

### **3 Lessons to be learnt from Brexit**

**by Ebru Ece ÖZBEY**

The United Kingdom (UK) has decided to end its love and hate relationship with the European Union (EU) on June 23, 2016. It was actually not the first time that we witnessed a referendum that resulted to the detriment of the Union in a member state. The examples date back to 1992 Maastricht Treaty Referendum in Denmark, and include the latest Greek bailout referendum that took place in 2015 and the Hungarian migrant quota referendum, which was held in 2016. Yet, no referendum result has shocked the European community like the British “Leave” decision. This was mainly due to three reasons.

To start with the most palpable reason, the previous referendums were almost always concerned with a participation of a member state in various associations (such as the Economic and Monetary Union) or with a ratification of a certain treaty. Brexit, on the other hand, was about the termination of membership of a state, and therefore, differed from the others. In addition, the fact that the right to withdraw from the EU, which had been introduced for the first time with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, was utilized even before a decade has passed, inevitably led to a debate on the possibility of a disintegration of the Union, and put Brexit in a different place.

Secondly, Brexit differs from the previous referendums because of the political actors that stood out during the referendum campaigns. The earlier adverse outcomes across the continent were generally seen as products of a chronic condition that we see in every member state, namely, public Euroscepticism. Recently, the European integration has been (re)politicized and become a mean of competition for political parties. The parties’ opinions on the EU have begun to play an important role in voter preferences, and the radical populist political parties (RPPs), which appear to be quite critical (although with different reasons and motivations) against the European integration as an idea and the EU as an institution, have benefited from this the most. The more they capitalized their anti-EU or Eurosceptic rhetoric, the more support they received. As a result, the EU has witnessed a rise of RPPs in elections held at both national and European level for the last two decades, especially since 2009.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain was no exception. The party had been on rise since the late 2000s but its media visibility rapidly increased during the Brexit campaigns. Prior to the referendum, the leader Nigel Farage, who had run a feverish "Leave" campaign, came up with provocative statements and social media contents. He also did not hesitate to own the referendum decision on behalf of his party, declaring the 23rd of June as the "Independence Day" of the UK, and inviting other nations to follow the British. With UKIP, Brexit appeared as a case in which party-level Euroscepticism overtook public Euroscepticism.

The last point separating Brexit from other examples is the timing of the decision. The series of crises in the last decade have shaken the EU to its core. The Union is still striving to recover. While the challenges related to security, economy, identity are still acute for the EU, new regional and global powers are emerging. Russia, Turkey, China, Ukraine and many others are causing concerns for different reasons. Yet, the European politicians, either from mainstream or radical parties are far from showing unity and solidarity.

2017 is the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty, which established the Union, and naturally, the time to reflect on the failures and successes of the last 60 years. It is also critical because of the national elections that have been and will be held in numerous member states such as France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Meanwhile, the EU institutions themselves are transforming. The President of the European Parliament (EP) and one of the key figures of the European integration, Martin Schulz, concluded his Brussels career and the new President’s right-wing background already worries many Europeans. Although the other institutions still have very enthusiastic and keen Eurocrats as Presidents, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, who appear to be willing to keep inter-institutional communication at maximum; the institutions attitudes with regards to the negotiations with the UK and the future of the Union in general will be of vital importance in the short-term.

Finally, the 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States (US), historically one of the most important allies of both the UK and the EU, should be mentioned. The populist leader Donald Trump, who won the elections, made his position on the Brexit decision clear by calling himself "Mr. Brexit" during the campaigns and painting the referendum result as “a trailblazing moment in a global revolution to take on the political elite and galvanize ‘forgotten’ voters” (Chappell, 2016). While remaining quite distant from the mainstream leaders such as Angela Merkel or François Hollande, President Trump seems to have close relations with the populist European leaders, which increases the visibility of these people in the international arena and creates the impression that their policies

are acceptable or perhaps even supportable. Both Trump's scepticism of the European integration<sup>1</sup> and the policies he has initially implemented in the office fuels the abovementioned concerns. The West, which is seen the defender of fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, freedom, and rule of law is losing blood from the US side, which makes the EU's capacity to promote them in the near future even more critical.

Brexit might be the first step of the events that will start the EU's dissolution. Considering all the other regional and global developments, it might also serve as a warning sign and lead to a gradual decrease in Euroscepticism in the EU member states. Regardless of what it turns out to be, Brexit is a trend that should be examined closely. Although the British Euroscepticism is historically different than the continental Europe's, Brexit can give us crucial information about the phenomenon that goes beyond the Atlantic. This paper suggests three important lessons (out of many) that can be learnt from Brexit with regard to the issue of populism.

