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Review

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INSIDE

This sculpture, Daydreaming, Bronze by Rudolf Hornák 1941, is part of a seminal exhibition of World War II art in the Slovak national gallery in Bratislava.

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All exhibition photos: Martin Deko

Looking Inward, from the Outside: Ruminations on Brexit from across the Pond

by Mike Gunter Jr

I'm not convinced leaving the European Union is the right move for Britain. On the surface, at least from across the pond, this pending departure brings an array of negatives. Short term, it has rocked not just British financial markets but those throughout the globe, my own retirement savings included. Longer term, it's raised into question the very future of a body that, for all intents and purposes, has kept Europe collectively relevant during an early 21st century pivot to Asia.

And of course, you can argue from a typically selfish, American perspective, as foreign affairs columnist and editor-at-large for TIME Magazine as well as professor at New York University Ian Bremmer asserts, that Brexit represents one of the three most significant risks to US dominance of the political order since 1962 and the Cuban Missile Crisis[1].

That should worry the British as well as Americans. Since the aftermath of World War II, for the most part, our two countries have continued to prosper from a mutually beneficial, some still say "special relationship." What's good for the British is good for the US, and vice versa.

Look no further than the Russian reaction to Brexit for evidence this is not just about Britain, but also a larger geopolitical game. Russian President Vladimir Putin, with his zero sum lens, interprets British retreat as Russian opportunity to fill a power vacuum, as suggests Dominique Moisi, senior advisor at the French Institute for International Relations and member of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

That said, if you dig a little deeper, anti-establishment outrage combines with anti-globalisation consternation to better explain the Brexit referendum. We in the states have our own version of this political predicament, emanating from both the left and right during our 2016 presidential primary campaigns. And regardless of whether he wins or loses in November, Republican nominee Donald Trump and the ideas he represents remain a force to be reckoned with.

Protectionism, even outright xenophobia, helped forge this Summer of 2016 political tsunami – on both sides of the Atlantic. But there are additional factors at work as well. And if these are not sufficiently addressed, we should expect unhealthy protectionism and xenophobia to flourish further.

What are these factors, you ask?

A common starting place for many focuses upon the costs of globalisation. Much has been articulated within academia as to how the developing world is an uneven partner when it comes to such transactions. But not all sectors of developed world society share in the bounty from global trade, either. As such, fear and resentment against the status quo should come as no surprise. Predictably, they drove concerns over immigration from not only Brexit voters this past June but also shaped significant portions of the European continent over the last several years. In the Spring 2015 Eurobarometer, for example, 77 per cent of Slovaks responding opposed immigration from outside the European Union. That placed them as third most resistant on the continent, with Greece at 78 per cent and the Czech Republic leading the pack at 81 per cent.

Such numbers cannot be explained away with the standard scapegoat of reactionary politics. Something more is at work. Globalisation critics have a point, too.

A shrinking middle class is Exhibit A here. While there are many ways to measure it, a June 2006 study by the Brookings Institution provides one example whereby the proportion of middle-income neighbourhoods in American metro areas declined from 58 per cent in 1970 to 41 per cent in 2000. The middle class within Britain has not fared well either. Average wages are 10 per cent less than before the 2008 economic crash, with government estimates suggesting it will take until 2020 for an average salary to reach 2010 levels – and all this as the top 1 per cent accrue a record high 14 per cent of British salaries[2].

Another related factor to general disillusionment, Exhibit B if you will, is the disproportionate influence of corporations in our political process. In the states we blame Citizens United, the 2010 US Supreme Court case prohibiting restriction of political campaign spending.

On the other hand, in the UK, and Slovakia for that matter, there are limits on spending but not donations[3]. This means that even though considerably less money is spent in general elections, with no limits on donations, public lack of confidence in the political process mirrors that in the US. "When donors are making contributions exceeding £20,000 ($31,000) – and some are making donations well over £250,000 ($390,000) – it's perfectly understandable you don't give away that kind of money without expecting something in return," explains Chandu Krishnan, executive director of TI UK[4].

Despite the significance of these globalisation-driven impacts, though, I want to focus attention on a different, albeit related, line of argument, the loss of faith in interdependence as an asset, specifically its role as the very foundation of the European dream. From its earliest stages, the basic idea of the EU was that sacrificing some state sovereignty enabled Europeans to remain a political and economic force – not to mention reap the benefits of economic integration with a market of half a billion people today. Yet, as stated earlier, not all have benefited equally. Some were left behind.

