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Brexit, the Democratic Question in Europe, and the Future of the EU

By Rosa Balfour

The United Kingdom is holding elections in which polarized political leaders claim to represent the people against the elite. As British-based Turkish novelist Elif Shafak recently noted, this inflammatory language has been the soundtrack accompanying the deterioration of democracy around Europe.[1] Brexit is emblematic of a generalized complacency about the strength of European democracies, and not just the product of the United Kingdom's politics. It is also symptomatic of a new European fissiparousness that is likely to accelerate further fragmentation across the continent, also as a consequence of Brexit. Improving the health of its democracies will be critical if Europe wants to offer an alternative to the global disorder, power politics, and illiberalism that are taking hold.

A British Quagmire

In 1941 George Orwell wrote:

> Probably the battle of Waterloo *was* won on the playing-fields of Eton, but the opening battles of all subsequent wars have been lost there. One of the dominant facts in English life during the past three quarters of a century has been the decay of ability in the ruling class.[2]

As the Brexit process has been punctuated by Conservative Party leadership contests and an election in 2017 that failed to provide ways forward on addressing the 2016 referendum result, it worth asking how is it that the United Kingdom ended up in a cul-de-sac, seemingly unable to stay in the EU and unable to leave it. Has the inability to "deliver on Brexit," in the words repeatedly pronounced by Theresa May when she was prime minister, a leadership failure?

The United Kingdom's uniquely ambiguous relationship with the rest of Europe has deep roots that cut across ideological, geographical, and political party beliefs. It provided the backdrop against which the Brexit drama has been staged, but it soon became something different. Challenged by the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), and now the Brexit Party, the question of EU membership has been a malignant growth inside the Conservative Party. May—a sacrificial lamb seen as unfit for purpose from the beginning—pivoted to the party's Brexiteer right, while nodding to the moderates, but failed to pass the Withdrawal Agreement in parliament or to unite the Conservatives.

Brexit morphed into a personality-driven drama, with the spotlight on lead actors making rather brief appearances, the merry-go-round of names moving in and out of cabinet positions, and a theatre of carnage with backstabbing and feuds among pseudo-rivals. For the Conservative Party and the government, the Brexit question became intertwined with leadership contests between characters of improbable standing and authoritativeness to deal with the greatest self-inflicted damage since Europe sleep-walked into the First World War.

1 Elif Shafak (2019), 'Déjà Vu in the UK: As a Turkish exile, I've seen this story before', Politico, October 28, 2019.

2 George Orwell (1941), 'England Your England'.

The Conservative leadership contest to succeed May earlier this year unfolded again on the assumption that a new leader would be able to leave the EU (by negotiating a new deal or by crashing out), reunite the party, fend off competition from the new Brexit Party, which won the most votes in the 2019 European Parliament elections, and prevent the Labour Party's Jeremy Corbyn from becoming prime minister. The winner, Boris Johnson, claimed that the European Union would have to "look into our eyes and think well this time the Brits really do intend to come out on October 31."[3]

Brexit would not be the first time that the United Kingdom crashes out of its international network and responsibilities. Recalling what happened in Ireland in 1917 and India in 1947, Pankaj Mishra perceptively argues that today "partition—the British Empire's ruinous exit strategy—has come home. In a grotesque irony, borders imposed in 1921 on Ireland, England's first colony, have proved to be the biggest stumbling block for the English Brexiteers chasing imperial virility."[4] Other hastily put together U.K. departures with bloody consequence include from Greece in 1944 and Palestine in 1948. In the case of leaving the EU, however, the damage will be mostly for the United Kingdom, which is likely to lose Scotland, see instability in Northern Ireland, and social unrest in England and Wales, hit by the economic consequences of Brexit.

It is clear that a sequence of accidents and ill-informed decisions produced the singular quagmire in which the United Kingdom found itself unable to leave the EU, unable to agree on the future relationship with it, unable to revoke its decision to leave, and with some on the right and the left hopeful that crashing out would be a new joyful beginning. On both the leave and remain fronts, the tribal divisions impeding a clear path forward suggest that leadership is indeed to blame for a failure to make the country move following the 2016 referendum. But would Orwell understand the Brexit fiasco as a consequence of an astonishingly incompetent leadership and political class? Or is it a failure of the United Kingdom's political institutions, which used to be models of democracy and moderation for the rest of the world?

