

9-21-2018

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Recommended Citation

Dottori, Germano (2018) "Immigration as a Domestic Policy Issue: What Strategy to “Save” Europe?," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol30/iss2/8>

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Immigration as a Domestic Policy Issue: What Strategy to “Save” Europe?

Germano Dottori

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This article analyzes the influence of political orientations in the development of migration policies in the European Union. It lists the forces shaping the political orientations regarding mass migration across Europe and shows how they combine and affect the policies being adopted. The article focuses on the economic and political positions underpinning progressive, liberal options for an open-door policy and the opposing views.

The open-door policy on immigration is a typical marker of political progressivism. The argument most often made in its support, however, is not moral; it is based on utilitarian economic considerations. That fact explains why immigration is sometimes favored also by conservative leaders.

Those who advocate for massive inflows of foreign migrants do so on the grounds that the persistent coming of age of the European population along with low and decreasing birth rates calls for a sort of replacement policy. To keep the welfare system working properly, so goes the argument, we need to increase the active population, which is declining in the European Union, by absorbing the most qualified people escaping their country's poverty. Some even predict a future competition among advanced industrial economies for the human reservoirs of sub-Saharan Africa. In that framework, migrants continue to be seen mainly as a productive factor, and intercontinental flows as something similar to the domestic and European ones of the past.

Even Chancellor Angela Merkel's move that opened the borders of Germany to the Syrian asylum seekers in 2015 was publicly explained as having been dictated by the industrialists' thirst for skilled labor, because people escaping the Syrian carnage seemed well qualified and even in full command of a foreign language, such as English. Since the crisis concerned the destiny of refugees—men, women, and children—moral factors were also at play: the German permanent commitment to overcome the longstanding shadow of Nazi intolerance, which affected also the weak reaction to the street violence recorded on New Year's Eve in Cologne, when the German press self-censored the news for days in an effort to avoid the revival of any kind of ethno-based backlash.¹

Humanitarianism, however, is a powerful force in Europe and contributes to the impetus to adopt political measures supportive of immigration. Its weight is heavier in countries that are sensitive to the values of Roman Catholicism and even socialism, where it still has supporters: both are internationalist forces.

Besides the economic and moral rationale, open-door policies have been embraced sometimes to serve long-term projects aimed at changing the demographic landscape of a given society for political purposes. Since cosmopolitanism is an antidote to nationalism, and

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immigrants are set to demographically reinforce the lower levels of the social pyramids, some might have conceived of immigration as a social engineering tool to alter the underlying correlation of forces existing between conservatives and progressives, to the detriment of the former and the advantage of the latter.² The very existence of such plans, however, is usually denied by the progressive parties and very often exploited by conservatives and populist latecomers as an electoral charge against their adversaries.

The idea underlying the hypothesis is weak: multicultural and multiethnic Britain brought to power Conservative leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and, more recently, David Cameron. The French elected President Nicholas Sarkozy, the son to a Hungarian refugee. Large foreign communities did not prevent conservatives like Helmut Kohl or Angela Merkel from seizing the German government.

A further variant of the hypothesis described earlier casts doubt on the sincerity of the political forces advocating permissive migration policies, which would resort to an open-door policy in order to serve the interests of a constituency supposedly loyal to them. That constituency is made up of organizations and voluntary associations that benefit from state contributions to the management of the arrivals. Integration is a rich business, if state funded, and that is a reality that creates further opportunities to enlist cronies and subservient lobbies.

The Identitarian Approach of the Conservative and the Right-Wing Populist

Those who oppose the open-door approach to migration make circular arguments. Though an economy may need migrants, they posit, men and women cannot be reduced to raw productive materials because each of them brings a distinctive culture and values, each has expectations to fulfill, and each asks for respect, recognition, and rights. Integration, if it were possible, could be achieved only at a price society would not consider worth paying, especially in times of tight fiscal policies and cuts to social security schemes.

