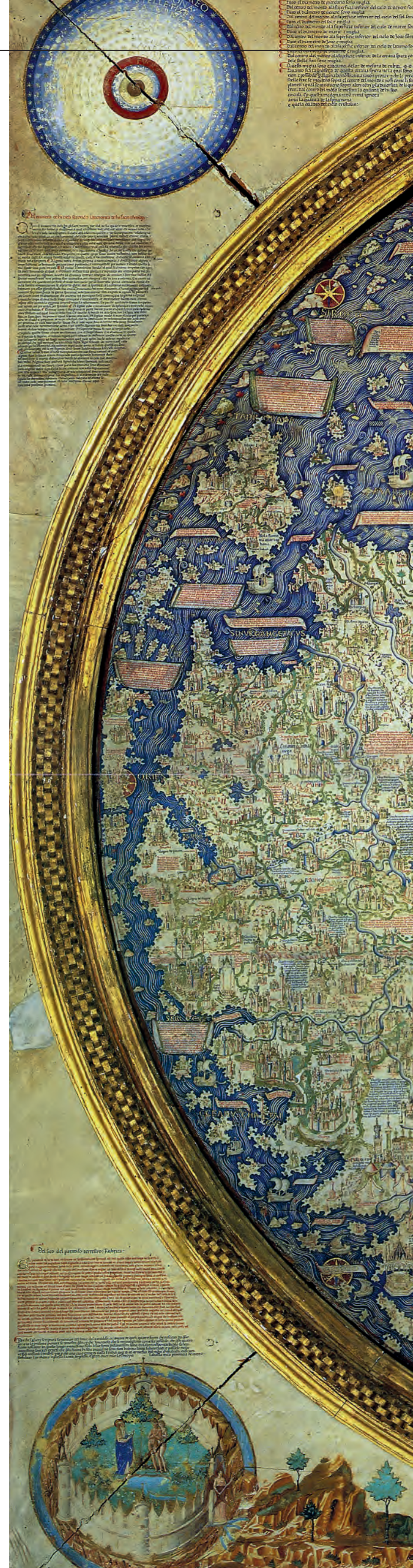
What we talk about when we talk about Europe

BY STASH LUCZKIW

The fallout from Brexit has many pondering the fate of the EU. Absent any concrete European identity, the continent's various peoples are falling back on national identities that appear to be assailed from all directions.



The Fra Mauro map was made around 1450 by the Venetian monk Fra Mauro. It is a circular world map drawn on parchment and set in a wooden frame, about two meters in diameter.

At the turn of the second millennium, 1,016 years ago, the biggest city in the world was a European one: Cordoba, in what is now Spain. It was the capital of the independent Muslim emirate of al-Andalus and a great economic and cultural center. In his book *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census* Tertius Chandler conservatively estimated its population at 450,000.

