Times* about Britain and Brexit, and I will just end by reading you the first two paragraphs. "Many Britons see their country as a brave galleon, banners waving, cannons firing, trumpets blaring. This is how the voluble Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, likes to describe it. But Britain is now a modest-size ship on the global ocean. Having voted to leave the EU, it is unmoored, heading to nowhere, while on deck, fire has broken out, and the captain – poor Theresa May – is lashed to the mast, without the authority to decide whether to turn to port or to starboard, let alone do what one imagines she would want to do and knows would be best, which is to turn around and head back to shore."

People do not recognize this Britain. We think of Britain as a country of pragmatism, of common sense, political stability, a nation of shopkeepers, but it has become nearly unrecognizable. It is no longer the country they understood it to be their whole lives. However, I really hope that some kind of deal will be done between the EU and Britain, because the trade is useful for Britain and the EU. Britain is a military power still, though very hollowed-out, let us be honest, and to imagine an EU or a Britain without some kind of decent relationship shakes me to the core.

Ali ASLAN

When you talk about Brexit, as someone who has lived in the UK for nearly a decade, you can tell that this is something that also affects you on a personal level. You also mentioned, correctly, that Europe needs a strong France, needs France to step up and assume its former role, if you will, to be the congenial partner of Germany.