With this in mind, today's EU has lost some of its soft power edge. Borrowing from esteemed Harvard University political scientist Joseph Nye, the EU has lost part of its power of attraction. To many average Brits, or at least a good portion of the 52 per cent that voted in June, as the Brexit results demonstrate, the EU has become a bureaucratic tangle of rules and regulations emanating from Brussels.

Still, in terms of a European idea and Britain's role within it, my 2007 experience as a US Fulbright Scholar in the Slovak Republic taught me something different. Chatting with fellow academics from Univerzita Komenského in Bratislava one evening in an apartment just beyond Namestie SNP, site of many a protest during the Velvet Revolution and ground zero for some 50,000 celebrating their Velvet Divorce in the last hours of 1992, conversation turned to Turkish desires to enter the EU. Colleagues from not only Slovakia but also Germany and Bulgaria raised some early warnings flags in their opposition, and highlighted the role of religion, history, and culture in conceptualising Europe. But our conversation also underscored the degree to which EU membership is not the sine qua non of fleshing out European identity and cross-border cooperation.

My own American embassy presence in Bratislava provided an additional foreboding backdrop here. In response to 9/11 and synchronised East African embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania nearly three years before it, US embassies across the globe transformed into protective fortresses. In Bratislava, this meant intruding onto Hviezdoslavovo, the main square of the old city center known in Slovak as Stare Mesto, to secure a perimeter with an architecturally glaring three-meter high fence as well as parking area that encroached upon a beloved public pedestrian promenade, not to mention required restricting traffic along an adjoining street.

The message was clear: We don't care about its impact on you. Our security is more important. Indeed, the embassy in Bratislava is akin to New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman's description of the US consulate in Istanbul, "a maximum-security prison without the charm"[5]. Security was greatly enhanced. Hard power asserted. But at what cost to soft power? Does not ..>>>>

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A Hussite in Scotland: martyred for his beliefs

by Pavel Vysny

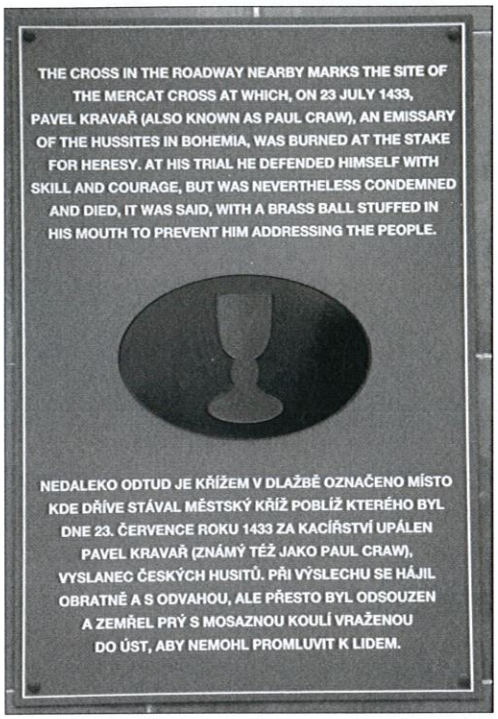
In the centre of a small university town on the east coast of Scotland a cross of cobble stones in the surface of the roadway marks an important historical link with Central Europe.

The cross in the roadway of Market Street in St Andrews indicates the former location of the Mercat (Market) Cross, close to which, it is believed, a Czech Hussite emissary, Pavel Kravař, was burned at the stake for heresy on 23 July 1433.

Little is known about Pavel Kravař other than that he was born around 1390, probably in the village of Kravaře, near Opava, now in the Czech Republic, and that he attended universities in France and Prague.

It was probably during his time in Prague that Pavel Kravař adopted the Hussite cause of religious and social reform as the university was then a hotbed of Hussite radicalism. In the early 1420s, he left Prague to enter the service of the Polish king as a physician and where he remained until shortly before making the journey to Scotland.

The precise reason for Pavel Kravař's journey to St Andrews is unclear. But, following a decisive Hussite victory over a Papal army at the battle of Domažlice in 1431, the stage was set for the council of Basel, at which reconciliation was to be sought between the warring religious parties. The Hussites might, therefore, have sent an emissary to Scotland in search of allies for their cause. A contemporary Scottish chronicle records that Pavel Kravař arrived with letters of recommendation from Prague "as an outstanding practitioner in the art of medicine".



Although there is some evidence suggesting that such views might have been present in St Andrews, they were certainly not shared by the university authorities, who arrested the visitor and placed him on trial for heresy. During his interrogation Pavel Kravař offered a spirited defence of his beliefs. The medieval chronicler noted he was "fluent and skilled in biblical argument" and "stubbornly maintained" his reformist views. Consequently, he was found guilty and sentenced to death by burning. The religious reformer, John Knox, writing more than 100 years later, claimed that at his execution a brass ball was placed in the victim's mouth to prevent him addressing the assembled crowd.