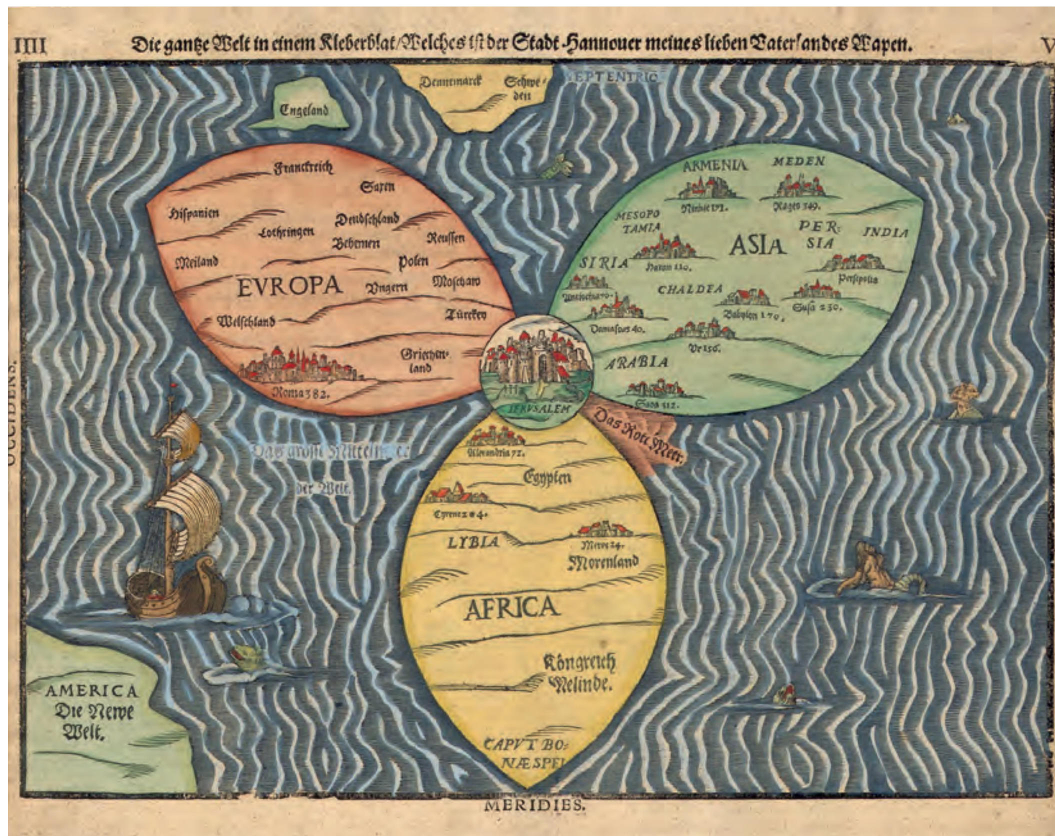
In the sixth and twelfth centuries, both before and after Cordoba's relatively brief heyday as the world's most populous city, another European metropolis was the biggest in the world: Constantinople, later renamed Istanbul.

Today, the most populous cities in the world are in Asia and the Americas. The two biggest cities in Europe are Istanbul, with 14.6 million people within the city limits, and Moscow, with 12.3 million. Yet there are many who would not consider Russia or Turkey as part of Europe. By that criteria, London would be the biggest European city, with 8.4 million.

But can London still be considered Europe after the United Kingdom's historical vote to exit the European Union?

Europe is obviously different things to different people. Its history can justify a wide range of arguments for inclusion or exclusion: Russia can easily be considered part of Europe if one defines the continent as the landmass bordered by the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans to the west and north, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and, most importantly, the Ural Mountains and Volga River to the east. By that strictly geographical criteria, Istanbul would also be considered Europe (although the Anatolian Peninsula would fall to Asia).

Europe
SEPTENTRIO
POLVSARTICVS



Bunting clover leaf map with Jerusalem in the center, sourrounded by Europe, Asia and Africa, published in 1581 in Magdeburg, Germany.

Then there are cultural elements. If, by Europe, one means the lands whose cultures were informed by centuries of Christian religious tradition, then Russia is in, but Istanbul won't make the cut, because in 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire, which of course was Christendom's great antagonist. Now Istanbul is a thoroughly Turkish and Muslim city.

If, however, one wishes to mitigate the preponderantly Christian influence by embracing the Greco-Roman, Judaic and even Islamic legacies, then Europe would be a much more inclusionary entity. By that logic, though, a whole new can of worms could open up by necessarily including North Africa and the Levant, which were historically part of the European sphere of influence in Hellenistic and Roman times, not to mention during the period of post-Ottoman Western colonialism. Some may find the idea of a European North Africa far-fetched, but only five years ago, before the Arab Springs had taken a disastrous turn, optimists were suggesting that even North Africa should eventually join some sort of common market with Europe. Clearly those hopes have been dashed by war and political chaos.

More recently, Europe has come to be defined largely within the parameters of the EU by a generation that came of age in the post-World War II bipolar political order. This order, conditioned by the Cold War and the Iron Curtain, saw Europe as limited to those areas where a deep liberal democratic tradition had taken root. In effect, the definition of Europe was narrowed down to include only those areas that had fully experienced either the Reformation or the Enlightenment. With the threat of communist expansion manifested by Soviet and Warsaw Pact tank divisions arrayed along the Iron Curtain, Moscow was viewed as a bastion of Asiatic despotism, which was inimical to European ideals. As such, the generation whose political elites consolidated the EU when they came of age had grown up conditioned to see the Iron Curtain as Europe's border.

