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Abstract

A British withdrawal from the EU would change Britain, the EU, the politics and security of Europe and the place of all three in the international system. To explore these possible changes, this article draws on a series of commissioned analyses that look at the views of Brexit in other EU Member States and select countries outside the EU. Specifically, it examines and maps out the prevailing ideas of what the aforementioned changes could entail. It argues that ideas connected to European unity and integration will define how a Brexit is managed.

Key words

Brexit, geopolitics, Europeanization, renegotiation, European integration.

1. Introduction

Britain's EU referendum has challenged a taboo of contemplating the idea of a Member State withdrawing from European integration (Oliver 2013: 12). Such ideas matter in European integration and international relations. As Wendt argues, interests are produced and reproduced through the discursive practices of actors. People and states 'act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them' (Wendt 1992: 396-397). How then today do EU Member States and others connected to the EU view the idea of Brexit and what it might mean for them and the EU? In 2013 the German Council on Foreign Relations (Möller and Oliver 2014) commissioned 27 national reports to analyse possible national responses. The reports were asked to set out what debates exist about Brexit and analyse how their state might respond if it happened. Since 2014 similar reports have been published, many focusing on the British Government's attempt to renegotiate Britain's membership (European Council on Foreign Relations 2015; Emerson 2015; EUROPP 2015; Irwin 2015; Leonard 2015). Together they provide a wide range of views from various states of what a Brexit could mean for each state, the EU, European integration, the wider politics of Europe and the EU and Europe's place in the world.

To identify the ideas that might shape how other states respond to a Brexit, this article draws largely on the series edited by Möller and Oliver (2014) and updated by the London School of Economics blog

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EUROPP (2015). This article therefore brings together 59 pieces of recent analysis on UK-EU relations. The breadth of views considered helps uncover any biases from individual contributors and national debates. Together they highlight that ideas of European unity will be important to managing a Brexit. The article first examines views from the EU before turning to non-EU states; with the first focusing more on internal changes while the latter highlight how European geopolitics might be changed.

2. EU views

a. Domestic debates about a potential Brexit

British debates about the EU have not passed unnoticed, but there are varying levels of understanding of what is driving British behaviour mixed with growing feelings of frustration that could facilitate a Brexit. Debates about Brexit can be found in all EU Member States. However, with the exception of countries very close to Britain such as Ireland (see Barrett et al. 2015; EUROPP 2015), these debates were until the renegotiation was agreed largely confined to the political and diplomatic communities. The debate has therefore been an élite driven one. Even then attention can vary. Sweden's political élite – traditionally close to Britain in outlook and policy – were like many in the EU frustrated at Britain's renegotiation proposals, preferring instead to focus on more pressing matters such as the Eurozone, migration and Russia (Möller and Oliver 2014: 78). When there are debates about Britain they often dwell, as seen in Poland, on Britain's domestic arguments, especially those within the Conservative party and ideas that David Cameron's aim with the renegotiation was not a reformed EU but his own political survival (Möller and Oliver 2014: 27-30). Even when detailed proposals are offered, they have been seen to lack conceptual clarity, viewed as unclear as to their long-term aims or interpreted as spoilers. They frequently failed to connect to similar ideas elsewhere, in part because they appeared directed solely towards engaging Germany and in particular Angela Merkel. Britain ignored the EU's institutions until the end of renegotiations, meaning they were 'the dog that hasn't yet barked' (EUROPP 2015). This all added to feelings of ambivalence in countries such as France about Britain's position in the EU (Möller and Oliver 2014: 11). The result is that Britain has moved from being an awkward if pragmatic partner to being seen as a bystander on core issues, turning inwards on itself (Rasmussen 2015). As Rem Korteweg (in Möller and Oliver 2014: 99) puts it, from a Dutch perspective Britain now suffers from a sense of 'narcissist victimization'; a sense that only Britain struggles with the EU and only it can see the way forward. Even in countries whose governments align with British positions, such as Denmark or Hungary, support has come with caveats (EUROPP 2015). Britain has become a problem for the EU. While no member state has actively prepared for a Brexit, negative views of Britain may ease the handling of it.

