Fictional States: Understanding Europe’s Real Political Boundaries and Fault-lines

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The political priorities of countries such as the US have of late begun their “pivot” towards the Pacific. However, shifting too much attention away from Europe, to China for example, would be inadvisable, especially in light of the current tensions and difficulties there, brought on by a combination of the continuing economic crisis, Russia’s ongoing attempts to flex its muscles to gain greater influence over its neighbors, and the gradual erosion of the Westphalian nation-state as political power is delegated both upwards and downwards. The potential for continued dramatic shifts in Europe is very real, and could have important implications, for good or ill, to the nations of Europe and to their allies abroad.

This combination of factors could play out in any number of ways. In one scenario, which I will discuss herein, growing popular support for localized governance and regional independence movements might result in the fragmenting of certain European nation-states that only ever had the outward trappings of unity in the first place. Should this occur (and, regardless of your opinions on the legitimacy of the polls and elections results, this seems to be what we’re seeing the early stages of in Crimea and Ukraine), the possible reactions of those nations, and of the international community in general, to such an event should be considered. Even if were to happen, the unprecedented unity of the EU, and the benefits from that unity to which Europeans have become accustomed, will not allow for it to simply crumble.

Many of Europe’s present circumstances are rooted in events stretching far back into its history. Thus, this analysis will draw heavily upon both the distant and recent pasts of Europe for trends and useful precedents that may be applicable to its current state and potential future. These backward glances will show us where Europe’s age old, recurring fault-lines are, where things are fragile and prone to breaking in periods of stress.[1]

I will attempt to identify the hot spots for this scenario and detail the possible ramifications for its occurrence. Although this is no doubt an obvious point, it must be stated that this analysis is made using only unclassified, open-source data, and thus cannot be held accountable for omissions stemming from a lack of classified material or insights.

[1] All of the historical data I mention here is common knowledge. Thus, as this information can be found and validated in numerous sources, both scholarly and popular, I have not provided references for it.

The Long View of Europe

The dust having for the most part settled in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the establishment of successor states, by around the year 1000 Europe comprised a patchwork of duchies, counties, city-states, and other feudal holdings, most (but not all) of which owed allegiance to a monarch. However, even if a monarch was recognized as being the ruler of a territory, their power was often delegated to these smaller units of governance. This was the basis of the feudal system: those with property and authority granting some of both to others in exchange for loyalty and support.

On the other hand, some of these more localized power bases likely pre-dated the monarch under whose domain they later rested. While sovereigns often created their nobility to assist in governing the kingdom, there were many cases where a duchy, for example, had been an independent entity, ruled by a sovereign warlord who managed to carve it out for himself and hold it long enough for his power to be established. In these cases, such magnates would grant their loyalty, and by extension the dominance over their holdings, to a king (either by consent or by force). In France, for example, regions such as Brittany and Burgundy spent centuries acting as though they were powers unto themselves, having every so often to be brought back into line by the king who (theoretically) held ultimate power over them.

It was these regional structures, then, that did the majority of the legwork which had the greatest impact on the lives of the general populace. More often than not, it was the actions of the duke or count of your region (and, furthermore, those of the lord on whose lands your village or town was built) that the average person was more concerned or directly impacted by than those of the king. Therefore, local and regional identities formed in ways that national identities would not for centuries yet. You may have been ruled by the King of France but, for all intents and purposes, you were a Breton or a Burgundian before you were a Frenchman.

This was the general nature of European politics for most of its early history. It allowed for borders to shift dramatically as a result of warfare, marriage, and inheritance. It also allowed for regional identities to grow into rivalries within a single kingdom, some of which are still visible today. The Northern/Southern divide in cultural identity in countries such as Britain and Italy are the result of centuries of hardening local identities. Kingdoms comprised batches of territory that happened to be ruled by a single person or group; no national cohesion was implied.

The idea of the nation-state is rather a new one, dating back only to around the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This event, which brought to a close the Thirty Years' War, a series of religious conflicts which had been ravaging Europe, is generally regarded as being the origin of several core principles of national governance which are still in use today. These are:

- The sovereignty of nation-states, granting rulers the legitimacy to rule by the will of their people. This sovereignty is exercised over physical territory as well as over the members of said nation-state.

- The establishment of nation-states as the most powerful agents on the world stage, in effect meaning that national interest is seen as the highest priority.

- The equality of nation-states in the eyes of the law.

