

GOP Looks to Take the Senate

Leading political prognosticators see the Republicans winning total control of the U.S. Congress this fall, meaning that President Obama's political agenda would be effectively finished. But will this bleak prospect finally force Democrats to fight back, wonders Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

The Democrats are facing a tough political map in their fight to keep control of the U.S. Senate in 2014. Most of the states that will be casting ballots for the Senate in 2014 are Republican leaning; seven of the 21 Democratic-held seats are in states carried by Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney in 2012, while just one of the 15 contested Republican seats is in a state won by President Barack Obama.

Also, with the exception of three Senate races to replace senators who died or resigned, the seats in play this year were last contested in 2008, "an extraordinarily strong year for Democrats," notes the respected political prognosticator Nate Silver.

In July 2013, Silver forecast that the race for Senate control was a toss-up, but his most recent forecast on March 23 stated, "We think the Republicans are now slight favorites to win at least six seats and capture the chamber."

The Democrats' position has deteriorated somewhat since last summer, with President Obama's approval ratings down to 42 or 43 percent from an average of about 45 percent before, Silver said. Furthermore, as compared with 2010 or 2012, it has been suggested that the GOP has done a better job of recruiting credible candidates.

Silver said Democrat-held seats likely to be picked up by Republicans are in West Virginia, South Dakota, Montana and Arkansas, with Republicans then having to win just two toss-up races in Alaska, North Carolina or Michigan, or pull off a modest upset in a state like New Hampshire. They'll also have to avoid losses in Georgia and Kentucky, he said.

Democrats have challenged Silver's prediction. Guy Cecil, the executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, issued a rebuttal on Monday, saying: "Silver was wrong in 2012" when he also projected a likely Republican Senate takeover.

"In fact, in August of 2012 Silver forecast a 61 percent likelihood that Republicans would pick up enough seats to claim the majority," Cecil said.

“Three months later, Democrats went on to win 55 seats.”

But Silver is not alone in seeing the GOP advantage. “Senate Republicans seem to have a strong chance at gaining the six seats they need for a majority in the chamber,” according to political professor John J. Pitney Jr., “but their task will be tougher if they drop any of the seats that they already have.”

Late last year, political analyst Charlie Cook said “Democrats need to win 3 of the 7 most competitive Senate races to hold the chamber,” while “Republicans would need to win 5 of these 7 seats including unseating 3 Democrats to win a 51 seat majority on the Senate. Six of these seven states were won by Romney in 2012 (AK, AR, LA, NC, GA, KY), and one was won by Obama (MI).”

But control of the Senate would likely be in play again in 2016, a presidential election year, Cook and other observers believe.

The Senate “will be very closely divided after the 2014 election and could swing to the other side in 2014 and again in 2016.” Cook concluded this March. “It’s hard to see how the GOP doesn’t score a net gain of at least four seats, shaving the Democratic majority to 51 seats. At the other extreme, it would not be impossible for Republicans to score a net gain of seven or eight seats, giving the GOP a 52-48 majority, or even one of 53-47.”

Cook believes, “The odds are high after this election that the majority party will have 53 seats or less, but it is important to remember that in 2016, the shoe will be on the other foot in terms of seat exposure. This year, Democrats have 21 seats up, compared with 15 for Republicans; in 2016, the GOP will have 24 seats up, while Democrats will only have 10. It’s not implausible that Republicans could pick up a majority in 2014 only to lose it again in 2016, with the Senate teetering on the edge for the foreseeable future.”

The view of Kyle Kondik of *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* is that 16 races are potentially competitive at the moment. “Of those races, 14 are currently held by Democrats, and just two are held by Republicans,” Kondik said. “Nearly all the competitive seats this cycle are in places where Democrats are playing defense.”

The chief Republican worry is that some of the GOP primaries will produce Tea Party nominees who could be weak general election candidates, as has happened in the past two election cycles. These GOP primaries have been identified as key to watch: Georgia, Iowa, Colorado, Kentucky, Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee and South Carolina.

But it appears safe to say even months before the midterm elections that for Americans the days a half century ago when political scientist Clinton Rossiter could boast that America’s party system reflected genius and that U.S. political

parties were “creatures of compromise, coalitions of interest in which principle is muted and often even silenced” are long gone.

Congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein offered a worrisome assessment in 2012: “One of these parties has taken on the role of insurgent outlier; the Republicans have become ideologically extreme, scornful of compromise, and ardently opposed to the established social and economic policy regime.”