Brexit as Democratic Crisis

Looking at the Brexit saga through the lens of a democratic crisis shows that it is part of a broader trend undoing democratic institutions and practices. The combination of a party suffering from ideological capture and a parliament suffering from executive capture produced ill-fated decisions in the wake of the 2016 referendum, which were never successfully overturned, due to complacency about the strength of the United Kingdom's democracy.

Today's shock is that by leaving the EU the United Kingdom may become a "failed state," in Chris Patten's words,[5] but the writing was long on the wall. The Conservative Party was taken over by a Eurosceptic hard-core—a minority that became a governing minority, capturing the public debate, the party, and parliament. The party's embrace of the Eurosceptic agenda was an attempt to fend off competition from UKIP. But it also pushed simultaneously a neoliberal agenda of dismantling state oversight on the economy behind the nationalist cloak of "taking back control." In fact, the oxymoron in Eurosceptic propaganda and ideology—dismantling the state and its institutional and international commitments in the name of the nation—is perhaps the most strikingly successful con of the whole Brexit saga so far.

This began during the prime ministership of David Cameron, who agreed to holding the referendum in the first place. So confident he was of winning that he gave ample space to the Eurosceptic minority to set the rules running the referendum and campaigning, for instance by not allowing 16-18 year-olds or EU residents in the United Kingdom to vote, against the recommendation of the House of Lords.

3 Kate Devlin and Elizabeth Burden (2019), 'Boris Johnson tells EU: Look into our eyes, we're serious about nodeal Brexit', The Times, July 8, 2019.

4 Pankaj Mishra (2019), 'The malign incompetence of the British ruling class', The New York Times, January 17, 2019.

5 Chris Patten (2019), 'Is Britain Becoming a Failed State?', Project Syndicate, August 20, 2019.

Following his defeat in the referendum and his resignation, the most extraordinary executive takeover of the substantive agenda took place under his successor. The government, without a broad cross-party parliamentary debate or consultation with stakeholders, decided to interpret the vote as an expression of dissatisfaction toward immigration and a desire to "take back control," according to one of the most successful campaign slogans. This translated, among other things, into moving out of the indivisible four freedoms that underpin the Single Market and ending the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice that regulates it. That this was an ideological interpretation is shown by the fact that the government did not interpret the Brexit vote as a plea for investing in the National Health Service although the Leave campaign convinced many that exiting the EU would make £350 million a week available to save it.

The activation of Article 50 and the red lines outlined by Theresa May reflected a majoritarian view of democracy whereby less than 52 percent of voters in a consultative referendum was taken as the "will of the British people." Brexiteers and the government used that occasion as blank check. This was also the normalization of Brexit Party Leader Nigel Farage's argument whereby "Sovereignty does not lie with parliament, sovereignty lies with the people"[6]—a conception shared by leaders with poor democratic credentials such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

Over the last two years, the United Kingdom's government and parliament went through a tug of war for power, with the latter belatedly trying to take back prerogatives that the May government had taken over, largely thanks to creative initiatives by individual activists and parliamentarians. For example, it was only in late 2018 that the government was forced to make public its assessments on the impact of Brexit, and Dominic Grieve, a Conservative member of parliament later expelled from the party, ensured that the government would have to seek parliamentary approval of any withdrawal agreement with the EU. Boris Johnson's government has been even more disrespecting of parliament's powers, not least in trying to prorogue it in order to leave the EU without its interference and in pushing for fresh elections for the same purpose.

The conduct of the negotiations with the EU, the lack of transparency and accountability over government assessments about the impact of Brexit, the tug of war between the government and parliament, and the absence of cross-party discussions on the United Kingdom's future relationship with the EU are testimony to a democratic failure. One in which the minority of a party captured widening circles of influence and power and, unchecked by a weak democratic system, got a country to embrace a path toward uncertainty. Boris Johnson's premiership is sharpening the edges of a process already underway—and he does not care to dissimulate it.

British Eccentricity or European Trend?

What of this story is relevant to the rest of Europe?

The astonishment of observers at the behavior of the United Kingdom's political elite should not prevent us from seeing that similar transformations are occurring in other countries, though not all with the same dramatic consequences yet. Seen through the lens of a democratic breakdown, the United Kingdom's story is not unique.