- A general policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other nation-states, thus making treaties between consenting nation-states the only legitimate international law. Warfare is justified as a means by which to secure a treaty.

These accords by no means put an end to wars of conquest. In Scandinavia and in Eastern Europe, borders continued to shift as major powers attempted to expand their territories and subjugate weaker ones. However, in Central and Western Europe, where the majority of the signatories to the Treaty of Westphalia were, the adoption of these principles seem to have prevented any dramatic redrawing of borders until the Napoleonic expansions began in the late 18th century.

The Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 sought to re-draw the map of Europe after nearly two decades of borders having been largely erased by Napoleon. The chief guiding principle of the delegates was to create a balance of power in Europe such that no one nation-state would be capable of dominating the entire continent. Thus, territories were consolidated and redistributed no so much on the basis of natural, cultural, or even historical boundaries, but rather with the goal to create an even playing field. This resulted in such counter-intuitive moves as the granting of portions of Northern Italy to Austria. These measures also resulted in the consolidation of German territories from over 300 separate states to around 39, as well as doing the same for the diverse city-states and regions of Italy and the Netherlands. This also laid the groundwork for the revolutions and political shifts that would eventually unify Italy, unify Germany, and create Belgium as an independent nation.

The next substantial shake-up of borders in Europe came at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in the early 1870s. A newly-united Germany gained control of Alsace and Lorraine, territories that, having both French and German cultural and linguistic elements, had been shifting back and forth between the two nations for centuries. France's resentment over this injury would simmer for half a century until, with the outbreak of the First World War, it saw its opportunity to reclaim the region once more. This is an important point to keep in mind: the tension surrounding this particular region dates back to the 17th century, before the Treaty of Westphalia. The tendency of old injuries to linger in a people's consciousness, only to surface again when opportunity arises, should not be overlooked.

After the First World War, a series of treaties rearranged portions of Europe once more. This time Germany and Austria were the main players shedding portions of their

territory, which they lost to Poland, Denmark, Belgium, France, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia. It is unsurprising, then, that these places were some of the first to be invaded by the Third Reich, in the name of reclaiming former German territories. Hungary also found large portions of its territory ceded to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Much of the ethnic Hungarian population found itself placed under foreign rule, again in the name of balancing power rather than following cultural borders. The Second World War constituted a brief disruption of this balance, only to be returned to a similar state upon its conclusion, with the notable exception of newly-ceded territories to the Soviet Union.

A brief recounting of the last 1000 years of political shifts in Europe shows that political borders have very rarely corresponded to ethnic, cultural, or linguistic ones. Attempts to remedy this have often been short-lived, suggesting that the strength of cultural ties has, to date, been trumped by political and national aspirations. Europe would look very different if its borders were decided by regional and cultural/linguistic divisions rather than political/national ones. What is most important is the way in which consciousness of this long view of Europe allows for present and potential future circumstances for the region to fall into place.

Fictional States

I propose that certain European nation-states do not functionally exist beyond the political sphere. Natural borders, whether determined by tribe, ethnicity, or some other common trait of the inhabitants, have been altered by centuries, if not millennia, of expansion, conquest, and, occasionally, consensual alliance. Several prominent European nations have either pre-existing fault-lines, weaknesses in its cohesive national identity, or both, which merit further investigation.

Italy

This nation was created only about 150 years ago. Previously, since the decay of the Western Roman Empire, the Italian Peninsula had consisted of a vast array of kingdoms, city-states, and republics. From end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 until the capture of Rome from the Papal States in 1870, a series of treaties and military campaigns gradually recovered ethnic-Italian territories from other powers and unified the peninsula under the banner of a single nation. Regional identities, however, continue to run deep. Italians often identify themselves as Milanese, Romans, Sicilians, or Neapolitans before identifying themselves as Italian. The 19th-century Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternic was alleged to have once commented that Italy is “a geographic expression” rather than a reference to a unified nation.

Numerous separatist political movements have alternated their stance from full independence of certain regions of Italy, to merely a greater degree of regional autonomy within a more federal state. A great deal of these are based in the North, particularly in Lombardy and Venice. Calls for an independent Lombardic region, known as Padania, as well as an independent Republic of Venice, have been voiced since the 1990s, and

popularity for these parties have waxed and waned. Several of these movements have banded together since the 90s into Lega Nord (The Northern League).

