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[2017 – A Year of Difficult Tests for Europe](#)

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In the coming year, the countries of Europe will face a series of tests, the results of which are liable to destabilize the European frameworks, especially the European Union (EU) and NATO, upon which they relied since recovering from two destructive World Wars, the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the consequences of the latter's disintegration in the late twentieth century.

The tests are moral and existential. The first involves the very existence of the EU. The EU and its predecessors were founded upon the ruins of post-war Europe, with a more extensive American aid and encouragement. Their goal was to create a supra-national structure, first in economic matters, and later in social and legal affairs and even in foreign and defense policy. The NATO alliance, designed to address the problem of defense, preceded the EU, and constitutes the link between the United States, Europe, and Canada. The twenty-first century brought with it processes that challenged the supremacy of the supra-national structures. Europe is, in effect, at the dawn of a post-global and Eurosceptical era fed by the awakening of nationalistic movements that are gaining momentum from the waves of immigration from Africa, Asia (including Turkey), and even from Europe itself (the Balkans, for example). In some countries, the nationalistic-tinged right-wing parties have already made inroads, and have chances of being successful in some of the election campaigns scheduled for this year. Parliamentary elections in the Netherlands will take place on March 15, with opinion polls predicting that the Party for Freedom, a right-wing—and some would say racist—party led by Geert Wilders will double its strength. The first round of the French presidential elections will be held on April 23, and the second round on May 7, with the National Front Party, led by Marine Le Pen likely to increase its vote, although she is not expected to win in the second and deciding round. General elections will take place in Germany on September 24. All the polls predict an increase in the strength of the party with the anti-minority agenda, the Alternative for Germany Party, led by Frauke Petry.

The most prominent in her opposition to the EU is Marine Le Pen. In her speech at the conference of right-wing Eurosceptic parties in Koblenz on January 21, she said, "The 2017 elections will bring the spirit of change in Europe," and referred to the sweeping change Europe should adopt toward the wave of refugees, the euro crisis, and the supervisory regime for Europe's borders. Petry expressed the opinion of the participants in the Koblenz conference

when she said earlier, “Islam is not part of Germany,” and “Illegal immigrants should be shot if necessary.” Germany, France, and the Netherlands were three of the six founders of the EU, and the rise of centrifugal movements there reflects the weakening of the pan-European spirit and the gains of extreme nationalism at its expense.

The second test involves an issue that is intimately connected to the first test: the UK’s decision to withdraw from the EU. The withdrawal is a result of historic British separatism from Europe, but it also involves matters of principle—the supremacy of the EU government and law on immigration; the independent national currency as an element in the state monetary regime as opposed to the pan-European one; and the question of where Europe’s foreign policy will be decided in the future. When the question of giving parliamentary validity to the decision to withdraw from the EU—which was determined by a referendum—is clarified and the UK makes a formal request to withdraw, as required by the EU treaties, Europe will face a difficult conundrum. Should the EU “punish” the recalcitrant UK and deprive the UK of economic advantages that it had enjoyed under EU membership after the withdrawal is completed, or should it take the UK’s economic power into account and facilitate EU access to the British market? A conciliatory attitude towards the UK is liable to encourage other countries in Europe to adopt the “British model” of seeking a maximal free trade zone combined with minimal concessions in attributes of sovereignty. The EU will most probably seek to turn Brexit into a relationship in which the UK will not enjoy the same advantages had it remained a full EU member and not be subject to the limitations on its independence that full EU membership entails.

A third test for European leaders is President Trump’s policy on membership in NATO. German and French leaders are already exchanging verbal blows with the new president. During the election campaign, Trump said that NATO members should share the burden of their defense with the United States (in an interview in the *New York Times* on January 21, for example), and that the organization was obsolete. In response, the German chancellor said, “The Europeans are responsible for themselves.” A telephone conversation between them on January 28 produced the statement: “The leaders recognized that NATO must be capable of confronting 21st century threats and that our common defense requires appropriate investment in military capabilities to ensure all allies are contributing their fair share to our collective security.” Both won—in public, at least. Merkel obtained Trump’s recognition of NATO’s importance, while he received Merkel’s recognition that the allies have a duty to assume a fair share of the financial burden of maintaining the organization.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this has put an end to the disputes between Europe and the United States during Trump’s presidency. The ban on the entry into the US of citizens from seven Muslim countries only highlighted the anticipated tension on both sides of the Atlantic. The amazing fact is that, at this very moment, more than a million Britons have signed

a petition against an invitation to visit that Prime Minister Theresa May extended to President Trump at their meeting on January 27, during which he again recognized the importance of NATO. The UK has historically enjoyed special relations with the US, and the public outcry in that country shows the revulsion aroused by the US president at a time when the UK is in the process of leaving the EU and needs to tighten its ties—especially economic ties—with the US in order to compensate for the partial loss of the European market.

Trump also disagrees on other issues with his colleagues in Europe. He repeated his biting criticism of the nuclear agreement with Iran, and is, in effect, threatening to unravel it. Even if the European participants to the agreement—Germany and the United Kingdom—are likely to agree with Trump’s assessment of Iran’s overall conduct in the Middle East, they will not lend a hand to reopening the agreement, and certainly not without the consent of all the participants, including Iran. If Trump persists in his opposition to the agreement in its current format, and fails to find a formula for reopening it through negotiations, the European countries, and in effect the European Union, which conducted the negotiations with Iran in the name of all six countries, will be obliged to expose the rift between them and the United States.

The European countries and the United States are also likely to find themselves divided on Russia. Trump has not concealed his conciliatory and indulgent attitude towards Putin, Russia’s leader. The president has refrained from harsh criticism of Russia’s policy in Ukraine and the countries of the former Soviet Union that joined the EU and NATO. These countries regard Russia as a concrete threat, and will certainly doubt the US’s commitment to come to their defense even after Trump’s joint declaration with Merkel. If Trump decides to remove some of the sanctions his predecessor imposed on Russia as part of a possible deal between him and Putin, he will have difficulty persuading NATO and EU countries to follow suit, certainly if Russia’s concessions are merely verbal and cosmetic.

Disputes about relations with Turkish leader Erdogan are also likely to surface. The ongoing violations of civil liberties in that country, which have escalated following the attempted coup, have compelled European leaders to openly express criticism of the Turkish regime, which they initially refrained from doing so due to their wish to see Turkey contain the waves of refugees from Syria and other parts of the Middle East on and within its borders. Trump has not concealed his views that Turkish policy is none of his business, and as far as he is concerned, Turkey’s contribution to the war against the Islamic State is far more important.

The problems worrying European leaders—the rise of the nationalistic right, the attitude towards ethnic and religious minorities, and the tensions in the US-Europe-Russia triangle – also have consequences for Israel. The rise of movements and political parties advocating restrictions on minorities and foreigners, some featuring a prominent anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denying element, and given Israel’s history and ethos should impel Israel to prefer the moral dimension over political benefit, even in cases in which leaders in this group display a friendly attitude

towards Israel or support President Trump's policy on certain matters. Moving the American embassy to Jerusalem is likely to gain support from political parties with a strong Christian hue. On the other hand, the EU could be facing some members' pressure to decide on measures aimed at expressing opposition to the American measure, such as abstaining from political activity by EU officials in Jerusalem and recommending that member states do the same.

Escalation of the crisis between the UK and the EU will require Israel to find suitable economic solutions for its extensive system of relations with the EU on the one hand and its economic ties with the UK on the other, especially if the UK creates a free trade zone with the United States following the UK's formal disengagement from the EU.