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b. The effect of a Brexit on the EU

Discussions about Brexit often dwell on ideas of what it would mean for Britain rather than the EU. There is little support for the view, as held by some British Eurosceptics, that the EU needs Britain more than Britain needs the EU (Zielonka 2014). Most views are that it will cost Britain heavily economically, break it apart by driving out Scotland and reduce its standing in the world. The EU would feel some costs, with the EU being reduced in size and stature, but these are seen as knock-on costs (Butler et al. 2016). There are specific national concerns, such as worries about what would become of EU citizens resident in Britain and the economic costs for states with close trading links with Britain. Any breakup of Britain raises concerns for Spain (Möller and Oliver 2014: 83) with the possibility of a breakdown in the Northern Ireland peace process being of concern to Ireland (EUROPP 2015). Nor is there any sense there will be feelings of schadenfreude. Instead the concern is more that the EU and its members will need to protect themselves from the damage a close friend would inflict on itself.

There are various, sometimes conflicting ideas about how the EU might be changed internally, but most focus on maintaining the EU's unity by increasing cooperation with Germany and the Eurozone. Discussions about changing the EU can be confused by differences within and between states over what is meant by concepts such as 'differentiated integration', 'concentric circles' or a 'multispeed Europe' (Möller and Oliver 2014: 13). Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some ideas held in Member States. Views from countries such as Ireland, Sweden, and The Netherlands identify ideas about the EU's balance of power shifting towards a less economically liberal, outward looking and Atlanticist union (Möller and Oliver 2014: 59, 33, 77, 99). For France, a Brexit would offer the chance for it to further pursue its long-term aim of trying to 'make the European Union in France's model as much as possible' (Möller and Oliver 2014: 11). For smaller states, Britain, France and Germany have often kept each other in check with the loss of one leading to the domination of the other two (Möller and Oliver 2014: 99). Germany's predominant position within the union could grow further. Other EU Member States have already directed their attention increasingly towards Berlin, with this in part a result of Britain's growing isolation. In other non-Eurozone members such as Poland, Denmark and Sweden, the potential loss of Britain has led to views that they need to increase their efforts to shape Eurozone policies because a Brexit is likely to enhance the power of the Eurozone within the EU. In newer members such as Bulgaria or Romania there are concerns that a Brexit would marginalize them further outside the Eurozone (Möller and Oliver 2014: 51, 55). Meanwhile in Greece, the idea of Brexit evokes fears that it

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could demonstrate to the rest of the EU that a Grexit is not to be feared (Möller and Oliver 2014 2014: 91).

c. EU-UK relations after a potential Brexit

There is less clarity about what new relationship should be sought with a departing UK. However, again, potential negotiating positions can be discerned that focus on the EU's unity and political economy. The prospect of a UK referendum has already raised concerns that it could unleash centrifugal forces, which through some domino effect begin unravelling the EU. In countries such as Denmark and Austria, Britain could serve as a powerful reference point in public debates about an alternative model for relations with the EU (Möller and Oliver 2014: 67; EUROPP 2015). Despite this, amongst many governments such as Greece, the Baltic states or Spain, the view amongst the government is that the answer to the current problems facing the EU – many of which can (at least currently) appear of more direct concern to EU Member States than a Brexit – is 'more Europe' (Möller and Oliver 2014: 83, 91). For German decision makers, a Brexit and weakened wider EU may be the cost to be paid for saving the Eurozone through further integration (Möller and Oliver 2014: 24). Concerns about maintaining and protecting European integration would therefore be the backdrop against which the EU agreed to adopt a new relationship with a departing UK. Preventing Britain from undercutting the EU is also raised in debates in several states, with many objecting to the idea of Britain being allowed some privileged relationship with the EU that allows it to avoid the social and political costs. For France, any fair deal will, much like with the forthcoming renegotiation, 'have to be fair for Britain but most importantly for France, and more broadly the EU' (EUROPP 2015). Even for a state such as Ireland that faces the prospect of significant economic costs from a Brexit, its political commitment to the EU comes first. As the Irish government has made clear, 'Ireland is an integrated and committed member of the EU community. And will remain so. On such a vital topic of national interest, we will not be caught in the slipstream of decisions that others make' (Donohoe 2013).

