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Workshop: Brexit and EU foreign policy: the view from other member states

Blog editor



On 9 March 2016, the Department of International Relations and European Foreign Policy Unit at the London School of Economics organized a workshop on 'Brexit and EU Foreign Policy: The View from Other EU Member States'. The workshop formed part of a broader debate which is now in a full swing at LSE, as the referendum on Brexit in June 23 approaches.

Karen E. Smith from LSE, who moderated the panel, asked the panelists two questions: first, what impact could Brexit have on EU foreign policy; second, what impact could Brexit have on the national foreign policies of other member states?

Annegret Bendiek, from the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Germany, and Stephen Keukeleire, from KU Leuven in Belgium, both stated unequivocally that without Britain the credibility and strength of the EU will weaken. As Keukeleire pointed out, the UK is especially needed when the EU negotiates issues concerning its values, as in the case of relations with Russia. Both Bendiek and Keukeleire, however, stressed that Brexit is not a priority for either

Germany or Belgium. Germany is now fully focused on the refugee crisis, and domestic issues also dominate the Belgian debates. They both agreed that the key for the future of the EU is a well-functioning German-French tandem. Even if the UK opts for Brexit, the ad hoc cooperation between the EU and the UK in foreign policy issues will continue. Keukeleire, however, added that without the UK's presence, the role of Germany in the EU will increase and with it an inward-looking approach. As such, EU member states may start to act more unilaterally, or only as part of sub-regional blocs.

Petr Kratochvíl, from the Institute for International Relations in the Czech Republic, started with three observations. Firstly, it is the reality of Europe today that it is composed of various blocs, based on economic, security and other interests. The notion that a country could extricate itself from these alliances through a referendum seems rather flawed. Secondly, Kratochvíl pointed out that some of Brexit discourse in the UK, with its focus on national interests, is very reminiscent of the position of illiberal parties in many other European countries. And lastly, one of the consequences of Brexit will be a significant weakening of the UK's staunchest allies in the EU. Based on these three general points, Kratochvíl, also claimed that without the UK, the international clout of the EU will weaken. He added that Brexit will diminish the role of economically neoliberal countries in the EU. This will have repercussions on the character of the EU's trading regime and market. This change will be also reflected in the position of the EU in bilateral trade agreement negotiations like TTIP. British exit from the EU will be bad news for countries which are not always enthusiastic about the policies promoted by the German-French tandem. Without the 'British alternative', these countries may become more alienated from the EU. When talking specifically about the Czech Republic, Kratochvíl said Brexit is not a highly debated issue in the Czech Republic. Only about 30,000 Czechs work in the UK, so potential closure of the UK labour market is not as salient topic for the Czech Republic as it is for instance in Poland. The uncertainty about the UK's membership in the EU is, however, bringing from moribund to life the anti-EU voices which would like to see the Czech Republic leave the EU. There is a real concern about 'exit contagion'. Following the UK precedent, more countries of the EU may contemplate leaving the EU. And the traditionally Eurosceptic Czechs may join this group.



left to right: Ben Tonra, Christian Lesquesne, Stephan Keukeleire, and Annegret Bendiek

Christian Lesquesne, from Sciences Po in France, identified a set of issues which will be directly affected by the Brexit. The future enlargement could be at stake, as the UK has been a key proponent of it, even at times when most of the EU has been affected by enlargement fatigue. This is bad news especially for the Western Balkan countries. Similar to Kratochvíl, Lesquesne stressed the important contribution of the UK to EU trade policy. Without the backing of such an important liberal member state, smaller neoliberal countries in the EU will be isolated. Last but not least, further institutionalization of the CFSP, initiated by France and the UK in Saint Malo in 1998, will be put on hold indefinitely. Lesquesne realistically assessed the British impact on EU foreign policy: whereas France has been clearly promoting its interests in Africa, Germany its interests in Eastern Europe and Russia, British priorities, apart from trade, have been very unclear.

When assessing the French reaction to Brexit, Lesquesne recalled two main reasons behind French support of UK membership in the European Community in the 1970s: to stabilize Germany and to have a strong military power in order to balance NATO. The second reason is no longer relevant as France returned to NATO military structures and developed a close security relationship with the US. France is, however, well aware that without Britain, the position of the EU vis-à-vis third countries will weaken. Moreover, without British financial contributions, EU development aid, often directed to French interests in Africa, will shrink. On the other hand, with Brexit, France will become the main representative of EU foreign policy. For example, it will be the main EU power with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Whereas other participants agreed that the UK debate about the Brexit is followed with an 'interested distance' in their respective capitals, Ben Tonra from University College Dublin in Ireland, presented a rather different picture. In Ireland, the question of Brexit is of strategic importance. Tonra described the current atmosphere in Ireland as 'delicate desperation'. There is a fear that without Britain, the EU will become either too fragmented or too integrated. In reaction to the British 'betrayal', the core countries could revive the idea of an 'Ever Closer Union', which would leave many countries out of the mainstream. Ireland could appear in a position of 'an island behind an island'. Dublin favours the status quo, and does not want to see the fragmentation of the EU as a result of 'exit contagion'. Likewise, it does not want to see more effort to further integrate the Union once it gets rid of its awkward partner(s). For Ireland, the UK is a key trade partner and Dublin expects significant economic consequences and a drop in its GDP should the UK leave the EU. Moreover, the sensitive border between Ireland and the UK could become again a source of tension between the two countries. Ireland may try to attract some international financial business from London to Dublin. But this will not be a compensation for the much bigger losses Ireland will suffer should the UK leave. To keep good relations with the UK, Ireland will still not go against its national interest: the EU is a priority.

The participants agreed that should the pro-Brexit camp win the referendum, the subsequent negotiation with the EU would not be easy for the UK. As mentioned by Kratochvíl, hardly anyone in the EU wants Brexit to become 'a good example' of an easy exit which could inspire other member states to follow the suit. As such, Britain should be prepared for tough talks.

To sum up, the panellists did not hide their concern about the future of the EU and Europe. The Brexit debate in the UK to some degree reflects the rather grim mood in the rest of Europe. People do not trust political elites and traditional mainstream political parties. Economic crisis, high unemployment among young people, and a widening gap between rich and poor raise uncertainty about the viability of the European economic model. The refugee crisis has further exacerbated this already tense atmosphere in Europe. Anti-system parties, some financed by Russia, are taking advantage of this 'bad mood'. As extreme and anti-EU parties are becoming stronger in member states across the EU, the post-war model of European integration has come under stress. Rather soon it will become clear if the EU as we know it will continue to exist, or if it will take a different shape and form.

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