1. Brexit was not just a "product of populism".

A large part of the reaction to the Brexit referendum decision has been about how the populists deceived, manipulated, and finally hijacked the British public opinion, and how big of a mistake it was to leave such a big decision to the "uninformed" and "unaware" public. While the first part is not completely wrong, this approach attaches too much importance to party leaders and underestimates the role of the public opinion. The studies show that people, who vote for the charismatic leader or cast a protest vote, constitute a very small share of the voter base for RPPs (van der Brug, 2014). It is the parallelism between the agendas of the voters and the policies recommended by the parties that drive the electorate to support the said parties.

In addition, the very high voter turnout in Brexit indicates that the public shows a great interest in the European issue –sometimes maybe more than they do in national issues<sup>2</sup>. Before the Brexit referendum, there were several "Leave" campaigns, which had brought different politicians from different parties together, and supported the withdrawal for very different, sometimes even conflicting, reasons. The debates over "Lexit", which is the withdrawal from the EU under the conditions set by the Left, for instance, is an indication that the dissatisfaction and the discontent in the British public are not only devoted to the UKIP supporters. This group is not big enough to change the referendum results by itself, anyway.

All in all, the European public's criticism against the EU is both multifaceted and enounced through different political actors. Here, the message and the messenger should be differentiated. Instead of ignoring or despising the radical populist discourse, people's fears that lie being the support these parties with regard to their well-being and prosperity as well as their concerns about whether the EU is either too distant or too interfering should be addressed. Neither the European institutions nor the national governments and parties can regain the electorate's support as long as they envisage the voters as naïve, ignorant, irrelevant minorities. They should look for new ways to be more inclusive, informative, and reassuring, and while doing so, they should cooperate with each other.

2. The target in the Brexit decision might be wrong but the reaction was right.

Brexit is a more complicated process than is currently assumed. The economic displacement that stems from globalization and automation, the rapid pace of social change (such as women's participation in the labour market or technological advancement), the increase in migration to and within the EU are the underlying causes of the scepticism towards the European integration. The people who feel that they are "left behind" in the combination of cosmopolitan politics and global economics are the ones who antagonize the EU. Globalization has created losers all around the world but Europe is the only place these losers can blame an actor other than their government –and, as opposed to the national governments or the parties that composes them, the EU is "an outsider" or "an alien", which makes it even easier to be antagonized.

In the eyes of the people, the EU has been constantly increasing its powers since 1992 but failing to face the series of crises that started in 2008. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are questioning the added value of the institution. The national governments' reluctance to own the responsibility of the joint decisions or habit of finger-pointing at the EU institutions consolidate this attitude, too. The EU's competences, responsibilities, and capacity on different areas vis-à-vis the national or the local authorities are rarely known by the citizens, and the politicians seem to use this to give a good account for themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> He stated that the European Union's breakup is "on its way" (Cillizza, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The voter turnout was above 75% in some areas of Britain, while in the last four general elections, it was around 65%.

Populism, by nature, feeds on democratic dysfunction, and the lack of differentiation between the areas of functioning for the national and the EU-level institutions cause the reaction to be directed to the wrong address. Although there are some serious issues to be clarified with regard to transparency, legitimacy, and efficiency of the EU, it is not the subject to respond all the above-mentioned problems –not alone by itself. After all, the EU is not an organic, self-determining structure but an extension of the government policies in the member states. Although it has its own institutions, dynamics, and agenda, it still is limited by its member states.

In any case, it should be kept in mind that this reaction of the public is going to -if has not already started to- go beyond the EU itself. The national actors as a concrete part of “the establishment” will find themselves as the targets of criticism. If nothing else, they will be accused of devolving the authority to the EU, leaving the fate of the society at the Union’s hands. Some may think that the elections in the Netherlands and France were a defeat for the populist leaders on national level. However, the increasing share of vote for these leaders indicate that traditional politicians are still not sufficiently responsive to the true needs and concerns of the voters. This lack of responsiveness, in turn, may still reflect as a systematic loss of power of the traditional politicians to the marginal ones in the future. In order tackle this possibility, it is crucial for the national politicians to hear the voters, take responsibility, and cooperate with the EU.

