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Fifty shades of Brexit: Britain's EU referendum and its implications for Europe and Britain

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Fifty Shades of Brexit: Britain's EU Referendum and its Implications for Europe and Britain

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Abstract

Britain's vote to leave the EU has raised more questions than answers, which is ironic given that David Cameron's aim for the referendum was to settle the European question in British politics. The outcome, which reflected a range of causes, leaves significant uncertainties overhanging UK politics, UK-EU relations and wider European politics. It is likely that the confused outcome of the referendum and the technicalities of Brexit mean that for both the UK and the EU future relations will resemble fifty shades of grey rather than some black and white division of in or out.

The British vote to leave the European Union has left many in Britain, the rest of the EU and around the world searching for answers. In Britain, the debate rages as to why 52 percent of the British people who voted in the 23 June referendum backed the option to leave. British politics has been thrown into a period of change and uncertainty. Questions abound as to what the result means for Britain's political economy, constitution, unity, democracy, identities, security and place in the world.

The rest of the EU has not been spared from its own barrage of questions. Brexit has added to doubts about the EU's purpose and unity thanks to continuing problems in the Eurozone, Schengen and with Russia, to say nothing of problems ranging from productivity through to demographics. Is the EU now more likely to disintegrate, integrate or continue a policy of muddling through where it copes with but does not solve the problems it faces?

As so often in politics, there can be no clear answers to many of these questions. The debate is also still a raw one and, as we set out in the first section, there are competing narratives emerging to explain what happened and justify the choices that will now be made. This article therefore explores in more detail how Brexit is not an event but a process, and one that will involve numerous debates and negotiations, each of which will take place to varying degrees of intensity and at different levels in the United Kingdom, all 27 other EU member states, the EU's institutions, non-EU European states and some allies such as the United States.¹ To examine this, the first two sections of the article look at some of the emerging ideas about why the British people voted for Brexit. This provides context as to what approach the British government will take to Brexit. The article then turns to the structure of the negotiations that are now unfolding to define and manage Brexit. As becomes clear, the negotiations include multiple possible outcomes for all sides in terms of models for future UK-EU relations and their political, economic and security consequences. The drawn-out nature of the process is likely to dampen some shocks, although the possibility of a crisis leading to some form of 'harsh'

¹ Grant, "Six pack of difficult deals", and Oliver, "Brexit is about Europe".

Brexit (or 'hard' Brexit) should not be overlooked.² As I therefore argue in the conclusion, the confused outcome of the referendum, the multiple possibilities and technicalities of Brexit and the protracted timeframe mean that for both the UK and the EU future relations will resemble fifty shades of grey rather than some settled, black and white division of in or out.

Sifting through the Brexit fallout

Why then did the British vote for Leave? Several themes have begun to emerge. First, nobody should be surprised that the British people voted to leave an organisation that for most of Britain's forty-two years of membership had domestically been the subject of a largely negative, Eurosceptic debate. British politicians have long struggled to offer any pro-European arguments, preferring instead to make any such case elsewhere in the EU or around the world.³ Tony Blair, Britain's most pro-European prime minister since Edward Heath took the UK into the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, was once described as an 'anti-anti-European' because he was willing to attack Eurosceptics but unwilling to go beyond this by actively making a pro-European case to the British people.⁴ Pro-European campaign groups have been limited in number and survived on limited funding and intermittent high-level political support. By contrast, while Eurosceptic groups have been divided by the intensity of their hostility to the EU and ideas as to what should happen to UK-EU relations after withdrawal, their numbers, resources and longevity have been much greater than their pro-European counterparts.⁵

² Morillas, *Brexit Scenarios*, 12-17.

³ Daddow, *New Labour and the European Union*.

⁴ Donnelly, *Euro and British Politics*, 2.

⁵ Usherwood and Startin, "Euroscepticism as a persistent phenomenon".