Those who oppose the open-door approach may accept the idea of allowing temporary economic migrants on utilitarian grounds related to the industrial need for manpower and the financial contribution such migrants make to the funding of welfare but reject the very idea of integration, perhaps because they fear adverse long-term changes in the composition of the electoral body and believe a progressive strategy is in place that is geared to that aim. Once in power, political forces and movements embracing these views very often resort to schemes supportive of limited stays and rule out easy access to citizenship.

Thus, the debate over the open-door policy is highly polarized and ideologized, focusing on the desirability of multi-ethnicity and its effects on state security and national identity. On those grounds, anti-immigration parties and movements also opposed the eastward enlargement of the European Union and the Schengen agreement, which created the European single space.

Attitudes toward asylum seekers are sometimes ambiguous and, in practice, are dependent on numbers. Few people openly support the rejection of refugees escaping war, political strife, or religious persecution, especially if they are Christians threatened by radical Islamists or jihadists. But suspicion prevails. On the opposite side of the aisle, many conservatives and populists call for tighter requirements because they fear that “economic migrants” can too easily disguise themselves as refugees and take advantage of the international protection to which they are entitled by the existing treaties.

Racial prejudice is also at play in the countries most exposed to immigration from sub-Saharan Africa, such as Italy, where de facto enslavement of the immigrants has been observed in various rural areas of Southern Italy.

After the attacks on the United States staged by al Qaeda on 9/11 and the more recent breakup of the Arab Spring, however, opposition to the open-door policy acquired a much clearer anti-Islamic bias. Those who criticize the progressive approach to the issue often emphasize the potential danger to the social cohesion and security of the host European countries, now and in the future, if Muslims are allowed to immigrate. They argue that Muslims are less likely to integrate into the host society and that migrant flows originating in the Ummah could offer a cover to dangerous people set to stage terror attacks on Europe.

In the end, opposition to the open-door policy and to the very pursuit of the integration of migrants stems from an identitarian approach that targets all foreigners and now defines itself mainly by its hostility to Islam. It is a feeling unfortunately on the rise everywhere in the European Union, especially at the grassroots level, and as a result of the recent jihadist attacks in Paris and Brussels.

Depolarizing and De-ideologizing the Debate on Immigration

Debunking the competing narratives is not an easy task, because the management of immigration has become as a major battlefield between progressive and conservative and right-wing populist forces across Europe. The debate is ideologically conditioned and very polarized with respect to social paradigms and values. While progressives emphasize equality among human beings as the ethical foundation of the case for openness and integration, borrowing core concepts from the Illuminist and Catholic heritages, their adversaries on the opposite side of the political spectrum emphasize the weight of cultural differences, resorting to theories such as Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations."

Though some degree of racial supremacism may motivate the most radical anti-immigration forces, most people who embrace the views of the parties supporting tighter immigration policies are simply reacting to the rapid changes they are experiencing in their human environment. Progressives fail to grasp the reality of the fear and estrangement people in the most disadvantaged sections of European societies are feeling.

Cosmopolitanism belongs to the social élites, the true "globals" in the words of the geographer Harm de Blij. But it does not pertain to the migrating "mobals" and the peripheral "locals" who are engaged in a growing competition for public aid, as the demand for welfare and social security increases and their supply decreases under the pressure of the tight fiscal policies put in place in by EU bodies governing the Eurozone to defuse crises on the sovereign debt markets.³ In other words, progressives have to cope with the growing gap between the values they proclaim and the practical results of the political actions they put in place to shape reality accordingly. They must also develop a more realistic assessment of the demographic magnitude of the process under way and the far-reaching consequences it could produce if not adequately met by appropriate concerted policies.

Europe is a mature demographic area facing a region of the world that is experiencing a demographic bulge and economic growth that is increasing day by day the number of people who can afford to travel. Africa's population of more than 1.1 billion inhabitants is scheduled to double before mid-century, and the continent is experiencing significant economic growth. The many political upheavals and wars under way from Maghreb to Afghanistan add to the pressure, making it all the more difficult to slow down the speed and intensity of the flows of migrants reaching Europe. An open-door policy, while consistent with the humanitarian values advocated by the progressive parties, can be read as encouragement to would-be immigrants, whose arrival will only intensify the magnitude of the disruption with which Europe must cope. Replacing aging Europeans with young people from Africa and Asia is also socially dangerous, because it challenges the ability of a polity to merge the newcomers into mature social bodies while avoiding an identitarian backlash.

