All is Not Lost, Europe[1]

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Abstract: *Brexit has been widely covered in the news. Much of the attention of the press in English has gone to the British perspective. This piece seeks to present a holistic view of this event, including the European perspective. It argues that, notwithstanding this break-up and the problems it highlights (especially the tiredness of citizens with traditional party politics), the European project can survive this crisis and forge ahead into the future.*

It was a gloomy day. It was disastrous indeed. Not for everybody. Nigel Farage declared 23 June "Independence Day" for the United Kingdom of Great Britain (the UK or Britain). Jean-Marie Le Pen joyfully invited France to follow suit. Geert Wilders enthusiastically called for a "Nexit". Outside Europe, other sympathetic voices from United States (US) and Russia were heard too.

A multi-faceted drama

Many Britons believed in good faith the Leave Campaign promises. It was somehow possible to do away with the "ugly" bits (contributions to the union's budget and the free circulation of people) of the relation with the European Union (EU) while keeping the sweet ones (access to the single market, that gobbles half of Britain's exports).

Others voted decidedly against, but are anyway facing the consequences of what the majority has chosen. Scotland and Northern Ireland are in this position, with the former debating, again, whether their union with England is worth keeping, and the latter wondering whether peace can be preserved in a UK outside the European Union.

The situation in England is uneasy too, with major protagonists of Brexit, stepping down from their leadership positions, while the two main political parties suffer from disarray and infighting. According to some, Britain may be facing its worst political crisis since the Second World War.

Brexit has sparked a deep exercise of introspection in the rest of Europe too. The UK was the EU's second-largest economy, one of two members with nuclear weapons, and a natural link between the EU and important allies like the US. Beyond the excited cries of far-right or far-left political parties, there is real discontent among many European citizens who perceive that the costs outweigh the benefits of belonging to the EU.

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Many of the problems that troubled the European polity before Brexit continue to be there and need a solution: from economic near-stagnation and the consequent unemployment to lack of social integration; from the weakness of the banking system and the euro in general to the remarkable challenge of immigration from North Africa and the Middle East and social integration of minority groups.

Making sense of the non-sense

What went wrong? Many things, at the same time. First, an irresponsible set of promises from at least some in the Leave campaign, arguing for instance that the UK would be able to apply 350 million sterling pounds that were sent to Brussels weekly to the NHS instead; that voting for leaving the EU would somehow cut immigration (with the assumption of course that all immigration is bad for the country); and that another 5 million immigrants were likely by 2030 due to the accession of new countries to the EU (including Turkey).

Second, an underwhelming campaign from the Remain side. Rather than explaining why the Leave arguments were wrong, and highlighting the benefits that the UK was receiving from its membership, they focused on the dangers of leaving the EU. The leading Remain campaigner, David Cameron was, after all, the one who promised a referendum in the first place, and was never an enthusiast of Europe. Adding to this, Jeremy Corbyn's support for the Remain campaign was tepid at best. This contrasted with the enthusiasm of the Brexiteers, even if what their arguments couldn't stand to serious scrutiny, because voters are tired, and that leads us to the next idea.

The third reason is a phenomenon of social psychology around party politics in many Western countries, not only the UK. Voters are tired of a political party system that is lost in endless debate, with opposing views ever more polarised against each other, and little practical benefit for the voters themselves. Therefore they look for another option voting for the "outsider", the "non-politician" who succeeds in elections is spreading all over Europe and beyond. Parties and politicians that used to be considered before on the fringe of the political spectrum are becoming more and more part of the mainstream landscape. The UK, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain and Greece are but a few examples. Centre-left and centre-right parties--traditionally the Social and the Christian Democrat-dominated the scene and built post-war Europe until very recently. That old order is in tatters now.

Fourth, there seems to be a correlation between low social mobility and discontent with the political establishment perceived as backing Remain. Vote for Brexit was higher in those regions where social mobility is lower, i.e. where people perceive that there is little hope of change as things stand. This situation explains in part the phenomenon described in the preceding paragraph, and reveals a challenge that the usual party politics hasn't been able to address.