After the revolutions of 1989, it took some effort to digest the glaring fact that cities like Prague and Krakow were unequivocally European. Even to this day it is not uncommon for analysts to laud "seven decades of peace in Europe" – conveniently forgetting a most brutal war in Yugoslavia during the 1990s; or if not forgetting, then dismissing it as a manifestation of some peripheral barbarism that had nothing to do with European values and culture.

And yet, notwithstanding the bloodshed in what are now Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, the fall of the Iron Curtain could have easily degenerated into much worse – another world war perhaps. It cannot be stressed enough how much the formerly communist Warsaw Pact countries' desire to become part of the EU helped build democratic institutions and rein in a host of atavistic grudges. The specter of virulent nationalistic antagonism, which had engulfed Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries and flared up again in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, was kept at bay by inviting these nations into a complex (perhaps too complex) system of nested hierarchies, founded on an idealistic commitment to freedom and democracy, as well as on a more concrete promise of peace and economic prosperity.

The EU's idealistic commitment has been spelled out so often that it has receded into oblivion – much the way you no longer notice the wallpaper pattern in your own house. It might be worthwhile to explicitly recall these ideals – and, to drive home their import, juxtapose

KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES

A group of Germans stare across the Iron Curtain at Hoheheiss in the Harz Mountains, May 19, 1961.

them against images of horror Europe has experienced in the past century: trench and chemical warfare, revolutions, dictatorships, total war, genocide, tens of millions of dead and displaced… the list can go on. The values meant to serve as a bulwark against such horrors are: "respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities."

Political-correctness fatigue and an overly sanctimonious elite in the face of instability in the neighborhood have perhaps inured many Europeans to the EU's remarkable accomplishments. Nevertheless, the level of prosperity, social security and quality of life achieved in Western Europe during the second half of the 20th century has been the envy of the world and nothing short of miraculous considering what the continent had experienced from 1939 to 1945.

Unfortunately, complacency is a universal human reaction to success, and it can easily lead one into a state of shock when the benefits begin to wane. This is exactly what Europe has been going through since the 2008 economic crisis. The social welfare system has become economically unsustainable. The hard-won job security and benefits for the working classes have now passed the point of diminishing returns and led to an ossified labor market with decreasing competitiveness and huge youth unemployment.

Then there's the 800-pound gorilla in the room: immigration. Europe was so successful in terms of economic prosperity and political stability that it became a magnet for migrants from all over the developing world (including many geographically and culturally European nations). But Europe's long history and the depth of its rich cultural traditions have worked against it when trying to integrate foreigners.

Muslims in particular have proven resistant to assimilation. As the threat of jihadist terrorism has increased in the 21st century, Europe has reluctantly had to come to terms with the possibility that a significant part of its population (44 million, or 6%, excluding Turkey, according to a Pew Forum analysis in 2010) espouses ideals that might be inherently opposed to the explicitly stated values on which the EU was founded. To wit: equal dignity and freedom for all individuals. Many Europeans consider the way Muslims treat women unacceptable and their attitude toward non-Muslim "infidels" appalling. Those who criticize Muslim attitudes, or merely point out the differences between non-Muslim immigrants and Muslims with respect to their ability to assimilate tend to be branded as Islamophobes. The result is a growing conflict between Europeans who insist on adhering to the spirit of free-

VALERY HACHE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

French dignitaries and French Prime Minister Manuel Valls observe a minute of silence on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, France on July 18, 2016, in tribute to victims of the deadly attack on Bastille Day. Valls was contested and jeered by the crowd.

dom by maintaining an open-door policy and those who would sacrifice some freedom to take self-preservation measures that entail excluding "hard-to-assimilate populations" who have shown themselves to be contemptuous of Europe's freedoms and may pose a threat to them (which usually means Muslims).

Ultimately the dilemma facing Europeans springs from a paradox: Can you safeguard freedom in general by limiting certain freedoms? In order to address this dilemma, a deep examination of what is actually meant by freedom must take place. Is freedom merely the ability to do and express whatever you choose to, as long as you don't hurt others or infringe on *their* freedom? Or is freedom the power to realize your nature in the context of ideals that express some ultimate concern? Unfortunately, in the short term any such examination of conscience will probably yield to a more immediate backlash against perceived threats.

