

EU in Stress: the German-Polish Clash

The strains on Europe from neocon-devised policies of “regime change” in Syria and Ukraine are resurfacing historical divisions and reviving old animosities among European states, including a war of words between Angela Merkel’s Germany and Poland’s new right-wing government, as Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

It may have been a foregone conclusion that Poland under the control of Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s Law and Justice Party because of its Euroskeptic and nationalist positions would quickly join Viktor Orban’s Hungary as a “bad boy” of the European Union.

In recent months, especially since the Law and Justice Party’s electoral victory last October, Poland has stood out as a leading naysayer to the E.U.’s calls for sharing the burden of receiving the wave of refugees arriving from Syria and the Middle East. Polish criticism of the open borders policy championed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been stinging.

For instance, before the election, Kaczynski raised alarms about the possibility that the Mideast refugees might carry diseases. “There are already signs of emergence of diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for a long time: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna. There is also talk about other, even more severe diseases,” he said, though European health authorities have not reported any widespread outbreak of infectious diseases connected to the migrants.

Poland also has been quick to take a “we told you so” stand on the New Year’s Eve mass violence and sexual assaults allegedly perpetrated by youths from North Africa and the Middle East, including asylum seekers, outside the Cologne main train station in Germany. Polish media cited the five-day blackout in Germany on news about the New Year’s Eve violence to question the autonomy and social responsibility of German journalism.

There are other reasons behind Polish vehemence on the refugees. First, from the standpoint of its population, Poland is already overrun by refugees and economic immigrants from Ukraine, which has suffered from civil war and economic collapse since February 2014 when a violent putsch toppled the government of President Viktor Yanukovych and created a crisis with Russia.

Official statistics put the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland at about 400,000, as of May 2015, but unofficial estimates are much higher, more than a million today. The Ukrainians are putting pressure on the local job market at a

time when there is still a net outflow of ethnic Poles going abroad in search of work. Secondly, admitting Muslims runs directly against the new government's stress on protecting and nurturing traditional Catholic religious values.

But Merkel's allies are hitting back against Poland's new leadership for its apparently anti-democratic actions to tighten government control over the public news media. A controversial new law allows the Polish government to appoint the directors of the public TV and radio services, as well as civil service directors.

This control of public media will be the subject of a European Commission examination into Poland's possibly violating the E.U.'s Rule of Law provisions, scheduled for Jan. 13 in Brussels. The charges are being pressed by a *German* commissioner-designate, Guenther Oettinger, who is taking charge of European Digital Economy and Society.

If a determination is made that Poland's law violates Europe's rules, the penalty could be to suspend Warsaw's voting rights in the European Council. That would be particularly awkward because Poland's own former premier, Donald Tusk, from what's now the opposition party, happens to be the Council's president.

To be sure, such an outcome would come only after a period of "supervision" during which Poland's conduct of affairs would be subject to ongoing review by the Commission. But the notion of such European supervision raises hackles in Warsaw, as reported by the country's leading daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

It also should be noted that suspension of Poland's voting rights is unlikely given the vocal support for Poland now coming from Hungarian President Viktor Orban. Resolutions in the E.U. institutions must pass unanimously, which Orban's veto threatens.

The more likely penalty that Poland could face is a cutback in E.U. financial assistance to the great variety of Polish infrastructure projects now benefiting from the largesse of Brussels. Poland is, in fact, the single largest beneficiary. Any cutbacks could be made simply as an administrative matter.

Poland also was scolded by President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, a German Social Democrat and thus representative of Merkel's ruling coalition. He decried the new Polish government in Russophobic terms, meant to insult Poland's leaders by comparing them to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In statements about Poland's new press laws, quoted by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper on Jan. 9, Schulz hurled the following grenade: "The Polish government treats its electoral victory as a mandate to subordinate the wellbeing of the state to the interests of the victorious party, including

personnel. This is controlled democracy à la Putin, a dangerous Putinization (*Putinisierung*) of European politics.”

The underlying resentments and condescension expressed by Schulz’s remarks come from historically tense relations between Germany and Poland, even if those conflicts now play out not on battlefields but in the non-violent universe of European institutions in Brussels, a system that many Member States view as German-controlled. Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission (from Luxembourg) and Donald Tusk, the ex-Polish premier at the Council, both owe their positions to the strong backing of Angela Merkel. And Schulz at the European Parliament comes from her coalition.

