

The EU's flawed future after Brexit: The referendum result reflected Europe's failures, not British exceptionalism

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What impact will Brexit have on the rest of the European Union in the coming years and decades?

Antonio Lettieri writes that while some commentators have portrayed the result as a uniquely British phenomenon, deriving from the UK's status as an 'awkward partner', the reasons underpinning the vote apply equally to other EU countries. He argues that it is entirely possible the EU could disintegrate if governments fail to respond to the concerns of their voters.



Following the UK's decision to leave the EU, a number of commentators have attributed the referendum outcome to the fact the UK has always been a reluctant EU member state. Additionally, it has been viewed as confirmation of Britain's congenital aversion to mingling with the continent.

Yet, the history of relations between the UK and the EU tells a different story. Britain asked to join the European community in the early sixties, just a few years after the establishment of the EEC by the six founders: France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries. The application for membership remained unsuccessful over the next decade due to the opposition of France, led by Charles de Gaulle. The subsequent application for membership was finally accepted in the seventies, and the British people ratified entry into the European community by a large majority.

Later, Margaret Thatcher opened a bitter dispute between the United Kingdom and the European Community over the issue of the Community budget, but the conclusion was reaffirmation of Britain's commitment to Europe. Thus, the UK has not only participated in, but in many ways has been at the forefront of the construction of the EU. However, this has never eradicated an essentially distinctive element: that for the UK, the European Union has never entailed the removal of national sovereignty.

In the UK's view, countries come together to share elements of sovereignty in the management of issues of common interest: both from the point of view of internal economic relations as well as in the field of external relations with the rest of the world; but without infringing on the member states' historical, political and social characteristics.

What is intriguing about the present situation is that this claim of sovereignty has become the source of negative views toward the UK, with critics forgetting that the defence of national sovereignty (albeit conditioned by membership in a shared community of states) has always been central to the historic stance of France – the nation that did more than any other to establish the integration process. It is no coincidence that Jacques Delors, the father of the European Union we now know, used to define the new European Union as a "Community of sovereign states". Nor was it surprising that the French referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 resulted in rejection, given the proposed treaty aimed to promote closer political integration between member states.

In short, Brexit must not be viewed as a product of a British historic and ideological aversion to building a European community of states. Instead, it reflects refusal by the world's fifth economic power to be subjected to a level of suffocating control by the EU's bureaucracy, which is devoid of popular legitimacy and is democratically unaccountable. This bureaucracy is a technocratic power which, with the key support of Germany, has imposed its flawed and devastating policies on Europe in an unsuccessful attempt to deal with the economic and social crisis – of which the migration crisis is one of the most troubling consequences (though far from the only one).



MEPs visit Greece to assess the migration crisis, May 2016. © European Union 2016 – European Parliament

The European Union and its most important undertaking – the euro for those countries that have adopted it – should have strengthened the community of European countries to enable them to face the challenges that have arisen in the last decade. Paradoxically, the opposite has happened. The only area of the developed world that remains caged in the crisis, eight years after its beginning, is the European Union.

US unemployment has fallen from 10 per cent at the height of the crisis to less than 5 per cent today. In most EU countries and, particularly, in the Eurozone, unemployment has reached historical highs. Poverty and inequality have increased hugely. The working class has been penalised via the marginalisation of trade unions, the dissolution of collective bargaining and attacks on the welfare state. The middle class has endured a steep decline in its economic status and social identity. The current popular uprising in France against the [El-Khomri labour reform](#), sponsored by the European Commission, is striking evidence of the intensified aversion to neoconservative European so-called reformism.

The old mainstream parties, independent of their centre-right or centre-left origins, are no longer able to impose their political platforms. This means that the illness doesn't depend on the specific mistakes of different governments, but on subservience to the same failed European political paradigms.

Within this framework the most notable outcome has been the collapse of centre-left parties. The latest example is [PSOE](#) in Spain, which in the recent election on 26 June endured its worst result during the post-Franco era. At the same time, in France François Hollande is a dead man walking in political terms, while in Italy Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party endured [significant defeats](#) in Rome and Turin in the recent administrative elections in June.

Other countries will now propose holding referendums on Europe's policies. And, in the majority of cases, the result could be similar to the British one. Not surprisingly, according to Eurobarometer surveys by the European Commission, in Italy, once the most pro-European country within the European community, a stable majority of voters support exit from the euro (not, in this case, from the European Union).

The lesson from the UK's referendum is that one or more European governments will have to bring about a reversal of the current self-destructive trajectory of national and European politics. This is a difficult task, but failure to do so could result in the Union's disintegration.

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