Conservatives and right-wing populists should be more attentive to the social and political dynamic that the radicalization they foster could fuel, especially when their political plans target whole ethnic and confessional groups, such as the Muslim migrants coming from Maghreb, the Middle East, and Central Asia. They are probably right, however, when they claim that massive immigration brings about a higher number of criminal offenses, especially against property, and demand action to prevent the diffusion across Europe of de facto no-man's-lands, urban areas left to criminal gang and jihadist cells to rule, such as the now tragically notorious Brussels Molenbeek.

Cultural identities matter too. Nonetheless, conservatives and right-wing populists should resist any temptation to generalize, above all for the sake of the security they declare willing to protect. Neither is every Muslim newcomer an Islamist nor is every Islamist a jihadi terrorist, even if all jihadists are Islamists and, by definition, also Muslim. There are Muslim communities in the EU member states that are demanding protection and cooperation by law enforcement agencies and even the security services. The generalization so often embraced by the conservative/populist discourse is of no help in reducing the growing risk of terrorist attacks in Europe and could instead paradoxically strengthen jihadi proselytism, perhaps serving some of the presumptive aims pursued by organizations such as al Qaeda or the so-called Islamic State. Missing that point is playing into the hands of our true enemies.

Progressives and their opponents on the right side of the political spectrum seem to underestimate as well the influence that some state policies exert on migration flows. The former Libyan ruler Muammar al-Qaddafi manipulated the flows in order to use irregular migrants as a weapon in the negotiation of a comprehensive agreement with Italy.

Some analysts suspect that the Libyan National Congress in power in Tripoli from mid-2014 to April 2016 resorted to the use of migrants to get political recognition by Italy and to cause trouble between Italy and France, which had sided with the government based in Tobruk. And there had been trouble: Paris overtly accused Rome of allowing immigrants and asylum seekers to move freely across the Italian territory up to Ventimiglia, in order to get rid of them, before resorting to the temporary reimposition of border controls.

Turkey's strategic use of massive migrations seems even more ambitious because it was designed to extract concessions from the European Union and perhaps even to reduce its geopolitical cohesion. Since a tenet of the Erdoğan-Davutoglu strategy is restoring Turkey's former sphere of influence, which once encompassed the whole of the Balkans up to Vienna, Ankara cannot accept its exclusion from the European Union. The prevailing view is that Turkey should accede and retain some negotiating chips with respect to the European Commission and the most powerful European states. Alternatively, Turkey should prevent the European Union from consolidating a regional bloc that extends to the Balkans. Expelling migrants and asylum seekers on a massive scale could serve both ends.

Unless the European political élites recover their historical ability to think strategically, in geopolitical terms, every tool put in place to manage these flows will probably prove fruitless.

The 1990s: The Migration Issue between Progressivism, Conservatism, and Populism

Public opinion toward immigration has evolved with the changing situation and is not homogeneous across Europe. Countries that experienced earlier massive inflows of foreign economic migrants tend to prefer tighter approaches to immigration than others new to the phenomenon. And in countries where the percentages of settled foreign nationals is higher, electoral support for political parties with xenophobic orientations is stronger.

Britain, which absorbed large numbers of immigrants from the Commonwealth shortly after the end of World War II, was among the first European countries, perhaps the very first, to tighten the rules restricting the access to her territory as early as 1971 and never adhered to the Schengen agreement, which created the European single space. When in 2004 London opted for the immediate opening of the British labor market to people coming from the states that had just joined the European Union, grassroots reaction was so hostile that the Labour Manifesto for the 2010 general election was forced to posit that there is no right to immigrate in the United Kingdom.⁴ Pressure continued to mount after the defeat of the Labour Party, as the British press continued to associate immigrants with growing criminality. Prime Minister David Cameron bargained hard with his European counterparts to get permission from the European Union to adopt an unprecedented set of political measures geared to discouraging immigration to the United Kingdom, to the extent that even European citizens who get a job in Britain in the coming years may be denied access to some welfare services. The case for Brexit itself owes much of its credibility to the failure of the British government to rein in immigration, and to the scourge of the refugee camp in Calais, where thousands of migrants suffered long waits for an opportunity to cross the English Channel.

