LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog: Brexit was a warning sign for the integration process – the EU must reshape itself as a project for the 'left behind'

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Brexit was a warning sign for the integration process – the EU must reshape itself as a project for the 'left behind'

The agreement reached between the UK and the EU in December last year was billed as the final act in the Brexit saga. Yet as **Uğur Tekiner** *writes, there is still much that remains uncertain about the future UK-EU relationship and the impact of Brexit on the EU.*

The world may be plagued by the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was not long ago that a different issue dominated the headlines across Europe: Brexit. Following the end of trade talks between the United Kingdom and the European Union at the end of last year, the dust appears to have finally settled, with both sides in the process of adjusting to the post-Brexit era. But have we really reached the end point in the UK and the EU's relationship?

Despite being portrayed as a largely internal matter for the UK, Brexit stands as a distinctly European phenomenon. And while both parties ostensibly parted ways with the trade deal, they have been obliged to stay in regular contact. The intertwined relationship between the UK and the EU ensures there will be further twists and turns in the years to come. Indeed, there are at least three reasons why Europe will continue to be a major theme within British politics.

First, Europe still represents a serious [fault line](#) in the relations between the four constituent nations of the UK. Five years have passed since the Brexit referendum, but there has still been no reconciliation between Northern Ireland and Scotland, which [voted to stay in the European Union](#), and England and Wales, which voted to Leave. The continued relevance of this split was underlined again in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election on 6 May. If there is a further referendum on Scottish independence, it will be in no small part down to the impact of Brexit.

Second, the [societal divides](#) along class, educational, generational, and geographical lines that marked the Brexit referendum are far from resolved. Over time, Remain and Leave have turned into strong identifiers through which different sections of British society can express their [dissatisfaction with politics](#). The complex meanings attached to these identities require a political response, not just in the context of Brexit, but in relation to the pertinent socio-economic realities that underpin them.

Third, the EU will continue to be utilised by a range of British Eurosceptic forces. European integration has been a convenient scapegoat for the failings of the British political system since the 1970s. It is unlikely the lure of blaming Brussels will vanish entirely, particularly if negative consequences from Brexit become apparent in areas such as workers' rights and international trade. The tensions that have already appeared between the UK and the EU in relation to [Covid-19 vaccines](#) highlight the extent to which Eurosceptic narratives are likely to remain relevant following Brexit.

Brexit as a European phenomenon

From the EU's perspective, the UK's departure represented the loss of an allegedly 'awkward partner'. Yet the EU has also lost one of its most populous member states, not to mention its largest military power, second largest economy, and most important financial hub. There has been an inevitable shift in the course of [European integration](#) as a result. This shift has the potential to create new divisions between member states, notably between [Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries](#), net-payers and net-recipients from the EU budget, and between member states in the North and South, and [East and West](#).

As such, what renders Brexit a truly European phenomenon is its ability to expose [fundamental tensions](#) within the EU. In this context, it can also be viewed as an [opportunity](#) to fix the problems that are present within the integration process. The UK's exit has once again brought the long-standing issue of the EU's democratic deficit into the spotlight, which will need to be approached from a broader perspective in the aftermath of Brexit.

Whatever the remaining member states may think about the UK, there is recognition that the European institutions would benefit from wide-ranging reforms. This is not simply a matter of rebalancing the distribution of competences between the national and supranational levels, or resolving tensions between the Council, Commission and European Parliament. Rather, the UK's referendum underlined the need to appeal to the losers from globalisation and, for that matter, the losers from European integration. This will require the EU, which has long been viewed as the terrain of the 'better off', to also become a project for the 'left behind'.

The threat of European disintegration following Brexit has reversed the seemingly irreversible course of 'ever closer union'. Faced with mounting challenges, the EU's future is now uncertain, and effective leadership will be needed to set a clear trajectory for the integration process. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether the UK and EU can develop a sense of mutual trust, or whether suspicion and mistrust will come to characterise their relationship. What is beyond doubt, however, is that while Brexit may be 'done', the process is far from over.

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