Cameron himself may have been overly confident he could overcome such long-standing unease and hostility towards the EU. A clear example was how he overlooked the power of a long-standing Eurosceptic press which, once the referendum campaign began, was relentless in its attacks on him and the idea of Britain remaining in the EU.⁶ In losing the referendum, David Cameron himself was reaping what he had sown. During his renegotiation of the UK's membership he made clear that he would support the UK leaving the EU if he failed to secure the renegotiation he wanted. This was in part a negotiating tactic, but more to appease Eurosceptics in his own party. Yet months later, during the referendum campaign, he made the case that Britain's membership was a matter of war and peace and therefore something that should not be jeopardised.⁷ The public, press and Eurosceptics quickly ridiculed his change of heart. But Cameron was not alone in thinking he could get away with such an attitude. Such contradictory positions were in large part the result of generations of UK politicians seeing the EU as an easy target by which to score domestic political points. Reversing decades of negativity towards the EU in such a short campaign was always going to be an uphill task.

Second, many have pointed to the vote being a backlash by the 'left behind', communities and individuals who don't fit in to the UK's and EU's globalised, open economies. There were links between economic circumstances and support for leaving the EU, with older, poorer, less skilled workers being amongst the most likely to have voted Leave.⁸ Voters in deprived areas across the UK had long shown themselves willing to vote for parties such as

⁶ Korsi, "Why we lost the vote".

⁷ Mance, "Leaving EU puts peace at risk".

⁸ Goodwin and Heath, "Brexit and the left behind".

UKIP. Despite the appearance of being a party that had successfully attracted Conservative voters, UKIP had for a long time been successfully pursuing voters in deprived and deindustrialized areas that had traditionally been strong Labour supporting areas.⁹ A political elite based in the booming, global metropolis of London was easily portrayed as distant and uninterested in the plight of the British working class. This was aided by the policies of austerity pursued following the global financial crisis that appeared to be centred on international banks based in London. The EU's own recent difficulties, most notably in the Eurozone and the policies pursued towards Greece, also left it a difficult thing to sell on the doorstep. Back in 1975, the then EEC had appeared the future, an image that by 2016 no longer applied thanks to the stark contrast between fast growing emerging markets and a sclerotic Eurozone.

However, the foundations for economic motivations for backing Leave were laid long ago and were not a reaction solely to recent events and policies. Large numbers of the 'left behind' were left behind by economic changes such as post-war deindustrialisation and the growth in the service (and especially financial services) industry that took place from the 1970s onwards.¹⁰ The turnout of 'left behind' voters in the referendum was the culmination of several decades of economic change.

Focusing on economics, however, misses how the referendum result was defined also by views on what type of country Britain should be in terms of its values, identities and outlook. Support for Leave connected closely with other

⁹ Goodwin and Milazzo, *UKIP*.

¹⁰ Davies, "Thoughts on sociology of Brexit".

divisions over values that cut across age, income, education and party affiliation. One noted comparison was attitudes towards the death penalty.¹¹ A semi-skilled or unemployed voter who opposed the return of the death penalty was likely to vote to remain in the EU in much the same way as a professional or wealthy voter who supported the return of the death penalty was likely to vote for Leave.¹² Two areas in particular were of note: immigration and Englishness. Immigration had been driven up the UK's political agenda by the arrival of large numbers of Eastern Europeans following the EU's 2004 enlargement. Britain had been one of only a few EU member states not to impose any restrictions on free movement following 2004.¹³ The result was a period of high levels of immigration to the UK. Whether this led directly to a surge in Euroscepticism is debated because areas where immigrants settled tended to show low levels of support for UKIP.¹⁴ This demonstrated that in some areas support for parties such as UKIP and anti-immigration policies could be based more on an imagined or exaggerated fear of immigrants taking jobs or adding to pressures on local services such as doctors or school places. However, this only goes so far given that some areas that backed leave had seen increases in levels of immigration unprecedented in their history.¹⁵ The Conservative government's **promise** to achieve its stated aim of lowering immigration to the 'tens of thousands' had also created expectations

¹¹ Kaufmann, "It's NOT the economy, stupid".