As for France and Germany, when they launched the European single space in Schengen, they made sure that all signing parties were able and willing to close the external borders of the area. Both countries had long had substantial minorities of foreign immigrants living on their soil and feared the demographic consequences of the collapse of the former Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union. So, while war was raging in the Balkans, generating powerful pressure from asylum seekers, Europe became a fortress.

Italy, which was set to watch over one of the most troubled sections of the external borders of the Schengen area, was able to join the European single space only after reform of its immigration law had been put in motion, while the Italian navy was displaying a remarkable determination in defending its Adriatic shores, as the sinking of the Albanian vessel *Kader-I Radesh* in 1997 proved. Spain also militarized its long coastline facing Africa, deploying a net of radar systems to receive early warning about incoming boats.

As the inflows intensified, anti-immigration sentiments began also to feature into the agendas of new populist movements, such as the French National Front and the Italian Northern League, whose leaders eventually understood that the issue was set to last and could become a long-lasting and effective consensus-building tool.

Support for the National Front and the Northern League increased during the second half of the 1990s, peaking in the regions and cities most affected by immigration. In 2001, the Italian general election empowered a center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, whose partners included the National League and a postfascist party called the National Alliance. Part of their program was a tightening of the immigration laws passed in 1998 and delivered in 2002 in the form of a new bill known as the Bossi-Fini after the names of its proponents. That same year, despite having been defeated by the conservative Jacques Chirac, Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second turn of the French presidential election at the expense of the Socialist candidate, eventually benefiting by intensified anti-Islam sentiments and securitarian concerns inspired by 9/11.

The New Migration Crisis

Immigration from Eastern Europe continued to be a sensitive issue until the first half of the first decade of the new century, in part because of the addition to the European Union of a large number of new member states that had once belonged to the Warsaw Pact and the former Soviet Union.

As the end of the first decade of the new century was approaching, however, the general perception of the phenomenon improved. Though the number of the so-called overstayers remained high in some countries,⁵ the number of landings on the Italian shores had decreased dramatically to almost zero, thanks to the bilateral treaty signed by Italy and Libya in 2009 and ratified in 2010. Repatriation agreements had also been put in place with a certain number of African states. Furthermore, the main source of European immigration in the immediate post-Cold War years had also gradually been depleted. And the Mediterranean basin was at peace.

The landscape, however, changed dramatically with the coming of the so-called Arab Spring, which at its onset brought about much welcome political renovation but soon descended into instability, fragmentation, war, and terrorism. What happened to Libya after the fall of the Qaddafi regime was of a particular concern to Europe, despite its having been pursued aggressively by European powers such as France and Great Britain, with the help of the United States, before a request filled by Italy and Turkey led to a full-fledged NATO intervention. As a result of the war waged against Tripoli, Libya was no longer able to hold back the flood of hopeful African migrants who entered its territory bound for Europe.

While Libya was spiraling into chaos and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the permanent instability of Iraq generated a further, massive, dislocation of populations that affected the entire eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea. A good number of Syrian citizens ended up as displaced persons in desperate need of assistance by Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

As the flow of migrants intensified, so too did casualties at sea, at first in the Channel of Sicily, then also in the Aegean Sea, prompting calls for humanitarian actions to be performed at sea and on the shores of Europe. The massive loss of life that occurred in the waters of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013, inspired the controversial decision by the Italian government to dispatch a fleet to save as many people as possible.

Italy, however, soon found itself in a trap, because the deployment of its navy increased the number of those who sought to cross the Mediterranean, and the Dublin Convention forced Italy as the first host country to examine applications for asylum that the huge mass of would-be refugees began to submit. The Italian authorities then engineered a pragmatic solution they continued to practice thereafter. To a large extent, the identification and registration of the newcomers was simply skipped, encouraging immigrants to move freely and rapidly north.⁶ The strategy adopted by Rome attracted criticism from the European Union and put Italy on a collision course with its neighbors, many of whom reacted by closing their borders and temporarily suspending the Schengen agreement. A similar chain of events took place beginning in 2015 in the Balkans, with Greece in the uncomfortable position of first host country facing Turkey.