But the image of German hegemony in Europe is something that Berlin strongly rejects. On Monday, Merkel’s spokesman explained to journalists that the Chancellor hopes for continued good working relations with Poland and looks forward to the forthcoming visit to Berlin of Poland’s new prime minister. Any differences over policy are with the European Institutions, he said, where Germany is just one of 28 Member States.

Both founders of the 14-year-old Law and Justice Party, Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his brother Lech, the Polish president who died in a plane crash outside Smolensk in 2010, often vented publicly their bitter feelings towards Germany going back to World War II atrocities. Relations with Berlin were fraught under their administration last decade, and their party’s return to power in 2015 was based on campaign promises to free the Polish economy from foreign, meaning German, domination.

The net result of the growing public row may be to unravel one of the key foreign policy achievements of Merkel’s 10 years in power consolidating her country’s hold over Central Europe. It also has implications for the E.U.’s current anti-Russian stance and sanctions, all of which have depended on Germany’s explicit support for adventurous Polish-written policies to woo Ukraine at the expense of Russian interests.

The passions of the Old World also have spilled over to the United States, where Polish-Americans have taken a close interest in the contest of wills between Warsaw and Berlin and Brussels. One political association in New York, the Polish Patriotic Discussion Club, issued Open Letters to the presidents of the European Institutions, and to Dr. Oettinger, sounding the alarm over what they see as “interference in the matters of the Republic of Poland as a sovereign country.”

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Surprised by Erratic Erdogan

In a volatile world, predictions are a risky business. But they are required in the intelligence community where analysts are called on not only to assess what happened but to anticipate what will happen, a process that ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller continues as he assesses his last year's accuracy.

By Graham E. Fuller

Prediction on Turkey: (I was considerably off base on this one)

2015 Prediction: *President Erdoğan in Turkey will find his influence beginning to crumble in 2015. After a brilliant prime-ministership for the first decade of AKP power, he has become mired in corruption charges and has lashed out in paranoid fashion against any and all who criticize or oppose his increasingly irrational, high-handed, and quixotic style of rule. He is in the process of damaging institutions and destroying his and his party's legacy. I continue to have faith that Turkey's broader institutions, however weakened by Erdoğan, will nonetheless suffice to keep the country on a basically democratic and non-violent track until such time as Erdoğan loses public confidence, which could be sooner rather than later.*

2016 Assessment: Instead of politically declining as I believed he would, Erdoğan went on to hold a plurality in the June 2015 elections, and, dissatisfied with that, quickly maneuvered to call for yet new elections in November in which he managed to win back enough of a majority to enable him to form a single-party government. I did not anticipate that.

In the process Erdoğan increased intimidation of his opponents, and went on to arrest or detain large numbers of journalists, close down newspapers, and to manipulate and pressure the judiciary. He continues to act on the assumption that an electoral majority has given him carte blanche to rule arbitrarily with virtually no obligations of consultation with the rest of the political spectrum.

Most dangerously, after having done more to resolve the Kurdish situation than any other Turkish leader in the past decade, faced with an uncertain electorate this time he went on to create an atmosphere of insecurity in the country, and

stepped up confrontation with the armed Kurdish movement inside Turkey (PKK); this policy of fear-mongering led to an increase in terrorist acts and stirred increased domestic anxiety that strengthened his party at the November polls.

ErdoÄŸan, meanwhile, still persists in following his ruinous and failing quest to overthrow the Assad government in Syria, even as both Washington and the European Union are retreating from that policy, finally coming to understand that a victory by opposition jihadi forces in Syria poses greater dangers than the continued rule of Assad.

In his zeal, ErdoÄŸan had been willing to indiscriminately support (directly or indirectly) all armed opposition against Assad, including elements of al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Russia's arrival on the Syrian scene with military power proved to be a major turning point in the Syrian civil war. Moscow has used its air power to take on all armed opposition in a campaign that has essentially rescued the Assad regime.

In doing so, Russian President Vladimir Putin has left ErdoÄŸan's strategy in tatters and dealt a major blow to Turkish influence on all fronts within Syria. In recently shooting down an errant Russian fighter aircraft on the Turkish border, ErdoÄŸan unleashed a sharp diplomatic and economic riposte from Russia in which he will inevitably emerge the loser.

