

Brexit: the many roads to a crisis?

— *Brexit is a process, not an event. As **Tim Oliver** sets out, that process involves 13 different negotiations and debates between multiple decision makers and other political actors. Each negotiation overlaps and shapes the others. While they need not add up to make Brexit a crisis, finding a way through will be a significant challenge for all involved.*

Theresa May's promise that 'Brexit means Brexit' sounds, as the **Washington Post's Sebastian Mallaby** pointed out, a bit like telling a toddler that 'bedtime means bedtime'. There will be a bedtime. But as every parent, aunt, uncle, godparent or babysitter experiences **at some point** it's never clear when, where and how bedtime will happen.

As has **become apparent** since the 23 June vote, Brexit is not going to be a process that is easy to define, implement and put to bed. Brexit is a series of interconnected negotiations, debates and votes that is, for some, potentially open-ended. This is not to overcomplicate Brexit. If anything, by breaking it down into its component parts we can clarify our understanding of it and better appreciate who the various players will be, what fields they will play on and therefore who will enable or constrain Brexit.

What we are now witnessing are thirteen negotiations and debates that can be divided into three groups, all of which are summarised in the tables below. The first group of negotiations are taking place within the UK and revolve largely around defining what the British people's vote to leave sanctioned in terms of a Brexit policy to be pursued by HM Government.

The second set of negotiations is between the UK and the EU and cover not only an exit agreement, but a new post-withdrawal relationship, a possible deal for a transition between the two, and the need to find ways forward in areas of mutual interest such as foreign, security and defence matters.

The final group of negotiations will be amongst the remaining EU, a development that until recently was with only a **few exceptions** almost entirely overlooked in debates about Brexit in both the UK and the rest of the EU. As the **Bratislava summit** demonstrated, the EU not only has to reach agreement amongst itself over what to offer the departing UK. It also has to manage a changed balance of power within a Union wrestling with a series of other challenges such as those facing the Eurozone and the EU's place in Europe and the wider world.

United Kingdom:

Negotiations	Participants	Issues
1. UK: Brexit narrative	UK political parties, media, academia.	What the vote by the British people meant.
2. UK: Party politics	Conservative party, Labour party, UKIP, SNP, Liberal Democrats.	Positioning of the parties to manage Brexit.
3. UK: Parliament and the people	MPs, Lords, UK Supreme Court.	Who legally defines Brexit.
4. UK: A united kingdom?	UK Government, Scottish government and parliament, Northern Ireland government and assembly, Mayor of London.	The role of the regions (especially those that voted remain) in negotiating Brexit; Scottish independence; Northern Ireland's peace process; London's place in the union; England.
5. UK: Brexit and the World	UK bilateral relations with non-EU world	UK relations with USA, emerging powers such as China, trade agreements, full membership of World Trade Organisation.

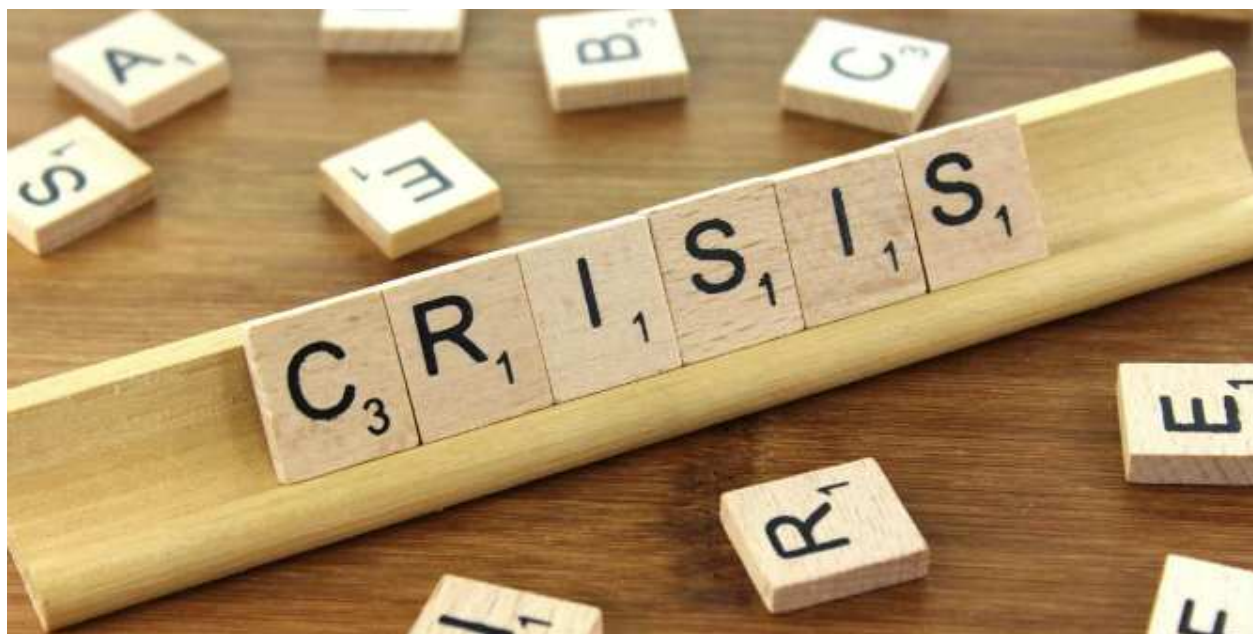
United Kingdom – European Union:

