

Paralyzed by Trauma

Europe no longer believes in itself

John Kornblum

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In the midst of the bizarre charade in Brussels there is some good news to report. For the first time in decades, Europeans are using active words such as “strong” and “sovereign” and “determined” to describe their goals for the European Union.

An even more ancient taboo was broken recently by German Federation of Industry President Dieter Trumpf. He expressed clearly his frustration with empty politics in Germany. The Chancellor reciprocated by confirming what everyone already knew -- politicians don't like businessmen either.

These may seem like small steps, but they were in stark contrast to the weak, mushy consensus which continues to emanate from Brussels. We know it well: “Europe is a peace project,” or “We need more Europe rather than less Europe.” And then there is my old favorite: “Europe must learn to speak with one voice.”

Or the incomprehensible debate which accompanied the Council of Europe's decision to readmit Russian Parliamentarians. What a nice welcome for a new Ukrainian government, elected under difficult

circumstances in a vote described by the OSCE as fair and democratic, despite the war conducted by Russia in its Eastern territories.

Raised believing that a weak Europe is the only alternative to nationalism and war, many Europeans actually celebrate their passivity as a sign of superiority. After more than 50 years of this nonsense, I have concluded that reforming the EU can do little to return Europe to global influence. Something more fundamental is missing. Continental society seems to be paralyzed by what Yale Professor Jeffrey Alexander calls *cultural trauma*.

Psychiatrists tell that there is no easy cure, as Professor Alexander put it; *“when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that..., marks their memories forever....”*

Forever is a long time. Stability and a commitment to firm, credible values are part of the therapy. But first one needs to accept that the problem exists.

Thirty years after the Cold War, failure to recognize the implications of trauma has produced an aimless Europe, whose stagnation is a burden for the rest of the world. Putin loves to play on European fears with sabre rattling and pipeline projects. The Chinese have their belt road. And for Americans, Europe is more a marketing territory for new inventions, than a partner, not to mention a competitor.

This is really bad news for all of us. Especially in the democratic West. Without a strong Europe, freedom cannot prosper. One of

the world's most important regions, once the center of invention and exploration, is sinking into stagnation — a leader in nothing, afraid of what is new and challenging, shirking responsibility and increasingly alienated from its most important friend and protector, the United States.

How can Europeans take charge of its own fate and begin living up to the tough words its leaders are trying to sell them?

First, none of this is Donald Trump's or even America's fault. Trump did not ordain Europe's shameful abandonment of military defense. He did not force Germany not to install broad band or discourage venture capitalists. It is not America's fault that the average age of DAX companies is 128 years, when in the S&P 500, the number is 20.

Above all, no one forced Europeans to ignore the fact that Europe's greatness from Rome to the Renaissance to the age of exploration was built by spreading European skills outwardly around the world. Many of us expected another surge of European global dynamism after the end of the Cold War. Instead, the path was to "deepen" an essentially dysfunctional organization.

Luckily a foundation for European global reach already exists. It is called the Atlantic community. The Atlantic world offers a trading power such as Europe an extremely efficient global platform for Western values, defense, scientific research and economic opportunity which could never be replicated.

Finally, the obvious. Power to project Western interests moved across the Atlantic in the 20th century and it will not return. America cannot be expected to focus its vision on a declining Europe forever. Trump may be harsh, but he is more relevant to the American isolationist tradition than Ronald Reagan or George H.W. Bush. Key will be to demonstrate a commitment to the partnership with a shared vision. Even if that means working with Trump.

Europe's future depends on much more than events of the 20th century. Rampaging technological change is likely to be as disruptive as was the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the two world wars together. Today, a rump continental Europe, bereft of political credibility, devoid of its global empires and above all failing to put its past behind it, is in danger of losing its claim to leadership. Maybe getting mad at Trump and Xi is a good first step to getting things back on track.