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RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DISINTEGRATION OF EUROPE IS SHARED

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Every day brings its lot of doomsday scenarios about the future of Europe. They vie for attention among politicians and the media. Some have been flagged for years – the financial position of Greece is as untenable today as it was a year ago and the Euro throttles any hope of enacting economic policies which could bolster growth; the refugee crisis burst upon us last summer and surprised Europe’s leaders though it was not for lack of forewarning; Western Europeans have woken up to the fact that their Eastern brothers do not share some of their key values and, while they were happy to accept billions of European cash to help them catch up with older EU members after they joined, they will not lift a finger to help Germany in its refugee hour of need. The fourth is the Brexit referendum whose outcome is impossible to determine. Finally we have the threat of Isis inspired terrorism whose actors are European citizens.

There are many villains in this play. Some choose to point the finger at the populist Hungarian leader Viktor Orban, recently joined in his attempts to turn back the clock on democracy by Poland’s new leaders. Others will fault Germany’s fatal miscalculation in how it handled the fallout of the international financial crisis of 2008, especially in the harsh austerity it imposed on Greece which France in particular backed, however unwillingly.

Continental politicians and media love to have a bash at the UK whose sense of timing in holding a referendum on whether to stay in the EU is particularly ill-chosen. The cockfight which has resulted risks tearing the Tory party apart. The behaviour which that jack of all trades, the mayor of London, Boris Johnson offers is hardly calculated to win plaudits across the Channel. As Evelyn De Rothschild pointed out in the Financial Times recently “Mr Johnson’s mystifying and illogical argument seems to be that our European partners will wake up and give us precisely what we want only if we storm out of the EU. This betrays a limited understanding both of history and of basic group psychology. If you want better terms of membership, you have to stay in the club”.

One key role of one actor is somewhat overlooked among these five -interlocking crisis which speaks of a north-south divide, an east-west divide, Brexit, the refugees and terrorism. For the first time, that key engine of Europe, the French -German tandem is not working in harness. Chancellor Angela Merkel and President

François Hollande are at loggerheads despite the fact that France officially supported her policy of opening the doors to refugees last summer to better sabotage it behind the scenes.

That the French prime minister, Manuel Valls should dare criticise the Chancellor, on her home turf in Munich and in personal terms on this issue is unprecedented. By so doing he has stooped to the level of Viktor Orban. Chancellor Merkel might have made a major political blunder when she unilaterally imposed on the rest of Europe an open-door policy without consulting any country other than Austria. One can be critical of her handling of the Greek crisis but that hardly justifies sabotaging her policy on refugees.

Those words come from a French prime minister, himself the son of economic refugees from Spain, who chooses to hug many of the policies promoted by former president Nicolas Sarkozy, not to say the Front National leader Marine Le Pen; who does not shy from criticising university professors for trying to understand the reasons why young Europeans opt for jihad in Syria or in Paris; whose law and order mental framework is every day more apparent but who is incapable of reforming France's ailing economy. The behaviour of French leaders spells a serious weakening of the Franco-German tandem which has been at the heart of the European project since its inception.

Europe is neither clinically dead as one French newspaper grandiloquently put it but if the refugee crisis spins out of control, if Slovenia, Switzerland and France close their borders to refugees fleeing Greece via Italy, the shock will be immense. If it tips the vote in favour of Brexit, that could destroy sixty years of hard work.

France loves to bask in its glorious revolutionary history and to present itself as the land where the modern notions of liberty were invented. *Les droits de l'homme* are a leitmotiv of its foreign policy – the reality is often more sordid. It accepted to take a share of 24,000 refugees last autumn but only a few hundred have arrived in France. Where is the country's sense of pride in its history, of honour? In tatters. Its foreign policy since Sarkozy is a string of monumental errors: it called for the removal of the Syrian president and then proceeded to enact a humiliating U turn. It refused to see the need of Russia and Iran's presence at the negotiation on the future of Syria and again after a few wasted years executed another U turn. On Iran its position was harder than that of the US which meant it was written out of the script.

France is one of the founding members of the EU which is tearing the solidarity on which Europe was built to shreds. Its leaders voice an increasingly toxic brand of nationalism, are obsessed with Islam meanwhile boasting one of the highest rates of unemployment among young people in Europe. France's incapacity to reform its economy, what it believed to be its "unique" social model and endless angst-ridden questioning of its own identity speaks of a deeply conservative society which finds adapting to the modern world very painful.

Less European solidarity with refugees or long suffering Greek people spells less democracy in Europe and a diminishing capacity to weigh on international affairs, notably vis a vis Russia and southern rim Mediterranean countries which are going through a upheaval which is unprecedented in modern times. If solidarity consists simply of ever greater restrictions on civil rights and theatrical denunciations of Islam after terrorist acts, the future of the EU is bleak indeed.