Fear, of course, is the driving emotion behind the current swell of anti-immigration retrenchment in Europe. Fear of the other; fear of jobs being snatched away in favor of someone willing to work for less; fear of losing one's cradle-to-grave healthcare in order to support someone who has not spent a lifetime paying into the system's dwindling coffers; fear of foreign men harassing native women for walking the streets dressed in revealing clothes; fear of rape and terrorism; and, in general, fear of one's inability to cope with the inevitable changes of a world order in rapid transformation.

As a consequence, this fear of the future is now eclipsing the lessons to be drawn from the past. Europeans are dissatisfied with the European Union: its soulless bureaucracy, its bloodless technocrats, and its stiflingly frustrating process of consensus-building. They simmer with anger as politicians refuse to address the pressing problem of immigration. Solidarity has proven to be a farce, as the newest entries prefer to enjoy Europe's open market without having to take on its unpleasant burdens, such as accepting refugees. To add insult to injury, many Europeans are further alienated when they hear debates about whether or not they can celebrate Christmas – the birthday of Jesus Christ – in public schools with a traditional manger scene of the newborn Jesus, lest the non-Christian students feel offended.

It's no surprise that identity politics are building steam in Europe. For years politicians have displayed a cravenness with respect to specifically defining what it means to be European. Instead, they have played it safe with anodyne abstractions.

For example, when in 2004 Europe drafted a constitution (which was never ratified by all the members) a debate arose about whether there should be a specific reference to Europe's Christian roots. As a compromise, the text's preamble referred to "drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law." This insertion of rhetorical fluff might have seemed like a wise move, but it intentionally avoided giving people what they needed – a concrete point of reference rather than an abstraction.

A similar approach was taken with the euro bank notes. Instead of historical figures, you have bridges and windows. And not just any bridges and windows, idealized constructions that look very similar to specific ones people have actually seen – but not quite, so as to not refer to one country at the expense of another.

MIGUEL MEDINA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Muslims pray in the street as part of Friday prayers, at the Rue des Poissonniers in Paris. Weekly prayers often overflow on to the streets in the 18th arrondissement of the French capital.

Still, at least you can touch a window or a bridge. How can anyone but a bone-dry intellectual hope to draw inspiration from a "humanist inheritance"? As if "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" had suddenly dropped anchor in our consciousness like some *deus ex machina* – or a guillotine blade. What's more, even if one agreed that the above-mentioned values and conceptions of the "human person" were universal (in itself a huge leap of faith), it is absurd to deny the historical fact that sparked such a conceptual revolution throughout Europe and the world: namely, that a certain Galilean peasant was born and crucified and believed to have resurrected from the dead in order to transform our deepest understanding of what it means to be human and divine, and to exact dignity for *all* individuals (not just those who look and think like us) as a likeness of God.

People want to identify with something they can touch, something that can move them – flesh and blood, or a symbolic representation thereof, like bread and wine. It takes a rarified intellect to be moved by "isms" – or a gullibility and indifference that simply precludes any desire to pose the question: What exactly do I mean when I say freedom?

With no concrete foothold for a European identity, and all transcendent foundations pared down to abstract locutions and formulas that can only be experienced from the neck up, the ultimate concern for the majority of Europeans has gradually become material well-being: the creature comforts of automobiles, washing machines, iPhones and August vacations. The bridges and windows depicted on the bank notes, in fact, lead to and look out on the myriad holiday havens that have taken on soteriological proportions for contemporary Europeans.

As a reaction, many have been drawn to politicians who understand that identity is like a flame of inspiration; it needs oxygen and fuel. It should come as no surprise then that the rising stars of European politics are individuals who display leadership (or some facsimile thereof). Russia's Vladimir Putin is perhaps the best contemporary example of someone who can change the direction of a country on a whim, without having to cajole his peers or defer to public opinion. Obviously such desire for a leader who can act decisively echoes the zeitgeist of Europe in the 1930s. But leaving aside such alarmism, there is a profound need for individuals to feel they are more in control of their own destinies. Leaders capable of articulating what that destiny might entail in any given context are very much in demand.