The political mood at the grassroots level changed accordingly. Occasionally, some of the countries on the route from Greece to Germany denied access to the asylum seekers. The Hungarian government even built a fence on the border. The military was deployed almost everywhere and put on alert.

Then, challenging the feelings prevailing in her own country, Chancellor Merkel decided to open the borders of the Federal Republic of Germany to the apparently skilled workers who were escaping the Syrian carnage and had been expelled by Turkey, prompting an immediate response from some of the German *Länders*, which declared their opposition to the strategy adopted by the Federal Chancery. Saxony-Anhalt went as far as to threaten to impose of its own limit on how many asylum seekers it would take, in defiance of Merkel's open-door policy. Prime Minister Reiner Haseloff called for state governments across the country to impose their own ceilings, staging a sort of revolt against the central government,

from which the powerful state of Bavaria refrained after considering the idea of deporting the asylum seekers.⁷

Nonetheless, nearly a million asylum seekers were admitted to Germany in 2015. Merkel insisted that it was in the German national interest to acquire talented workers and that doing so was consistent with the values of the Federal Republic. Her decision, however, immediately proved controversial. A poll taken by YouGov on behalf of the popular magazine *Bild* shows that the percentage of Germans convinced that the number of the asylum seekers was too high climbed to 62 percent in late January 2016 from 53 percent in November 2015.⁸

The chancellor's approval rates began to slip, and the first local election convened after the move by Merkel, in March 2016, revealed how much stronger some anti-immigration parties had become, from Pegida to the Alternative für Deutschland, which was at its onset a pro-U.S. political force, with a strong anti-EU agenda, but had rapidly turned into one of the tightest on that issue.⁹

Polls documented a generalized increase of support for anti-immigration parties across Europe, involving also the Austrian Freedom Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the Danish People's Party. Pressure for the relocation of asylum seekers and the repatriation of economic migrants who had reached Europe increased in almost all parts of the European Union, and governments were urged to take action or face a dramatic loss of political support at home. Since reaching a Europe-wide agreement on how to share of the costs immigration management proved daunting, many countries decided to act unilaterally.

To shelter their country, the Danes, for example, resorted to a draconian measure, already tested in Switzerland, that involves stripping the newcomers of every economic asset, from banknotes to jewels, that is determined to be "of considerable value."¹⁰ Asked for an explanation by the United Nations Committee for Human Rights, the Danish foreign minister, Kristian Jensen, explained that the initiative was aimed at covering the costs of immigrants' integration. Clearly, however, this inhumane effort was part of a dissuasive strategy.

What Strategy Can "Save" Europe?

Management of the huge mass of migrants landing in Southern Europe and moving north began to emerge as a divisive issue, pitting the most exposed countries of the Schengen area, which were accumulating asylum seekers in the thousands, against the others, which hoped to stem or at least contain the mounting tide.¹¹ Britain, France, Germany, and Sweden ranked high in the asylum seekers' preferences, but the Dublin Convention forced the first host countries to grant them hospitality until their request for asylum was either accepted or refused.

A geopolitical conflict, still unresolved, then broke out among the countries of the European Union, as domestic considerations linked to their political survival led some governments to ask for a revision of the system devised in Dublin and for immediate relief from the burden they were bearing in their efforts to follow through on the requirement that they return asylum seekers to the member states that are responsible for their asylum claims. Many of those member states simply refused to accept the asylum seekers. Among the hardliners were the Eastern European states of Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia, which were swift to close their borders, putting up barbed wires and even raising fences to stem the flow. Austria recently joined their ranks.

The very survival of the Schengen agreement and the freedom of movement across Europe were called into question in the domestic arena of many EU member states and in their reciprocal relations. Acts of terrorism worsened the situation.