### 3. Unless there is a new social contract offered to the European people, populism is here to stay.

The rising economic and social inequality around the continent is translating into a greater appeal for populist leaders. The golden years of the continent are long over, the welfare state is destroyed, and the unions are no longer able to redress the balance between the capital and the labour. Moreover, the democratic elites and institutions are either unable or unwilling to tackle the challenges their societies are facing. If the establishment remains inefficient and indistinguishable as the populists claim, it would be unavoidable for Europe to be trapped in a vicious cycle of populism.

This being the case, the mainstream parties should strictly restrain to be carried away by the populist *zeitgeist*. They should fight back the RPPs with progressive policies rather than adapting their core populist ideas and beliefs like they have been doing recently. They should address the structural rifts, form cohesive political coalitions, pass needed reforms, and constitute a new social contact. The main purpose here should be to make the European citizens feel that they are getting a fair share of the opportunities and prosperity generated across the continent.

At this level of integration, a new social deal cannot be concluded solely by the nation states. The EU should also be a part of this process. In the past, the most important steps for further integration (such as the ones on the Euro, the Schengen, enlargement or the Constitutional Treaty) have been taken without asking for the consent of the public first –sometimes even against it. This can no longer be the case as the way democracy works is changing itself and the permissive consensus is no longer there. The enlightened despotism of the EU should be left aside, and a compromise between the public at one hand and the national and the EU level on another should be reached. The concerns and the desires of the citizens from 27 socially, economically, politically distinct member states should be taken into consideration, and legitimacy, transparency, and accountability of the EU should be proved once and for all to gain the support of the people back.

This is a hard task but it should be kept in mind that EU is still one the biggest and the most important examples of cooperation of our time. Its unique structure as well as stance to defend shared norms and values are still concrete and well-recognized. Moreover, the crises and the setbacks are embedded in the history of this institution. What is critical here is to recognizing the problem rather than turning a blind eye. Luckily, this appears to be what is being done recently.

In the Rome Declaration on March, 25, the European leaders addressed all the challenges mentioned above and many more. Moreover, they restated their determination to tackle these challenges and called for unity, solidarity, and respect for each other. They underlined the fundamental reasons and objectives of the European integration and embraced a really inclusive, positive tone.

There have also been some concrete works conducted by the European institutions and devoted to outline the drivers, problems, debates, and areas to work on with regard to the EU. In that sense, the European Commission’s recent reports on different subjects such as the future of the EU, globalization, social dimension and defense are very good examples. These are comprehensive studies that cover all the aspects of the integration, which inevitably raise questions for the European citizens. In addition, they draw a roadmap until the 2019 EP Elections as Juncker himself stated in the report that he would have some substantial policy recommendations in

his State of the Union speech in September 2017. However, their significance derives most importantly from the fact that they propose an “honest and wide-ranging” debate on the both every-day issues and high politics, which is what is demanded by the public in the first place. The next work to be done in the near future is to encourage and inspire the national governments to follow the path the EU has proposed and show a similar positive and responsive attitude.

All in all, Brexit has shown us that radicalism and populism have been a powerful outlet for those feeling dispossessed. It appears that the backlash against globalization and neoliberalism, and as a consequence against the European integration, embodied by RPPs will continue unless the mainstream European political powers successfully reacts to this challenge. For this not to happen, there should be a fundamental change in the European political, economic, and social structure. It is a tough job but if it can be done, it can only be done by the most amazing organization of our century, and its member states and nations, who are committed to fulfill the initial promises of this integration: peace and prosperity. The European Union seems to learn a lesson from Brexit, and now it is the others turn to do so.

### References

- Cillizza, C. (24.06.2016). Donald Trump’s Brexit Press Conference was Beyond Bizarre, *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm\\_term=.150d16a0971f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/24/donald-trumps-brexit-press-conference-was-beyond-bizarre/?utm_term=.150d16a0971f) (07.05.2017).
- Chappell, S. (09.11.2016). ‘Mr. Brexit’ – What a Trump Presidency Means for the UK, *Euronews*, <http://www.euronews.com/2016/11/09/mr-brexit-what-a-trump-presidency-means-for-the-uk> (07.05.2017).
- Van Der Brug, W., Fennema, M., Van Heerden, S., & De Lange S. (2014). Not That Different After All: Radical Right Parties and Voters in Western Europe, in Sandelind, C. (Eds.), *European Populism and Winning the Immigration Debate*, Stockholm: ELF/Fores, p. 65-97.