3. Non-EU views

a. Introduction

Non-EU states frame their views of Brexit through a lens of geopolitics and security (see also Oliver 2015; Simón 2015). All states surveyed deem relations with Britain to be important. However, relations are balanced against relations with the rest of the EU, which collectively amount to a greater relationship – in economics, politics or security - than with Britain alone. There is next to no support for the idea

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that a Brexit would enhance Britain's standing in the world. The US view (Möller and Oliver 2014: 15) recalls the 1962 warning by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson that:

> Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role … The attempt to play a separate power role apart from Europe, a role based on the 'special relationship' with the United States and on being the head of a 'commonwealth' which has no political structure, unity or strength – this role is about played out.

b. Perspectives from non-EU states outside of Europe and the US

Views in several Commonwealth states – Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Singapore, Cyprus, Malta, and India – generally supported a critical view of the Commonwealth role (Möller and Oliver 2014; EUROPP 2015; Tripathi 2015). In one of the most critical views of Brexit, former Australian Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan (2016) dismissed Eurosceptic arguments that Australia would be interested in the idea of working more with a UK outside the EU.

A common view in all non-EU states was a concern that a Brexit would lead the EU towards a position of being a less able power geopolitically and one more likely to turn inwards and away from an outward looking liberal economic agenda. Chinese views of the EU and Britain, 'alternate between being primarily economic and geopolitical, albeit with considerable overlap between the two' (Möller and Oliver 2014: 35). The same is found in Japan where worries exist that a decline in British pragmatism leading to a Brexit could weaken Britain and the EU as market places and allies (Möller and Oliver 2014: 93-95). An uncomfortable prospect for the Japanese government is being put in a position of having to choose between Britain and the EU, the preference instead being to find synergy in cooperation with individual Member States and the EU. Fears of Europe splitting and appearing vulnerable to divisions from the outside feed views of Brexit in Ukraine (Getmanchuk 2015) and in EU members such as Estonia and Latvia (EUROPP 2015). For decision makers in Ukraine, a Brexit would weaken ideas of the EU as a reliable partner, an idea that has been placed under considerable pressure by the conflict with Russia. In Russia, unless EU-Russian relations return to a stable economically driven relationship, a Brexit would feed some Russian populist messages that the EU has reached its limits and is crumbling (Gromyko 2015).

c. Perspectives from the US

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In US debates about the UK-EU relationship a Brexit raises a series of questions about US ideas for transatlantic relations in an emerging multipolar world. Britain's place as a key partner in NATO and one of the EU's two capable military powers, means a Brexit would weaken the EU's efforts in security and defence (see Simón 2015). A British exit could hit EU-NATO relations at a time when the US government is pushing for enhanced geopolitical relations with the EU through the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (see Hamilton 2014). As President Obama made clear, UK membership of the EU, 'gives us much greater confidence about the strength of the transatlantic union and is part of the cornerstone of institutions built after World War II that has made the world safer and more prosperous.' He went on to single out the importance of UK membership because, 'the values that we share are the right ones, not just for ourselves, but for Europe as a whole and the world as a whole' (BBC News 2015).

d. Perspectives from non-EU European states

Finally, views of a Brexit in non-EU European states are set against the possible implications for their place in Europe. Switzerland and Norway's existing relations with the EU are often looked on as possible models for a UK outside the EU. This does not sit comfortably with the hopes decision makers in each have for their state's future relations with the EU. Debates in both countries recognize a Brexit would boost the voice of non-EU states, but there are also worries a Brexit would see the departure from the EU of a state with a similar economic and political outlook and – in the case of a Norway model – fail to meet Britain's needs (Sejersted et al. 2012). These countries worry that Britain would push other non-EU states into the shadows, limiting their individually tailored relations with the EU (Möller and Oliver 2014: 43, 64). Meanwhile, in Turkey, Brexit has raised the possibility of an alternative model for relations to pursuing a long-stalled EU membership application (Ulgen 2015). However, it is not clear whether UK or EU decision makers would be willing to share any new UK-EU deal with Turkey or other non-EU European states.

4. Conclusion

Despite the limited debates about Brexit – ones confined largely to political élites – it is still possible to discern ideas that will shape the EU's response should it happen. The most prominent ideas surround the unity of the EU and continuation of European integration. This can be seen in debates about what new relationship the EU could negotiate with Britain following a vote to withdraw or fears that a British exit vote would start a domino effect leading to similar referendums elsewhere. How the EU responds to a British vote to leave will therefore depend on ideas about what type of union the EU wishes to be.

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Such ideas will not be shaped solely by a Brexit, but by a series of pressures connected to the Eurozone, Schengen, Russia, transatlantic relations, and global economics. The rest of the world, particularly allies such as the USA, will also respond based on ideas of an EU they hope to see remain a global economic power and a coherent partner in a range of policy areas.

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