¹² Burton, "Link between Brexit and death penalty".

¹³ Vargos-Silva and Markaki, *EU migration*, 2.

¹⁴ Dodds and Akkoc, "Where is UKIP's support strongest?".

¹⁵ "The immigration paradox: explaining the Brexit vote", *The Economist*, 16 July 2016.

that were always going to be difficult to fulfill given the high levels of immigration from both inside and outside the EU.¹⁶

That notable levels of support for Leave were also found in large cities such as London or Manchester – where immigration had long been a norm – also shows how something else was at work. One aspect of the vote that shone through was the rise of English nationalism.¹⁷ England has long struggled to define itself within a UK where English and British identities overlap. That England lacks its own parliament or distinct political system compared to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, to some extent, the global metropolis of Greater London, has helped drive the issue of England up the UK's political agenda.¹⁸ One outcome, as Ben Wellings has argued, is that “Euroscepticism is the most formed-up expression of English grievance and an ideology that provides the political content for English nationalism.”¹⁹ This is not to claim that English nationalism and Euroscepticism are an automatic connection.²⁰ Nor is it to maintain that the non-English parts of the Union did not show signs of support for Leave. 52.5 percent of Welsh voters backed Leave. Even in Scotland support for Leave registered as 38 percent, a figure expected to be much lower and a reminder that Scottish pro-Europeanism has its limits. Nevertheless, the connection between English nationalism and Euroscepticism was one example of why the Leave campaign were able to draw on support from issues that reached beyond the narrower arguments

¹⁶ “Net migration to UK rises to 330,000 – second highest on record”, *BBC News*, 26 May 2016.

¹⁷ Henderson *et al.*, “England, Englishness and Brexit”.

¹⁸ Barnett, “It’s England’s Brexit”.

¹⁹ Wellings, “English nationalism and Euroscepticism overlap”.

²⁰ Kenny, “Idea that nationalism powered Brexit unduly simplistic”.

deployed by the Remain campaign, namely benefits connected to trade and wealth.

‘Brexit means Brexit’ means what?

One prominent aspect of the successful Leave campaigns was the call for the British people to ‘take back control’, a message that resonated with a range of people whether economically disenfranchised, worried about threats to their identities or uneasy about the EU’s direction as shown in the policies within the Eurozone. But in voting to take back control by voting for Leave, it is unclear what the British people actually voted for. There was no clear post-vote plan for Brexit. When, two weeks after the referendum, the Chilcot Report into the Iraq War offered a damning critique of the lack of UK government planning for Iraq after the 2003 conflict, it led the *Guardian* to note that Leave campaigners had also achieved a victory with no plan, “as clueless about post-Brexit Britain as Bush and Blair were about post-invasion Iraq”.²¹ This was in part because some Leave campaigners such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove may not have expected to win, and were instead using the referendum as a means to an end of advancing their own careers within the Conservative party. It also in part reflected the incredible difficulty of developing a plan because a credible one could only be drawn up in cooperation with the other members of the EU as they would eventually have to agree to any new relationship.

²¹ Freedland, “Warning to Gove and Johnson”.

The outcome of the vote has therefore been growing frustration and anger. Initially the anger was to be found amongst Remain voters. One survey found that almost half of 18-24 year olds who voted for Remain (and they were the group most likely to have backed Remain) were left feeling distraught by the result.²² Frustrations also began to show on the Leave side because of the possible delays to any exit. As shown by the reaction to the High Court's ruling that Parliament and not the government must control the triggering of article 50 (the EU's withdrawal clause), frustrations on the Leave side are likely to grow if efforts to take back control turn out to be not as straightforward or quick as they were made to sound during the campaign.²³

Leaving the EU is unlikely to make much of a difference to a number of the reasons that drove people to vote for Leave.²⁴ Leaving the EU is not going to bring about economic change for deprived areas, it could even accentuate them with areas such as London continuing to thrive thanks to their international links and more diversified economies.²⁵ Nor will it settle arguments about England's position within the UK, or divisions between urban and rural areas and especially between a global London and the rest of England. Arguments about austerity and funding the National Health Service (NHS) transcend the EU topic, reaching deep into divisions over political economy between and within the political parties. The Leave campaign seemed to operate on a mantra of 'nothing is true but everything is possible'. The infamous £350 million the official Leave campaign claimed was paid by

²² Helm, "Young Remain voters reduced to tears".

