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The Great Confusion

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By mid-June 2018 European politics was in chaos, and it is not clear how it might ever get out of it. The German government had come to the brink of collapse; the French-German “refounding of Europe” had got stuck in the morass of the very problems it was supposed to resolve; the inevitable collision of the German and French would-be hegemon with the new Italian government was approaching; and Brexit was coming closer without anyone having an idea of what will result from it.

One by one. Merkel’s strategy since 2015 had been to use the refugees to replenish the German low-wage labor supply and block out the memory of Germany crushing the Greek government. Now that strategy has finally hit the wall, not least in Merkel’s own party which is afraid of being pulverized, like the SPD before, by further right-wing electoral gains. Merkel’s Bavarian sister party, the CSU, demands a reintroduction of border controls to prevent refugees already registered elsewhere from moving to Germany. This, Merkel believes, would signal – her favorite word – the end of Germany’s “liberal empire” (Ross Douthat in the *New York Times*): an integrated European superstate ruled out of Germany according to German taste. As so often, Merkel promised a “European solution” – only to be told by her party that she has to deliver one within two weeks, although she had been unable to do so in three years. Nothing is clear here, apart from the fact that no such solution will be found.

Equally in trouble is the “European renewal” under a French-German directorate, as envisaged by Macron. By now it seems to have melted down to more military spending, very likely on “European” ground troops in French Africa, flanked by a joint asylum policy, essentially limiting entry to people admitted by European asylum offices located outside of Europe. This will be hard to reconcile with the German constitution and the carefully

cultivated sentiments of Merkel's "Welcome" constituency. At the same time, Macron's pet project, a separate budget for the Eurozone, of which nobody knows exactly what it is to pay for, will ostensibly be supported by Germany, but only because it is vehemently opposed by the Netherlands and various other countries – which means it will never materialize. More turbulence ahead here as well.

Meanwhile Italy is figuring out how to extract its national economy from the stranglehold of Germany and the euro, as well as how to deal with a level of immigration that its citizens are no longer willing to accept. Macron, whose immigration policy is more restrictive – and more in conflict with Merkel's Europe without borders, internal as well as external – than that of any other member state, except perhaps Denmark, used the Aquarius affair for a cheap shot at the new Italian government that France, Germany and the European Commission had been unable to prevent. (Remember that Macron wants "Europe" to do the same as Italy: no longer admit immigrants crossing Europe's external borders without permit.) Symbolic action continued when the new Spanish government invited the ship to Valencia, knowing full well that it will be unable politically and otherwise to deliver on the hopes this may raise. Soon "Europe" will have to answer the "Italian question" which is essentially the Greek question, but coming from a country that cannot easily be subjected to the "financial waterboarding" (Varoufakis) that crushed Syriza.

On top of all this, the date of Brexit is coming closer. Both parties in Britain are divided over the if and how, and both their leaders may be pushed from office shortly. Brussels, and the French-German would-be co-directorate, do their best to hasten their demise. But even if a new referendum were to overturn the old one, the EU would no longer be the same. What it will be like, either way, nobody knows.