In March of 2014, a community of these separatist groups united under the name Plebiscito.eu held an online poll asking Venetians if they favoured Venice becoming an independent republic, citing that Venitians feel they are being asked to shoulder a part of Italy's financial burden disproportionate to what they are getting back from the state in services. Two million of the region's 3.7 million eligible voters participated, out of which a startling 89 percent voted "Yes".[2] The poll carries no legal weight, however it is likely to boost morale for more official political moves towards the same end.

Belgium

The area known today as Belgium has its origins in a collection of medieval duchies and counties known as the Low Countries. Until the 19th century, these territories were alternately ruled by the Holy Roman Empire, France (both the Kingdom and, later, the Republic), and the Dukes of Burgundy. After the fall of the Napoleonic regime, it became part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, from which it seceded to become an independent nation in 1830.

Belgium's multi-tiered governmental bodies are comprised of the federal government in Brussels, the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Capital Region), each (with the exception of Brussels) containing five provinces, and the three language communities (French, Dutch, German). Each region and community has their own parliament and holds equal power. The borders of the provinces loosely correspond to cultural borders that pre-date Belgium itself, being partly influenced by older duchy and county borders. Furthermore, the regions and language communities correspond to ethnic and linguistic boundaries that are also substantially older than present-day Belgium.

These older regional systems proved their continued relevance in 2010, when inability to form a coalition following elections resulted in Belgium spending 541 days without a federal government. During this time, nothing fundamentally changed for the Belgian people. The regional governments, who provide most services anyway, carried on as usual and perhaps picked up a little of the slack left by the absence of centralized authority. Despite occasional movements proposing the fracturing of Belgium into independent regions, most Belgians appear, for now, content to stay Belgians.

Spain

Spain has experienced some of the more dramatic cultural and political shifts in Europe. Having been conquered by Muslim forces in the 8th century, Al-Andalus (as it was called then) became the most prominent non-Christian presence in Europe. European forces gradually took back portions of territory with which to form Christian kingdoms such as

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[2] "Europe's latest secession movement: Venice?", The Atlantic. http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/europes-latest-secession-movement-venice/284562/ (accessed 5/6/14).

Aragon, Castille, and Catalonia. The process, known as the Reconquista, was not completed until 1492. Although the new Spanish Empire was still composed of separate kingdoms, the emperor ruled over them all and the term España slowly grew in usage throughout the 16th century and beyond.

The individual kingdoms gradually morphed into the regions of modern Spain. The accustomed independence of these regions is reflected in the political autonomy granted to them today. Each has its own government and socio-political infrastructure. The regions are further subdivided into 50 provinces, themselves grouped together into municipalities which also have a degree of internal autonomy. The 17 autonomous regions and 2 autonomous cities are nonetheless acknowledged as being part of a unified Spain under their constitution.

The most prominent separatist movement as of late has been that of Catalonia. In the wake of the 2012 elections, parties supporting a 2014 referendum for Catalan independence (the Republican Left of Catalonia, the Popular Unity Candidacy, Convergence and Union, and the Initiative for Catalonia Greens) were elected to over 57 percent of the region's parliament. This parliament approved the Catalan Sovereignty Declaration, which stated that Catalonia was a sovereign entity with the right for its people to decide on their own political future, in January of 2013. This was a clear response to the Spanish government's statement that independence, or even a referendum on it, was unconstitutional.

Fracturing States

All throughout Europe the fundamental function of the nation-state is slowly coming into question. The establishment of the EU has led to a quantity of political power formerly the sole domain of states to be delegated upwards to the European Parliament. These powers include regulation of currency for Eurozone members, customs issues, regulation of internal markets, conservation, and the agreement of certain types of treaties.[3] Subsequent treaties gradually increase the number and types of powers ceded fully or in part to EU bodies by their member states.

At the same time, a desire to alleviate the pressures of already overwhelmed governments has led to a combination of privatization and localization of certain services and aspects of governance. This is visible in Britain in the form of the Big Society initiative as well as the recent contracting out of NHS service provision to private contractors, and other governments in financially-strained European states are taking similar actions. As with some nations like Greece and Spain, where cuts to services were a result of cost-saving measures, sometimes imposed from without, these contractions are not always done willingly. Nonetheless, it is another example of powers once held firmly by the state

[3] See Title I, "Categories and Areas of Union Competence", in "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union", Official Journal of the European Union C 326 (26/10/2012), pp. 50-53.

leaving their domain.