²³ Cowburn, "Brexit 'could be delayed'"; Snowden, "High Court's decision sparks reactions".

²⁴ Oliver, "To be or not to be".

²⁵ Springford *et al.*, "Brexiting yourself in the foot".

the UK to the EU each week was a bogus figure and therefore cannot now, as they argued, be spent on the NHS.²⁶ A decline in immigration could happen, but not before a possible surge from within the EU in advance of the UK formally withdrawing.²⁷ Immigration from outside the EU is unlikely to decline significantly unless the UK economy goes into free-fall or Britain severely tightens its immigration policies, in doing so reversing a long-standing policy of openness. The outcome could be that low levels of trust and confidence in Britain's political institutions can only decline further. It will be an anger that UKIP, or another party that draws heavily on an anti-politics vote, could feed off.

In trying to simplify a complex issue, the referendum was bound to fail. As Europe's predominant organisation for politics, economics and non-traditional security, the EU is like the mythical Hotel California the Eagles sang about: "You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave." Defining Leave and Remain is all about degrees of separation, rather than some clear in/out choice as it was sold by both sides of the campaign. A vote to Remain would have meant the UK maintaining its position of semi-committed membership, leaving the rest of the EU to develop without it, albeit one where the rest of the EU would need to adapt with the UK on the inside. The Leave option means formally placing the UK outside the structures of the EU, which entails some formal departure on a set date. While a 'hard Brexit', whereby the UK leaves the EU with no deal and takes up a WTO style relationship with the EU should not be overlooked (indeed, the UK government has hinted it is

²⁶ Emmerson *et al.*, *Brexit and UK's Public Finances*.

²⁷ Home Affairs Committee, *Work of Immigration Directorates*, 5-6.

prepared to pursue such an outcome), the economic and political shock would not sever all the links between Britain and the EU.²⁸ Britain will remain connected to the rest of the EU in a wide range of areas and bound or influenced by the decisions taken within it. Even if a ‘hard Brexit’ occurs or economic links decline significantly, the politics and security of Europe – which today is in large part (but not wholly) defined by the EU – will, as they have always been, remain the main reference point for British politics and foreign policy.²⁹ As Sir Winston Churchill argued, Europe is where the weather comes from.

Brexit Part Deux

In the run-up to the 23 June vote, neither the British government nor the rest of the EU were prepared to contemplate a vote for Leave, in part because it might send a signal that a victory for the Leave campaigns was a possibility they took seriously.³⁰ While after the vote the British government was criticised for having no contingency plans in place, the lack of planning for Brexit by the Leave campaigns had been highlighted during the campaign. A common line of attack by the Remain campaigns was the inability of the various Leave campaigns to agree on what a future UK-EU relationship would look like. The Leave campaigns’ inability to agree was compounded by the fact that whatever models they variously put forward, their realisation would depend just as much on what the rest of the EU (and in some cases other

²⁸ Wolf, “May Limbers up for Hard Brexit”.

²⁹ Simms, *Britain’s Europe*.

³⁰ Foreign Affairs Committee, *Equipping the Government for Brexit*, 9-10.

countries around the world) would agree to as it would on what the UK might like to see happen.

