Refusing to dance to a Brexit tune: How the EU has misinterpreted Britain's vote to leave

Britain has made numerous mistakes over Brexit, but the European Union's record also needs to be analysed. **Tim Oliver** *addresses some of the things the EU has been accused of getting wrong about Brexit. In this post, he looks at how the EU has misinterpreted Brexit.*

Brexit has been a learning experience for all involved. British and EU negotiators have found themselves navigating their way through an unprecedented event, while academics, researchers and commentators have struggled to keep up with events, while also trying to examine the broader fallout from the 2016 vote. Mistakes were bound to be made, and there has certainly been no shortage of them, or accusations from both sides that the other is approaching the process in the wrong way.

As covered in the **first post in this series,** some elsewhere in the EU might bristle at the suggestion the EU has made mistakes over Brexit. Surely the UK has been the guilty party here, making a series of mistakes that began with – and in some cases preceded – the vote to leave. Britain's handling of Brexit, especially that of its government and leadership, has been far from perfect. But given the unprecedented nature of Brexit, the EU's own approach should be critically reflected on for lessons and analysis for what it can tell us about the state of the EU.

The background to Brexit itself provides a starting point to analysing the mistakes, something covered in the first post. Was the EU's first, and perhaps biggest, mistake being too lenient or harsh on the UK as a member state? One's view on this can define one's views of how the EU has interpreted and responded to Brexit.

Credit: European Council President (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Six groups of mistakes

Interpreting Brexit has been tough for all involved because Britain's vote to Leave came as a shock to many, not least in the UK itself. It has provoked a mix of anger and regrets across the rest of the EU, but also hopes for both pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics. In the rush to interpret the vote, six groups of mistakes can be identified.

1: Myopic vision

First, Brexit shattered a taboo of contemplating the EU going into reverse. Before the vote, many in the EU – not least those committed to its advancement – shared something of a myopic vision that integration was inevitably destined to move forward, even if that was at varying speeds in different areas. Theories and discussion of European disintegration took place on the fringe, were viewed suspiciously as Eurosceptic dreams, or seen as irrelevant. That taboo helped underpin an assumption that the UK was going to stay, there being a widespread view that there was no viable alternative and that a majority of the British people would share this view. The EU's leadership and those who debate and discuss it, failed to take the idea of Brexit as seriously as they should. As a result, the EU has learnt the hard way that like any political union it can go backwards by losing members.

2: Misinterpreted timeframe

Second, there is often a misinterpretation of the timeframe of Brexit. Polling in several member states showed an increase in support for the EU after Britain's vote. This can be taken as a sign the EU need not worry about Brexit triggering some form of domino effect that would lead to the unravelling of the EU. That would be to forget that Brexit is for life, not just for the two years of article 50. Britain's position vis-à-vis the EU in a decade or further may be more interconnected to the EU, complex and weak than appears on the surface. To the publics elsewhere in the EU, however, that may appear a minor technicality if the complexities of yet another crisis such as in the Eurozone engulf the EU.

3: Credit to crises

Third, Brexit has been viewed through the long-standing myth that crises are what drives European integration, an idea deeply woven into the narrative of the EU. But as Desmond Dinan has shown, closer inspection reveals a somewhat tenuous link between crises and European integration. Integration has been the result of a variety of factors, with crises sometimes playing a part, but by no means being the key factor and often playing no part at all. Giving credit to crises distracts from longer-running developments and work that integration depends on. Seeing Brexit as a crisis that can only be positive for the EU risks blinding decision makers to the significance of the full scale of the current crisis facing the EU, of which Brexit is one part.

4: UK vote not an anomaly

Fourth, interpreting the UK vote as an anomaly. The EU's history is replete with referendums that have seen citizens vote against the status-quo and more European integration. Britain's vote for Leave encapsulated a whole series of concerns about the state of the UK, but the EU was anything but an easy sell. Since the UK's vote there might have been an increase in support for the EU in other member states, but that does not mean citizens are willing to vote for further European integration. Even in the UK, as Clark, Goodwin and Whiteley showed in their comprehensive study of Brexit, a majority of Remain voters held less than positive views of the EU.

While the context of every referendum is unique, Britain's vote is not only a reminder of how unpredictable referendums can be but how difficult it is to sell the EU. As President Macron admitted in a BBC interview in January, while the context in France is different, it is possible that a similar referendum in France could result in a vote to leave the EU. Dismissing the Brexit vote as an anomaly reflective of Britain's history of awkwardness does little to help find a way to go about reform in the face of the continuing 'constraining dissensus' that faces European integration across the continent.

5: No alternatives

Fifth, like the UK, the EU has struggled to interpret what Brexit should mean as a destination. The UK has excelled here, with Theresa May and her government spending the past year outlining what they don't want Brexit to lead to (although finding unity on even this has been difficult) rather than what they do want it to mean and how to get there. This has hidden the fact that the EU itself has struggled to define what Brexit should mean because it has either put the emphasis on the UK to come up with answers or because Brexit forms part of wider and difficult questions about where the EU is headed in terms of its own development and place in Europe. Proposals such as the 'Continental Partnership', which tried to find an alternative to exiting models of pan-European collaboration, have been accused of arguing for the EU to change to fit a departing UK's needs.

Refusing to dance to a Brexit tune is understandable. Dismissing such proposals while offering no alternatives, however, does little to move the EU forward in facing a problem that won't go away. Something bespoke will inevitably be created to fit the UK. Parking the UK in a soft-Brexit akin to EEA membership will work for a transition, but doesn't define where that transition will eventually take the UK and EU.

6: Denying Brexit

Finally, assuming it is certain that Brexit won't happen and that Britain (or Scotland) will return as a prodigal son. It was not uncommon after the referendum to be asked by fellow Europeans whether Britain really was going to leave. There was a time when even I wondered if the UK government would go through with a full Brexit, as opposed to actively seeking a fudge or something akin to EEA membership. But Theresa May, largely without any sense of strategy, has pushed ahead nonetheless. That may well lead to the fudge of a transition where the UK gets stuck in something akin to the EEA. But with a year to go, the possibility of Brexit being stopped seems a forlorn hope that reflects a degree of denial by some.

That denial is less than it was in the aftermath of the June 2016 vote, but the idea the UK is destined to re-join still has a long life ahead of it. This reflects a series of beliefs, such as that younger, Remain voting UK citizens will in time become the majority. Such thinking ignores the challenge of a UK accession, the need to win a referendum to take Britain back in, and that any pro-EU campaign would face a massive task given the underlying forces that drove the Leave vote have not disappeared and show no signs of doing so. It will take a massive economic and political shock to reverse Brexit, one that, if economic, would also hit the EU hard.

There is also the belief that the Scots will jump ship to re-join the EU, although again this all too casually overlooks the massive economic, security, social, legal, diplomatic and political challenges Scotland would face in leaving a three-hundred-year union to (re-join) a more recently established one. Whether it is Scotland or the UK that is assumed to be destined to return, to some extent this is part of the assumption discussed earlier, that forward moving European integration is inevitable and cannot be resisted.

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Note: This article originally appeared on the Clingendael blog and LSE Brexit. The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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