But leaders cannot be expected to articulate the various destinies of individuals. Rather, leaders must

DANIEL ROLAND/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The new 50 euro banknote presented at the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, Germany, July 5, 2016.

elaborate a common destiny. And individuals must be grounded in a common destiny because we are social creatures and need to feel part of something greater than this mere sack of skin containing our egos – no matter how magnificent. We need to belong to a family, community, nation, church, sangha, umma, what have you – because to deny human interdependence is a symptom of madness.

Is there any leader even trying to articulate the virtues of Europe? Those who do tend to mitigate their rhetoric in a way that would not seem too chauvinistic, or racist. It is still unacceptable in polite company to declare European culture superior to others – certainly not given its legacy of colonialism. As a result, a veneer of cultural relativism has descended over anything that can be expressed publically with regard to the European project. And privately, iterations of superiority and exceptionalism have been left to the domain of reactionary nationalists, whose precursors have long been tarnished with the blame for causing the 20th century's world wars.

But even if a charismatic and capable leader were to come around and talk the talk of a united Europe, would Europeans buy it? Nationalism is a fairly recent phenomenon in the timeline of human civilization; it only began to gain traction after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. And the fierce nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries tended to be built on the corpses of those who had sacrificed their lives for some idea of nation. Unfortunately for any would-be leader of a United States of Europe, if history is any indication, there may not have been enough blood shed in thwarting an external enemy to unite the population. And yet, the death tolls from internecine European conflicts have been more than enough to afford some sense of solidarity. One can assume that killing a common enemy together is not a necessary condition for political unity in Europe, although some may have their doubts. In any case, some statues in the squares of European cities of men and women who gave their lives to the EU cause would help.

Unfortunately, a man on a horse wielding a sword makes a more striking impression than a man in a suit and tie schlepping a briefcase.

Interestingly, when in the winter of 2013-14 the Euromaidan protests erupted in Ukraine and the government tried to quash it, some observers noted that it was the first time anyone had died for the EU flag. And surely there were many who believed strongly enough in Ukraine's place in Europe to risk their lives. But when Russia invaded Crimea and the Donbas, there were no European flags leading the volunteers to

SAKIS MITROLIDIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Balkan trail from Greece to Northern Europe used by floods of migrants was blocked on March 9, 2016 after a string of nations slammed shut their borders, hiking pressure on the EU and Turkey to nail down a "game-changing" grand bargain.

fight the Russian-backed separatists. The impetus to sacrifice their lives came from a deep-rooted, at times fanatic sense of nationalism and historically based fear of Russian occupation.

Anyone who would dismiss the potential for a similar manifestation of nationalism in the "more civilized" parts of Europe may soon be in for a rude awakening. An entire generation in Europe has grown up believing it had transcended such primitivism. Now the national flags come out in earnest only during soccer tournaments. And in order not to fan any flames, the European political elite has convinced itself that their primary purpose is to ensure economic prosperity and well-being. As of now, the EU is still more a free market than a political union, and many are reluctant to disrupt the status quo for fear of having to define what Europe means, or can mean, which might inadvertently stir up some hungry ghosts that have been placated by a lifelong attachment to the governments' prodigious tit. Now that globalization has made the free market a scary place and homegrown jihadis are running amok to avenge Europe's freedom to insult, people are beginning to worry. And the state's breasts are withering fast. The weaning process is well underway.

To make matters even more uncertain is the fact that much of the stability that contributed to Europe's well-being came as a direct outgrowth of the Pax Americana. And now the Americans are pivoting away – for better or worse – and may not return in force until some shots are fired. Will Europe need to become an American protectorate again? NATO's freshly resurrected raison d'être may offer a preview of what's to come.

Europe's trajectory of political and cultural evolution has always been determined by the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, an ebb and flow that has persisted over the centuries. Brexit and the war in Ukraine may well have marked the point where the tide of European unity and expansion has begun to ebb back into the ocean of atavism. Yet even while hopes for a politically unified Europe may need to be put on hold, it is imperative that Europeans understand in which direction they want to go – and why. But in order to do that they need to know where they came from – or risk letting the various conflicting forces sort themselves out as they have traditionally. A frightening prospect indeed.

STASH LUCZKIW *is a US-born social and political analyst based in Italy.*