Belgium's successful, even comfortable, weathering of an extended period with no central government reveals the potentially uncomfortable possibility that the Westphalian-style nation-state may be approaching obsolescence. If sub and supra-state bodies are capable of together providing the necessary services that allow populations to thrive, what then is the ultimate function of the nation-state? This has almost certainly occurred to the Belgians, and as pressure builds in other nations, there is no reason why a similar realization would not dawn on others as well.

While any nation's people could eventually come to such a conclusion under the right circumstances, the above-mentioned "fictional states" are most likely to be some of the first. Having only the shallowest degree of unity in cultural terms, political unity does not have much to reinforce itself with should it come under scrutiny. If Catalans or Venetians, for example, have long felt capable of running their own affairs (and indeed did for centuries previously), if they should feel that their way of life is imperiled by their own national government, the willingness to break from it will be easier to muster.

Thus far, the existing movements for regional independence in places like Catalonia, Northern Italy, and Scotland (scheduled to holds its referendum on independence in 2014), have been peaceful. The proscribed and acceptable channels, public demonstrations, activism, and legislation, have thus far been pursued. Violent movements such as ETA in Basque Country, though responsible for some disruption, have failed to generate sufficient popular momentum and will to realize their aspirations for independence on their terms, and thus have not made a significant impact in this arena. The democratization of post-Franco Spain, and the resultant gradual improvement of political conditions for the Basque Country, has made violent attempts to gain independence (or even the ultimate desire for full independence) increasingly unpopular, thus weakening their support base.

However, with 26% overall unemployment, and 56% youth unemployment in Spain, for example, anger and impatience is likely to rise amongst the population.[4] If they feel that their region is shouldering an unfair portion of the burden and would be better off on its own, as is the popular argument amongst Catalan separatists, the possibility of violent uprisings, should they feel that this issue is a matter of survival, cannot be ruled out. The hard-line that the Spanish government is taking on the situation, ruling the very act of a referendum on independence as unconstitutional and invalid, may escalate matters if it is maintained in the face of increasingly desperate and impassioned demand.

An important question to ask is, should either a successful referendum or a successful uprising result in a region of a European nation-state breaking away and declaring sovereignty, would that nation, likely in a state of financial strain already, be in a position to effectively take the necessary measures to recover that territory? Put another way, would that nation-state simply conclude that they are, in the long-run, better off taking

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[4] "Spain hasn't seen unemployment this bad since Franco", The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/07/spain-unemployment-bad-franco (accessed 4/13/13)

the loss and letting the region go? With tax revenues low and debt already at unsustainable levels, would such a nation-state be in a position to successfully launch a large-scale reclamation and pacification operation if push came to shove?

The situation becomes even more complicated when other EU member states, and even non-European allies such as the United States, come into the picture. Financially, the EU is already in a rough place after successive bail-outs, totaling hundreds of billions of euros, being allocated to several of its members. It would be hard-pressed to allocate additional funds to one of those distressed member states to finance internal military operations. The same can be said for non-EU allies such as the US, itself involved in an expensive ongoing military conflicts and having to navigate substantial debt and resultant federal expenditure restrictions.

Financial matters aside, it then becomes a question of whether or not the nation in question would want to engage in a civil war, and whether or not its allies would want to help them fight it. The degree of violence that could result from a secession attempt becoming a military matter has not been seen in the region of Europe since Bosnia. It must be pointed out, however, that the politico-cultural lines that would be drawn in such a conflict would not resemble the politicocultural-religious ones that flared up during the Bosnian War. Thus, we would not expect to see the same degree or severity of atrocities that were a sad hallmark of the aforementioned conflict. The rivalries that would come about in this hypothetical European conflict do not seem to be such that they would cause each side to dehumanize the other.

Using Spain/Catalonia again as an example, a victorious Spain in this scenario would likely result in a harsh occupation of Catalonia, which would in turn encourage a Catalan insurgency that would draw the conflict out for an extended period. Spain needs Catalonia, which is one of the nation's most prosperous regions. Spain has little incentive to damage it too greatly in a reclamation effort. Knowing this, Catalans would be well-placed to mount a successful insurgency with little worry of overly-heavy handed responses.

In addition to the political destabilization of that particular nation, and indeed the entire region, the damage to international relations would be substantial. If such an operation were successful with outside aide, the resentment of that region towards the participants would hinder attempts at maintaining the unity that the EU so strives for. Even if the newly-seceded state were still in place after an unsuccessful reclamation attempt, diplomatic relations with the new state and the international community would be cold at best if their own neighbors and former allies fought against them or contributed aide to their opponents. The damaging image of Europeans fighting other Europeans, or of, say, the United States sending troops or aid to assist in a European civil war, cannot be underestimated and should be avoided at all costs. Furthermore, both in the US and in the EU, leaders sanctioning military action in Europe against Europeans would likely pay a high political price for their actions, faced with an electorate that has grown increasingly weary of prolonged and expensive military operations.