Journalist Robert Parry, the editor of *ConsortiumNews*, has suggested that: “We’ve allowed the madness to dominate for three decades. Now, it may be impossible to govern responsibly with such a huge apparatus behind the madness.”

Perhaps the only way to reverse the current trends is for Democrats to get out of their defensive crouch and stop being so averse to confrontation. Yet, even if they go on the offensive and marshal the evidence to support their positions, the odds may be against them, given the vast sums of money available to Republicans and the Right.

Political observer Bill Moyers calls the current struggle against extremist authoritarians masquerading as conservatives “the fight of our lives.” But informed and decent American voters still have an opportunity to make a difference a vote is a voice.

The hard reality is that we are in a fight to save our representative democracy and we must face battle after battle, with 2014 midterms the next one looming.

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Why Europe Shies from Ukraine Showdown

Exclusive: Despite pressure from President Obama to escalate the fight with Russian President Putin over Ukraine, the Europeans are reluctant to stoke the crisis any further because it could consume their fragile recovery and ignite more fires of political discontent, notes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

The crisis over Ukraine and Crimea threatens to touch off a new version of the

Cold War's "mutual assured destruction" or MAD not from nuclear warfare but from the economic damage that the two sides, particularly Russia and the European Union, could inflict on each other, with fallout reaching the United States.

Though the EU and the U.S. may have started this crisis by trying to pull Ukraine away from Russia and into the European fold maneuvers that led to a violent coup d'état in Kiev last month Russian President Vladimir Putin countered the West's moves by annexing a willing Crimea and asserting Russia's right to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine's east and south.

That prompted the West to impose targeted sanctions against some prominent Russians, to oust Russia from the G-8 meeting of industrialized nations, and to threaten more severe sanctions that would damage the Russian economy if Putin won't back down. President Barack Obama added insult to the injury on Tuesday by dismissing Russia as "a regional power."

But Putin finds himself with a strategic advantage in that Europe is struggling to emerge from a long and painful recession that has divided the Continent between the EU's stronger and weaker economies. Europe's fragile recovery would likely suffer a crushing blow if the economic warfare with Russia escalates.

A new economic downturn would be particularly devastating to the so-called "periphery countries" such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus which still suffer from painful levels of unemployment and which could experience devastating political upheavals if the EU goes into another recessionary dip.

It is those countries and others in southern and eastern Europe that are putting up the most resistance to a determined campaign to punish Russia. Portugal and Spain are the least exposed to direct Russian ties, but their economies might not survive another external shock.

That's why European leaders, in general, decided to take a more cautious approach than the U.S. in retaliating against Russia for annexing Crimea. The broadened blacklist of targeted individuals is still shy of seeking a direct showdown with Russia.

But the EU did sign the association agreement with Ukraine's interim government which took power after last month's coup ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who had rebuffed the EU's offer as too harsh and instead accepted a more generous aid package of \$15 billion from Russia.

Greater Risks

The EU's reluctance to join Obama in an escalation of the tit-for-tat sanctions war with Russia reflects the reality that U.S. bilateral trade with Russia is

less than a tenth of EU's trade. While it's hard to quantify the exact impact of an escalation on Europe's fragile recovery, it's fair to say that the closer a country is to Russia the more severe the likely consequences, especially if Russia's energy shipments are disrupted.

Before the Ukraine crisis erupted in February, the EU Commission was getting slightly more optimistic about the Continent's economic growth, raising the 2014 outlook from 1.1 percent to 1.2 percent and the 2015 outlook from 1.7 percent to 1.8 percent. But those pallid numbers themselves explain why the EU is nervous. It wouldn't take much to cause a new contraction and set off a new wave of political unrest.

According to several bank research notes, the GDP impact of a sustained crisis with Russia could be a decline of about 1.5 percent in the Eurozone, but nearly a 3 percent hit for Poland. Particular harm would be inflicted on the weakened banking sectors of the emerging European economies. Even stronger economies, like Germany's, could feel some effect, a possible 0.5 percent drop.

A 1.5 percent economic slowdown for the Eurozone could prove intolerable for European populations that have already felt severe pain from the Wall Street crash of 2008 and the austerity that was prescribed by Europe's central bank and some political leaders, including Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Given the likely economic damage from a prolonged standoff with Russia, it is hard to imagine that the EU's leadership could sustain the political support necessary, especially given the murky circumstances surrounding the Ukrainian uprising and the clear desire of Crimean voters, expressed in a referendum, to abandon Ukraine's failing state and to rejoin Russia.