Negotiations	Participants	Issues
6. UK-EU: Article 50 and Brexit transition	UK, EU 27 heads of government, European Parliament, European Commission, European Court of Justice (ECJ)	Exit agreement for the UK from EU institutions and associated arrangements; possible transition arrangement for UK, possibly inside European Economic Area.
7. UK-EU: New relationship	UK, political systems of EU 27, European Parliament, European Commission, ECJ, EEA/EFTA members.	Agreement between UK and EU over new relationship: EEA, EFTA, non-single market membership, free trade deal and others.
8. EU(UK): Article 50, Brexit transition and new relationship.	EU 27 governments and their domestic political structures, European Parliament, European Commission, ECJ, EEA/EFTA members.	Remaining EU member states reach agreement over what to offer the UK and over what timeframe, potentially with member states ratifying agreement individually through domestic ratification processes (parliamentary votes, referendums).
9. UK-EU: Foreign, security and defence cooperation.	UK, EU27 (especially France and Germany), NATO members, USA.	How to continue cooperation on international matters.

European Union:

Negotiations	Participants	Issues
10. EU(EU): Rebalancing the Union.	EU 27, European Parliament, Commission, ECJ.	The new balance of power within the post-Brexit EU; place of Eurozone in EU; European integration, disintegration or muddling through.
11. EU(Europe): An EU in a multipolar Europe	EU, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Turkey, Ukraine, non-EU Balkan countries, UK.	The future of the EU's relations with non-EU European countries; EU-EEA/EFTA relations, European geopolitics.
12. EU(World): An EU in a multipolar world.	EU, UK, USA, Russia, China, UN, NATO.	EU's place in an emerging multipolar world.
13. EU(Business): business as usual?	EU as a union of 28 member states until UK exit formally effective.	How to let UK and rest of EU continue normal non-Brexit business until UK withdraws.

The multiple players and playing fields of Brexit and the numerous ways in which Brexit could be enabled or constrained has led some to conclude that Brexit won't happen or that it constitutes such a crisis for the UK, the EU or both that it would be dangerous for either side to push forward with it. It is possible to imagine a 'harsh Brexit' which sees a breakdown in trust between the various actors leading to a deterioration in relations between some or all involved, ending in significant damage (potentially a break-up) of the UK, the EU or both. That said, even a harsh Brexit could amount to a crisis that forces all involved to realise what they have to lose. The outcome could be what can be termed a 'harsh-positive' Brexit in which instead of muddling through Brexit – coping with it rather than solving the problems it presents – the EU and the UK find a viable solution that settles the matter.



Is Brexit a crisis?

Is Brexit, therefore, a crisis for the UK and/or the EU? Politics is the daily management of crises, and in some ways Brexit takes the long-running problems of UK-EU relations to a new level. In doing so Brexit can be said to meet the definition of a crisis as something that is dramatic, vivid, emotionally charged and carrying significant consequences. Crises are, as Rosenthal et al. argued, moments or periods of truth which test leaders and the robustness of political institutions, and in which frailties are revealed, in no small part because the limited time available limits the opportunities for adaptation. Crises capture the attention of leaders, commentators, and analysts, and so risk neglecting other big but less exciting problems.

Brexit is testing the robustness of both the UK and the EU as political unions, and threatens some of the goals either side have set whether it be 'ever closer union' or the idea of Britain as a great power. The time available is limited by the domestic, political, legal and economic demands facing both sides, not least the UK. Extending the time available will lessen any sense of crisis, albeit at the risk of triggering a backlash from those who would like to see the process happen quicker whatever the cost. All sides are in the early stages of feeling their way forward with an unprecedented problem. The potential for unexpected surprises remains high; not least that one actor somewhere

along the way in one of the above negotiations – for example, a vote in a parliament or a legal challenge – could disrupt the entire process.

Note: This post summarises evidence submitted by Dr Oliver to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs his article ‘The world after Brexit: From British referendum to global adventure’, forthcoming in the journal [International Politics](#), and it represents the views of the authors and not those of LSE Brexit, nor the LSE. Image credit: [CC BY-SA 3.0 NY](#)

Tim Oliver is a Dahrendorf Fellow of Europe-North America Relations at LSE IDEAS.

September 21st, 2016 | [By LSE authors](#), [Exit negotiations](#), [Featured](#) | [0 Comments](#)