Flailing around in desperation for alternative tactical measures, he has had to defer more to U.S. concerns (for the moment), even seeks a nominal rapprochement with Israel (to please Washington), and aligned himself with Saudi Arabia's essentially meaningless new "counter-terrorist" coalition of 34 countries.

ErdoÄŸan's relations with Iraq and Iran have seriously deteriorated. Thus, although ErdoÄŸan has managed to gain domination over the policies of the Turkish state, it has been marked by poor judgment and dangerous tactics. Mr. ErdoÄŸan, you have reversed nearly all the successful foreign policy principles you innovated in your first ten years of office; would you go back to them please?

I'm going to go out on limb and say that ErdoÄŸan's losing game will increasingly undermine his authority, but not his power, over the next year. When the Turkish electorate will decide that he is a danger to the country is unpredictable, but his party is not up for reelection until 2019. If he continues to seek to amass power and rule in arbitrary and quixotic fashion, the damage to Turkish institutions could be grave.

Internal tensions in Turkey will rise, demonstrations and movements against him

will increase. He will not lose power, but growing autocracy and heavy-handed treatment of all opposition is rapidly destroying his legacy and guarantees Turkey a very tense year to come. At this point he is virtually without foreign allies, except perhaps Saudi Arabia and Qatar which may be able to provide some investment support, but little political support.

My 2015 Prediction on Iran: *The role of Iran as an actor in the region will grow. Despite all the hurdles, I feel optimistic about U.S. negotiations with Iran. Both parties desperately need success in this regard. Normalization is ludicrously long overdue and necessary to the regional order. Furthermore, Iran and Turkey are the only two "real" governments in the region today with genuine governance based on some kind of popular legitimacy, for all their faults. Turkey is democratic, Iran semi-democratic (presidential and parliamentary elections are real, while not fully fair, but they really matter.) These two states espouse many of the aspirations of the people of the region in ways no Arab leader does. The Gulf will be forced to accommodate itself to the reality of a normalized Iran; the two sides have never really been to war, despite all the occasional bellicose noises that have emerge from them periodically over the past century. Iran is post-revolutionary power with a vision of a truly sovereign Middle East free of Western domination none of the Arab states truly are. Iran's influence in the region will also grow in supporting growing regional challenges to Israel's efforts to keep the Palestinians under permanent domination.*

My 2016 Assessment: U.S.-Iran relations indeed did take a stunning step forward this year with the signing of the international nuclear agreement with Iran under U.S. leadership, Obama's virtually sole (but impressive) success in the Middle East arena in eight years.

Rear-guard actions are underway by hard-line conservatives in both the U.S. and Iran to destroy the agreement, their ideological fervor mirrors each other. Israel and its Israel-firster allies in the U.S. are equally committed to undermining the agreement.

My guess, however, is that these reactionary Iranian and American elements will not succeed in reversing the treaty, but they will set up lots of roadblocks complicating its implementation. There is still much room for military incidents in the Gulf, but as long as Obama is president such incidents will likely be handled with restraint. (There are no guarantees on this score with any next U.S. president.)

Saddest of all, opposition to the treaty essentially undermines the prospect of more serious (and potentially valuable) cooperation between the U.S. and Iran in other areas. Cooperation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria will thus be harder to

attain. But the treaty will hold and gradually take on greater significance and importance. It has already shifted the balance of power in the region in unpredictable directions.

The Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia of course loathe the return of Iran to a significant role in the region, but they will not publicly or explicitly oppose the treaty. In fact, they are condemned to live with it, as they have accommodated themselves countless times in the past to Gulf realities. (More on Saudi Arabia next time.)

The conservative establishment in Iran, while seeking the lifting of the sanctions, are determined to hold the line against any additional cooperation or warming of relations with the U.S., and to crack down against social and ideological looseness in Iran.

These efforts to maintain the status quo will continue, but in the end they are a losing game: the new political and economic emergence of Iran will inexorably begin to weaken the hard-liners and their control over the life of the nation. They indeed sense such trends, hence the struggle to freeze the internal scene. It's not about nukes but about maintenance of conservative clerical domination of the nation.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle)

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