During the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, in the 16th century, several other reformers suffered a similar fate in St Andrews and are commemorated on a stone memorial in the town. However, Pavel Kravař's name does not appear on the monument and he has been referred to as the "missing martyr" of St Andrews. That is no longer the case. Thanks to the generosity of the Czech community in the United Kingdom a memorial plaque has been installed close to the place of Pavel Kravař's execution. The plaque design includes the Hussite chalice with an inscription in Czech and English.

The significance of this historic link between Scotland and Central Europe was marked recently when the Czech Ambassador unveiled the plaque. The ceremony in September was attended by the principal, Sally Mapstone and vice principal, Prof Verity Brown of St Andrews University, Czech and Slovak students and staff.

<<<< American cultural power suffer? Getting a visa certainly isn't any easier. Enjoying a late afternoon ice cream on Hviezdoslavovo doesn't have the same charm, either. As I argued to the chief public affairs officer during my stay, what message does a fortress embassy like this really send, especially when it compromises the social fabric of the host city? Fortunately, American officials now concur and, beginning in May 2014, formally agreed to look for another location.

The UK, on the other hand, practices a decidedly different approach. Take the British Council as example. Founded in 1934, and beginning work briefly in Slovakia in 1946 before shutting down during the Cold War, these offices boast spread of the English language as the heart of their work. In Slovakia, since reopening offices in 1992, the British Council has helped over 50,000 Slovak students with the International English Language Testing System. Even as an American, I could easily access their offerings, including a healthy sample of feature films from their Stare Mesto location on Panska. Although all three British Council libraries in Slovakia were closed in 2006, with most of their stock transferred to British Centers within Slovak libraries, their English language support structures remain.

Following this lead, more merit is to be found by ramping up Britain's other continental commitments, at least at the micro level. The UK must double down on "cultural relations". Salvaging as many ties as possible is not even about swallowing British pride. It's about touting the UK as a continued player in EU affairs. Even as it looks inward, the UK should increase its people-to-people interactions. It should foster more educational exchanges, more English language instruction. It should encourage more travel.

Yes, even simple travel. When we travel we learn not only about where we visit. We also learn more about from where we come. We are better able to grasp both the strengths and shortcomings of our home country.

I'm not the first to articulate this argument. Traveler extraordinaire Rick Steves, who knows vast chunks of Europe much better than I ever will, suggested in his 2011 TEDx Talk that becoming a more thoughtful traveler makes us a better citizen of the planet[6]. Well before him, Mark Twain asserted in *The Innocents Abroad* that: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."[7]

Keep these words of wisdom in mind in the coming months, perhaps as long as two years of Brexit negotiation allowed under the Treaty of Lisbon's Article 50. Undeniably, the EU experiment has seen better days. It is considerably weakened with British exit, the richest financial market and largest military lost. Yet, the EU is by no means languishing upon its deathbed as some may claim.

Whether as a counterweight to its, at times, bully-like American ally, or as a bulwark to its historical Russian adversary, the EU idea still has relevance – even for the UK. That is why, at least from a Transatlantic Alliance perspective, more micro-level efforts to enhance interaction are needed now more than perhaps any other time since the end of World War II. Even as the UK retreats at the most visible macro level in the form of the EU, it must reach out to the continent with a multitude of micro-level initiatives like the British Council.

More travel, more cultural exchanges, and more study abroad at an earlier age are all needed. This is how we better understand our world. This is how we develop more creative solutions to our problems. As the British better position themselves for Brexit in the coming months, they must also pause and take measure from the outside.

1. American over-reaction to 9/11 and the 2008 economic crisis, Bremmer contends, are the other two. "After Brexit, Is the West coming apart?" On Point with Tom Ashbrook, National Public Radio, 27 June 2016: http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2016/06/27/brexit-results-impact-global-west.
2. West, Ed and Fraser Nelson. "The Strange Death of the British Middle Class," The Spectator, 24 August 2013: http://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/08/the-missing-middle/.
3. The Czech Republic limits neither spending nor contributions.
4. Thompson, Nick. "International campaign finance: How do countries compare?" CNN, 5 March 2012: http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/24/world/global-campaign-finance/.
5. Friedman, Thomas. Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution – and How It can Renew America. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, p.4.
6. Steves, Rick. "The Value of Travel," TEDxRainer. 12 November 2011: http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxRainier-Rick-Steves-The-Val.
7. Twain, Mark. The Innocents Abroad. Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1869.