This means that further votes and a series of debates are now unfolding which will collectively define the meaning of Brexit.³¹ The first set of negotiations and votes are taking place within the UK. There is an ongoing fight to define what the British people voted for when they backed Leave, a fight being played out in the media, political parties, academia and international commentaries. The most important forum will be the House of Commons where the UK government will at some point have to ask MPs to vote to put Brexit into law and in doing so define what the UK is seeking and prepared to accept by way of an exit and post-withdrawal relationship with the EU. In addition to this, debates will play out surrounding negotiations between the UK government and Scotland, London and Northern Ireland, all of which voted for Remain. Each will seek to protect their interests in ways that could reshape the UK. Scottish nationalists could use Brexit to push for another Scottish independence referendum. Northern Ireland's peace process has in part been built on the UK and Ireland's shared membership of the EU. London, the political and economic heart of the UK, finds itself a capital city at odds with the country it governs and dominates, a feeling of separation many elsewhere in England have increasingly felt towards it. Meanwhile, the UK will need to engage in discussions with non-EU partners such as the US, emerging markets such as China and organisations such as the WTO about where Britain will stand vis-à-vis each of them as it leaves the EU.

³¹ Grant, "Six pack of difficult deals", and Strong, "Brexit debate is far from over".

A second set of negotiations and votes will revolve around UK-EU negotiations. The first will be over an exit agreement and a possible transition arrangement to provide both the UK and the EU with more time than the two-year timeframe allowed by Article 50. A transition arrangement, for example a ten-year membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) similar to that held by Norway, could provide the UK and EU with the time needed to negotiate a full post-withdrawal relationship.³²

What a post-withdrawal relationship might look like has been the subject of a great deal of speculation in the UK.³³ Models range from the EEA model, some special tailor-made agreement, through to no deal where the UK falls back on relations with the EU as guaranteed by WTO membership. The speculation has long suffered a glaring omission, which is that it is focused almost entirely on what might be the best deal for the UK and less on what would be good for the remaining EU. As negotiations unfold, a great deal of political attention will focus less on what UK politicians want and more on what the remaining EU is prepared to grant.³⁴

Finding a position acceptable to the EU will be one of the biggest challenges for both the UK and the rest of the EU. Each of the 27 EU member states will have its own position, as will the European Parliament and the European Commission. The positions of the European Court of Justice and non-EU states such as Norway and Switzerland will also need to be taken into account as, depending on the type of deal put forward, they may have the right of veto or delay. Should all member states have to ratify the agreement

³² Chalmers and Menon, *Getting out quick*.

³³ See, for example, Booth and Howarth, *Trading Places*.

³⁴ Oliver, *Brexit: what happens next?*

individually through their domestic processes, then the probability of rejection by a national referendum or vote in a national parliament is very high.³⁵ Various member states also have national elections due over the next few years, elections where positions over Brexit could become a topic of debate. This will require Britain to undertake a considerable diplomatic lobbying effort, something the Foreign and Commonwealth Office may not be in a position to do, thanks to years of cuts to UK diplomatic representation across the EU.³⁶ One area where the UK and to some extent the rest of the EU may find a way forward in maintaining close relations, and therefore building trust and confidence in relations to compensate for strains over arguments about future relations in economics or free movement, is in the areas of foreign, security and defence.³⁷ However, as discussed further below, all sides will need to come to terms with the fact that none of the various models can create a set structure for UK-EU relations. Both the EU and the UK face an uncertain future because the EU will remain in a state of flux and the UK will be confronted by its own changing needs and political outlooks.

A final set of negotiations to define Brexit will unfold within the remaining EU. While the remaining 27 members, along with institutions such as the European Parliament, are trying to reach agreement over what to offer to the departing UK, they will also be negotiating over the shift in the balance of power within the Union created by the departure of one of its largest members. Such shifts will be heavily influenced by ongoing efforts to deal with the problems facing the Eurozone and Schengen. There are four ways the EU

³⁵ Rankin, "Britain must learn from CETA".

³⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, *Equipping the Government for Brexit*.