The five years of recession have already caused many European leaders to be voted out of office and for the EU's unity to be strained by the uneven impact of austerity across the Continent. There appears to be no appetite for more belt-tightening to make some geopolitical point.

Instead, the European bloc is struggling to jump start an economic recovery and build a more solid institutional framework for sustained growth, such as a banking union. Furthermore, harsh economic sanctions severe enough to deter Russia would require unanimity from the 28-member European Union, a unity that is lacking.

Though Great Britain leads a small group of European countries demanding a more robust response to the annexation of Crimea, most southern and central European countries prefer to defuse the crisis. In the middle of both is Germany, which stands to lose a lot from an economic war but also sees itself as the de facto

leader of Europe.

Russia's Stake

While it's true that Russia's economy would likely suffer exponentially more in terms of percentage damage from a sanctions and trade war with the West, Russia's energy exports would eventually find new markets in energy-hungry countries such as India and China.

Plus, the issue of Ukraine and Crimea has a much greater emotional pull on the Russian population than on the rest of Europe, giving Putin more political leeway than his European counterparts have.

Still, Russia is not in a great position to engage in a protracted economic war. Its economy is small, the size of Italy's, and it's very dependent on Europe, its most important trading partner. Europe accounts for 75 percent of Russia's foreign investment stocks.

But Russia is vital to global oil and gas supplies, and as such wields tremendous power. About a third of Europe's oil and even more of its natural gas comes from Russia. While it's true that Russia would not survive without its energy industry, neither could Europe function without Russia's critical oil and gas supply.

Even a small economic conflict could have serious repercussions. Supply disruptions, regardless if it's over sanctions against Russia or Russian gas cutoffs, would cause energy prices to rise. Gas shortfalls would especially affect Eastern Europe and perhaps Italy.

The West also would find it hard to isolate Russia's economy with sanctions given its land mass and its relations with other expanding economies, such as India and China. Europe and Russia additionally share significant economic interests beyond energy, especially in terms of investment and joint ventures that span the globe.

Business leaders of both sides are already lobbying for more caution, lest their mutual investments be threatened, causing collateral damage to countries far from the front lines of Russia and Ukraine.

One of the Kremlin's strongest weapons in an economic war would be its ability to destabilize Ukraine's economy, where European countries also have significant interests. Europe will need to help Kiev's near-bankrupt government in any event, but the situation would get even costlier if Ukraine has to deal with the instability that Russia can cause, particularly by turning off Ukraine's natural gas supplies if back debts aren't paid.

With Russia also ending its gas discounts to Ukraine, the interim government may have to grapple with prices doubling. Russia entrenched itself in Ukraine precisely to make the cost of any switching sides to Europe very costly. Putin knows that. And he is wagering that even though Russia is more exposed economically, Europe is less prepared to weather the economic storm or to pay the staggering bill for rebuilding Ukraine's economy.

So, most observers expect that the EU will wait for Russia's next move before entering what some call "phase three" of the crisis the first two being the original sanctions list plus the expanded one. Though the West has refused to recognize the legality of Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its annexation by Russia, the sanctions war is only likely to escalate if Russia intervenes in Ukraine's east and south to protect ethnic Russians.

To avert that possibility, the interim government in Kiev has softened its initial aggressiveness in asserting firm control over the eastern and southern regions which were the political strongholds of ousted President Yanukovich. A key question, however, is whether the Kiev regime can rein in the armed far-right militias that spearheaded the violent overthrow of Yanukovich.

If the civil violence in Ukraine worsens and if Russia intervenes militarily, the result would likely be more painful commercial, economic and migratory sanctions, which the EU is calculating would be more damaging to Russia than to Europe. But the consequences would be so serious that EU leaders agreed to economically compensate the most affected countries.

The reality is that Russia and Europe are mutually dependent, though each side may believe it has the upper hand. But the fundamental question boils down to which side can muster the most support at home for enduring the economic pain.

And, therein lies Europe's weakness. In pressing for an association agreement with Yanukovich's government last year and then quickly recognizing the coup regime that ousted him last month, the EU clearly miscalculated the Kremlin's resolve over Ukraine. But Putin may be underestimating Europe's vulnerability at a moment of economic weakness.

Still, considering Russia's resolve throughout history, specifically when it comes to Crimea, which has been part of Russia since the 1700s, and Russia's willingness to sacrifice economic benefits for its strategic advantage, Putin is unlikely to flinch first.

Given the stakes, the EU and Russia will most likely try to avoid having the crisis escalate further. That would be the economic equivalent of a nuclear bomb, or mutual assured destruction.

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