

Iulian Frunțașu: “Brexit would be like leaving the bridge of a ship for the lower decks”

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*If Britain chose to leave the European Union, it would not only have an effect inside the UK, but also on the rest of Europe. **Iulian Frunțașu**, the Moldovan Ambassador to the UK, presents his view on the referendum. He argues that the UK's interests will continue to be affected by globalisation regardless of whether the country chooses to leave the EU on 23 June.*



As the truism goes, it is the sovereign right of the British people to decide whether to stay in or leave the European Union in the upcoming referendum on 23 June. Yet, it is difficult to escape the feeling that something surreal is hanging over this question, like the notorious Great Smog which hung over London in 1952. Indeed, in many ways the public's perception of the referendum is as toxic as that experience must have been for the Londoners of the 1950s.

It is often assumed that referendums are designed to promote accountability and strengthen democracy. Yet, it is highly debatable whether these benefits are present when the public are asked to adjudicate over more complex issues like the pros and cons of EU membership or how the EU should improve its functioning. In one of my previous jobs, as Director of European Initiatives Programme at the Soros Foundation, I dealt with EU related issues, and after 4 years in that position I knew there was still so much more to learn.

Therefore, despite public information campaigns, I believe that the largest majority of voters will express an opinion based on the way the issue is presented in the media or in accordance with personal anxieties. As a matter of fact, this is one of the reasons why we elect officials – to delegate the responsibility to professional bureaucracies to take decisions on our behalf.

The challenge to democracy is how to represent essentially unrepresentable swings in the public mood, amplified by the media and social networks that favour immediacy at the expense of critical thinking. This smoke screen might never turn into a toxic smog, yet it diverts our attention away from real problems.

Leaving to one side whether the UK will leave the EU, what is strange is that so many people seem to cherish what is defunct – the nation-state. This happens now at times when non-state actors like large multinational corporations are more powerful than many states and when there are challenges like international terrorism, climate change, global pandemics and cross-border crime.

So does it matter whether the UK will stay in the EU or not? In the wider perspective, the answer is no. While it is fashionable to be angry these days, it is less fashionable to be level-headed. Common global challenges will force people to practice more critical thinking than is currently promoted by the media. We are lazy because we can afford to be. This cannot last.

There is a temptation to compare the popular anger toward elites that is now present on both sides of the Atlantic. And while there is certain hypocrisy in the US and UK in using immigration and the EU as scapegoats, I don't believe this is a fully rationalised and internalised policy. Yet, it is no coincidence that in times of crisis, or rather imagined crisis, primordial instincts take over and societies' angst pushes countries into isolationism.

The key question is whether this isolationism will work. There are reasons to think that it won't. Therefore, regardless of the rise of illiberal movements on the extreme right and left in Europe and the US, it is difficult to imagine the rise of large-scale movements, like Nazism or Stalinism, could occur again. Globalisation is

unstoppable, immigration is unstoppable, and technology is unstoppable. These will trump everything and everybody, including Trump-like politicians in Europe.

The United Kingdom can, of course, leave the EU if it decides to. It will look more like leaving the bridge of a ship, where the main decisions are made, for an inside cabin somewhere on a lower deck, closer to the engines, while being on the same vessel. It might be that illusions of sovereignty are important to the British public, but as with any illusion there will be a time for waking up to the realities of the new world and its different ideals and requirements.

To be clear, the EU has many shortcomings and both member states and aspiring ones, like the Republic of Moldova, are very much aware of these. Yet, the EU is what the member states allow it to be, and there are many states, in particular in Eastern and Central Europe, that share the same British drive for more efficiency, accountability, and free markets.



Anything that goes against these ideals, including anti-immigration instincts and policies, is very much both anti-European and anti-British. Therefore, the liberal principles governing the free movement of goods, services and people within the EU are of paramount importance to the very existence not just of the European Union, but to stability and security in Europe.

It is obviously not the Union we want. The European aspiration is determined by the will to be part of a club that exercises a modernising effect over the associate and candidate countries. With diminished clout, an inward-looking EU would not be able to export stability to its borders and help the reformist forces in respective countries.

However, from a wider historical perspective, the referendum on 23 June is largely irrelevant. More powerful global forces are at play and if we can only imagine the world in 100 years, future generations will smile at the passions displayed during this particular debate.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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