³⁷ Van Ham, *Brexit: Strategic Consequences for Europe*.

could deal with these problems: further integration, muddling through, disintegration, or some radical reduction and reordering of the Union.³⁸

Further integration will be difficult to secure politically, but is deemed necessary if the Eurozone is to find a way out of the impasse it is currently in. A similar fate hangs over Schengen. So far the EU has tended to muddle through, coping but not solving the problems it faces. Brexit may not change this because Britain's traditional awkwardness in the Union has been increasingly limited by its self-imposed exclusion from both the euro and Schengen. Could Brexit therefore trigger the EU's disintegration or some reordering so that a smaller EU focused around Germany and a few other states emerges? Here one of the most important factors will be the attitude of Germany, not the UK.³⁹ Britain has been increasingly peripheral to the EU in terms of defining integration. Coping with Brexit is, by itself, unlikely to be the biggest test of the EU's unity, unless it aligns with crises in the Eurozone or Schengen. While Britain will remain a European power of some standing, managing relations with it will be played out in a framework of an EU in an emerging multipolar world. Further European divisions could open up the possibility of a 'multipolar Europe' in which Britain, Russia and Turkey surround the collectively more powerful, but less united, EU.⁴⁰ If this took place in a multipolar world, emerging powers could seek to use Brexit to add to a divided Europe as opposed to a Europe that collectively – through organisations such as the EU, NATO or other arrangements – is a pillar of world politics.⁴¹

³⁸ Oliver, *What impact would Brexit have*.

³⁹ Webber, "How likely is it?".

⁴⁰ Krastev and Leonard, *Spectre of a Multipolar Europe*.

⁴¹ Techau, "Europe torn apart in Asian century?".

Fifty Shades of Brexit

As discussed above, how the rest of the EU would react to Brexit was largely overlooked in the UK's referendum and has only slowly become an issue in the UK's debate over how to define and implement Brexit. To be fair, the idea was also overlooked elsewhere in the EU where the idea of a member state withdrawing was a taboo, a challenge to a belief in 'ever closer union' as a forward moving, progressive process. Thinking about Brexit was also made difficult by the EU's place as Europe's predominant organisation for economics, politics, social matters and non-traditional security cooperation. Non-membership of such an organisation by a European state, especially one as large as the UK, could appear nonsensical. Such an outlook runs the risk of taking a myopic view of the EU's permanence but, unless the EU implodes, its place and power will be a reality of European politics that Britain will struggle to ignore. Similarly, the UK is not going to disappear from the politics of the EU and Europe. While Britain's ability to divide and rule the rest of the EU should not be overplayed, it is worth remembering that the EU struggles to maintain unified positions in its relations with states ranging from the United States to Israel. With the UK, it faces a country that will become its largest trading partner and one with over forty years of experience of working the corridors of Brussels. Even if the UK were to break-up into its four component parts, a possibility that while real should not be overplayed due to the potential cost for each part, England (which is 84 percent of the UK's population) would remain one of Europe's most populous and richest states.

Each of the options on the table for a new UK-EU relationship will therefore ultimately fail to varying degrees to cut out the EU's involvement in British life in the way some Leave supporters might like. At the same time, they also mean they won't cut the UK out of the life of the EU as some elsewhere in the EU might like. Reaching agreement over what new deal to take forward will be a diplomatic minefield of mega-proportions, and one neither side should relish because of the possible acrimony that it could bring for all concerned.⁴² It will also reveal that none of the options currently on the table can adequately deal with the scale and complexity of UK-EU relations. The EU is an evolving political process; its changing shape and direction means the UK-EU relationship will be in a constant state of flux.

Even in the UK, where naturally the debate on Brexit has been the most extensive, most discussion about future relations has focused narrowly on trade. Discussion has often ignored the wider political, social and security relationships that connect Britain to its European home. This is despite the fact that even when it comes to trade, relations will likely vary from area to area, changing as both the UK and EU adapt and evolve in themselves, to say nothing of how they respond to their places in a wider and deeply interconnected transatlantic economic and political relationship.

The UK-EU relationship has rarely been a stable or settled one. Opt-outs have been the most obvious manifestation of a relationship that has long been different shades of grey. Any new 'out' relationship will more than likely reflect

⁴² Morillas, *Brexit Scenarios*, 12-17.

this more clearly, with darkness in areas where cooperation is minimal while others are light and filled with cooperation of varying kinds.

Notes on Contributor

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