Begret: to pull or not to pull (the trigger)

What next for Britain? The situation in the [main political parties](#) and, indeed [in the UKIP](#) is uncertain. Between now and October new leaders of those parties will emerge. Yet the [formal procedure to exit the EU](#) doesn't really start until the UK notifies the EU of its intention to leave. After that, a negotiation starts for a new agreement, which must be reached within two years. Needless to say, the leaving country doesn't participate (on the EU side) in the setting of terms. That notification is the equivalent of "pulling the trigger" for the country to legally start moving away.

Once the trigger has been pulled, the UK will not have the obligations, nor will it receive [the benefits of membership](#) to this club. Will this be the end of the UK? Perhaps not. It will certainly have to evolve, [perhaps to become a federation](#). But [the situation will be difficult](#), and arguably worse than it would have been inside the EU.

There are reasons to believe that the trigger might never be pulled if [certain circumstances come together](#), for instance, a blockage of the procedure by the Scottish Parliament, or a successful candidate seeking a mandate to reverse the decision (a sort of second referendum in disguise). But that is unlikely.

Ode to Europe?

According to some who prefer to disregard the [negative impact of Brexit for the UK](#), the British referendum should be rather considered as [the beginning of the end for the EU](#). And, indeed, the EU might be about to crumble. Yet, whether the honour of being the main cause for that would belong to Brexit is debatable. As mentioned above, the EU faces huge challenges, or downright crises on [immigration](#), [the banking system](#), [economic stagnation](#), [future enlargement](#), or [foreign policy](#), just to mention a few. Brexit joins a long list of Europe's misfortunes.

However, there is still hope for Europe. As acute as its difficulties are, Europe's situation when its project of integration started in the forties was much worse. Today it is an altogether different place. It has enjoyed one of its longest periods of peace and prosperity, something other regions of the world can only dream of. And [its achievements](#) have spread benefits well beyond its borders.

The European project, which started without Britain, can survive without it. The departure of the UK from the EU is a great loss, a drama in which everybody loses. The UK has represented for Europe a fresh source of ideas; a pragmatic approach to complex problems; an ordinarily measured and reasoning voice in the discussions between East and West, North and South in Europe; an experienced player in foreign affairs; the source of a lingua franca the EU uses on its daily dealings; and a peculiar sense of humour. Furthermore, a significant number of Britons voted for Remain, or regret having voted for Leave. They believe in the European Dream that has materialised for millions across the region.

Yet the origins of the EU can be traced back to the modest initiative of six countries: France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy. The UK received an invitation to the club but it declined it. It wasn't until the sixties when Britain tried to join, and [the seventies when it finally was accepted](). An EU without Britain would be a club with a member down, but still a 27-strong club. The qualities and ideas of Britons would not be there, but the polity would continue to inspire other nations to meet the criteria and join (think of the Western Balkan countries on course to join). The EU would still have considerable economic and political clout in the region and the world.

The problems the EU faces today, if complex and challenging, are not unsurmountable. There is a history of over 60 years of the European project forging ahead, overcoming crisis after crisis, evolving, growing to the occasion with each problem, and expanding to transform the whole region completely. To [remain relevant in the XXI century Europe must pool forces]()and present a unified front. Isolation is the past. Cooperation is the future. This doesn't mean necessarily the creation of a "European country"--a superstate--where the richness of Europe's diversity is drowned. A [European polity formed by states but not a state itself]()is not only thinkable but a current--if very perfectible--reality.

Brexit, therefore, is indeed a historic moment. But for Europe, it means a call to consider what is not working, a revisiting of processes and policies, a re-imagining of a vision for the future of the European project. [The European polity must evolve]() to become more democratic politically, more inclusive socially, more productive economically, more effective internationally.

An agreement will have to be reached when the UK activates Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Like Iceland, Switzerland, Norway (or for that matter Belarus or Ukraine), Britain will remain a part of the European region whether it belongs to the EU or not. Brexit should by no means be a cause for dismay, but an impulse to grow. All is not lost, Europe!