Creating a pathway for these new sovereign bodies to join the EU independently may be the most expedient option across the board. Even if this means beginning the membership process from scratch, as Scotland has been told it may have to do, even the allowance to undertake the process will speak volumes and will quell potential tensions between the EU and these new nations. Borders get redrawn, treaties get renegotiated, but fundamentally the nature of the way in which international commerce is conducted in Europe, and the day-to-day life of its people, remains unchanged. However, if this does not happen, and, worse, the international community does not recognize the legitimacy of the hypothetical new nation, the devastation from lack of trade in an already financially-strained environment could lay the groundwork for a failed state, or several, in Europe: a dangerous and highly undesirable outcome.

A final complicating factor in this scenario is the European people. Since the Schengen Agreement, Europeans enjoy the ability to travel, live, and conduct business freely anywhere in Europe. By now, a generation has reached adulthood that has never experienced a time when this freedom did not exist. This freedom granted by Schengen will not be casually or willingly given up by Europeans, especially those in the younger generations. Catalans in a newly-independent Catalonia, citizens of the new Republic of Venice, or residents of an independent Flanders, will expect to retain the same liberties regarding their access to the rest of Europe that they have hitherto enjoyed.

The desire to retain the liberty provided by the Schengen Agreement (and the threat of its loss) may be used as a point of leverage to prevent regions who might otherwise press for independence from doing so. It will be a strong imperative put forward by Europeans to the governments of current EU states and potential newly-sovereign states to cement good relations quickly, so as to allow business as usual to continue. Lastly, it will potentially serve as the one unifying factor that could preserve a type of cohesion amongst European nations even if EU member states, or the EU itself, should ever cease to resemble the form it currently takes. Europeans give no indication of relinquishing freedom of travel, abode, and commerce within Europe, it being so hard-wired into European identity that disruption of the current geopolitical setting would not be seen as a justifiable reason to abandon it. This final point may be a significant factor which prevents Europe from falling back into the turbulence it experienced in the first half of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Europe is not out of the woods yet. The financial crisis has created a strained political environment that is aggravating injuries and fault-lines that have been dormant for some time. While the general will of the European people seems such that a complete dissolution of the EU as a consensual confederation of states, working for certain common purposes and for the enjoyment of certain common benefits, is unlikely, there is no requirement, nor guarantee, that the member states themselves retain their current form in order for this unity to continue.

The modern nation-state model was constructed in a time, culture, and political climate

differing greatly from or own. The establishment of nation-states attempted to harden borders that once were prone to shifting, and impose a national identity over a people that sometimes shared little commonality in cultural or ethnic identity with fellow nationals, resulting in internal borders that frequently reflected those existing before the nation-state. While these borders remained soft and cultural/ideological for years, even centuries, the gradual weakening of the nation-state from powers being delegated upwards and downwards, combined with increasing strain placed on quality of life by austerity measures and related consequences of the financial crisis, has rekindled in some areas the desire for turning these cultural borders into political ones.

Some areas are more prone to potential fracturing than others. To determine those nationstates that are most vulnerable, it is useful to look for which nation-states possess lengthy histories of being disunified, and for which their eventual unity was based more on geopolitical will than on-the-ground consent and unity of its people. The stronger the identities of separate cultures and identities within separate territories within a single nation-state, the greater the likelihood that one such group might make a bid for independence if it feels it can govern its own affairs more effectively than the national government to which it is currently subject.

Given the possibility of sovereign states breaking away from their original nation-states, it falls upon Europe and the wider international community to decide how best to react should this come to pass. Thus far action towards this end has been peaceable, but should it approach reality, both sides could act drastically to maintain their position against adversity. Civil war in Europe should be avoided at all costs. Europeans fighting other Europeans, or their overseas allies, would result in substantial material and political damage to all parties involved. A more constructive approach would be for Europe and the rest of the world to let such initiatives take their course, so long as they are conducted democratically, and work to quickly establish ties with any potential new states that might emerge. Redrawing maps and renegotiating treaties takes less work than repairing the damage after a bitter and impassioned conflict in one of the most influential and densely populated regions in the West.