The frequency of European summits focusing on immigration and terrorism intensified in a vain attempt to find a viable long-term solution to the issue. In a display of leadership, Merkel engineered a controversial agreement with Turkey, which makes Ankara a strategic partner in the containment of mass migrations originating in the Middle East and Central Asia. As compensation, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received a promise from the European Union to reopen the dossier concerning the accession of Turkey to the European Union, as well as future visa liberalization.

The scope for political maneuvering was and still is, nonetheless, quite narrow, since important elections are often on schedule across Europe, and the appetite for unpopular choices usually decreases as polls approach.

It seems appropriate to predict that demands for strengthened controls and tight policies will force governments to take a more aggressive stance. The gulf between Southern and Northern Europe will enlarge, as the temptation to leave Italy and Greece alone in facing these massive migrations gains traction.

As a result, Europe could be heading for fragmentation, an outcome that would feature the Continent as an area of differentiated security levels, especially if a new and smaller Schengen agreement were to replace the existing one, to the detriment of the national interests of the peripheral states of the European Union, marginalized once again after the Greek rebellion against austerity. That is clearly a suboptimal solution, but nonetheless one of those implicitly on the table.

A different option is desirable, particularly one aimed at deterring and defusing mass immigration, with the final aim of reducing the scale and speed of the current inflows, since a hermetic closure of the borders is impossible, and an unconditioned open-door policy could be recipe for a social disaster of major proportions.

Notes

¹ See the intervention delivered by Tobias Piller, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung envoy to Italy, before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Lower House of the Italian Parliament on January 20, 2016 (in Italian), http://documenti.camera.it/leg17/resoconti/commissioni/stenografici/html/03/indag/c03_strategie/2016/01/20/indice_stenografico.0009.html#stenograficoCommissione.tit00020.int00040.

² See Stephen Glower, "Using Immigration to Turn Britain into a Nation of Labour Voters Is So Shameful," *Daily Mail*, February 12, 2010.

³ Harm de Blij, *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴ According to "Crime and Immigration" in the British Labour Party Manifesto 2010 "Our borders are stronger than ever. A new Border Agency has police-level powers and thousands more immigration officers, 100 per cent of visas are now biometric, and new electronic border controls will be counting people in and out by the end of this year. Asylum claims are back down to early 1990s levels, and the cost of asylum support to the taxpayer has been cut by half in the last six years. . . . Because we believe coming to Britain is a privilege and not a right, we will break the automatic link between staying here for a set period and being able to settle or gain citizenship." *A Future Fair for All*, Labour Party Manifesto, 2010 (April 12, 2010), 5:6.

⁵ An overstayer is an immigrant who was granted a regular tourist visa and illegally extends his or her stay after the term of the visa has expired.

⁶ Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Italy Opens the Door to Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2005.

⁷ Justin Haggler, "German States Threaten to Set Own Asylum Quotas in Merkel Challenge," *Telegraph*, November 24, 2015. The German immigration policy is federalist, because the *Länders* can pursue different policies with regard to the recognition of international tutelage and because they are in charge of the repatriation of people whose demand for asylum have been rejected. See Barbara Laubenthal, *Refugees Welcome? Federalism and Asylum Policies in Germany*, Fieri Working Papers, September 2015. The distribution of the refugees across the national territory, however, is determined each year by the federal government, on the basis of the "Königstein Formula," which considers the tax receipts and population numbers of the *Länders*. In 2015,

three *Länders* accounted for nearly 50 percent of the total, as North Rhine-Westphalia was set to take more than 21 percent of the asylum seekers; Bavaria more than 15, and Baden-Württemberg nearly 13.

⁸ “German Attitudes to Immigration Harden Following Cologne Attacks,” YouGov UK, 2016.

⁹ Merkel’s Christian Democrats lost ground in all three States at stake: Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate in the west and Saxony-Anhalt in the east. In Saxony-Anhalt, AfD grabbed 24.2 percent of the vote.

¹⁰ See Rick Noack, “Denmark Passes Controversial Bill to Seize Assets and Valuables from Refugees,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2016.

¹¹ See “Immigration Drives a Deeper Wedge between EU States,” Stratfor, April, 29, 2015.