Political party systems are undergoing huge transformations everywhere. The parties that ran Italy between the Second World War and the end of the Cold War no longer exist. Spain had a stable two-party system but now has five national parties, one of which is on the far right, and is consumed by a constitutional crisis with respect to the relationship between central government and the regions (something that the United Kingdom is likely to go through soon too.) France's presidential contest in 2017 wiped out the old mainstream parties and saw the consolidation of the radical-right National Rally of Marine Le Pen and the rise of a new movement, La République En Marche, led by Emmanuel Macron. Neither were new to the

6 LBC Radio, 'Farage: This is What Sovereignty Means', January 24, 2017.

system; the former is a mutation of an older challenger to French politics from the fascism-inspired right, the latter an outgrowth of the centrist elite. Together they managed to supersede the old party system and left and right parties, which are now in a state of disarray. Even long-stable Germany—the country of "never again"—has seen the return of a far-right party that has scored impressive election results in recent years.

This has been possible because traditional political parties have long been in a deep crisis. The linchpin between state and society—the political party—long ceased to play its role of intermediator between government and democratic representation. According to the political scientist Peter Mair,

> the age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.[7]

What is more, throughout the post-war period West European states belonged to a web of international partnerships and organizations that provided a legal and normative framing to national constitutional and political arrangements, which contained and excluded domestic and external threats to that system. Even in the tumultuous 1970s, when sharp political polarization and the success of extremist parties on the left and right were in some countries accompanied by existential threats to the state through terrorism, the democratic system held its ground and weathered the storms. Now the resilience to push back on attacks to vital democratic infrastructure and international institutions seems to have evaporated.

The demise of traditional political parties may not necessarily be something to be mourned. New parties and movements can usher in much needed renewal. The trouble begins when the democratic system is not strong enough to address the challenges posed by those exploiting voids in political life. Throughout Europe, whether the populist right is in power, in coalition, or in opposition, the mainstream, traditional center-right is being captured by it. The center-right mimics its rhetoric and tactics, adopts some issues that are presumed to motivate its voters, or forms alliances with it.

Through these transformations of the political party systems, anti-democratic forces have emerged in Hungary, Poland, Italy, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere—all in their sly ways undermining the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the autonomy of civil society. Populism's rise seems unhindered, and its far-right version capturing the old center-right is paving the way for soft authoritarianism in once democratic countries. In the United Kingdom, the extent of the executive's powers has allowed the takeover of government by a minority. Elsewhere populist leaders bypass traditional institutions essential to representative democracy—such as parliaments and the media—and engage directly with their supporters for legitimacy, with the space for politics moving from pluralist engagement in debating arenas to unilateral Twitter feeds and Facebook posts.

Once in government, populists do three things.[8] First, they try to hijack the state apparatus; for instance, by replacing civil servants with loyalists. This has happened systematically in Hungary; Poland's government has been trying to do the same; and the process had started in Austria until revelations about Russian interference persuaded the center-right prime minister to end his coalition with the far right. Second, populist governments use mass clientelist tactics to manufacture consent, from tax breaks to money handouts. In Hungary the government has promised large cars to large families; in Italy the previous government formed by two populist parties made lavish promises of tax cuts and income support. Third, they try to repress civil society; for instance, by discrediting it as a foreign agent, as amply demonstrated by Orbán's anti-Soros witch hunt, or by promoting restrictive laws, as happened in Italy

7 Peter Mair (2013), 'Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy', London: Verso, p. 1.

8 Jan Werner Müller (2017), 'What is Populism?', London: Penguin.

through the crackdown on NGOs involved in saving lives in the Mediterranean.

Populists are able to do this because they exploit the gaps in the system. Democrats have not paid sufficient attention to the transfers of power that globalization and Europeanization have entailed. The strengthening of decision-making at the intergovernmental levels—be they in the various G-formats or the EU—have not been compensated by national scrutiny and devolution to the local level. In most EU member states, parliaments are weak in scrutinizing EU legislation. Rarely are public debates held on pan-European issues. In many countries, the processes of devolution to the local level have been emptied of substance by austerity-driven cuts to local government.

This democratic displacement has caused a political backlash and the revenge of those who feel excluded from political participation. The EU has been the easy scapegoat for their loss of empowerment, but national institutions and political parties have been behind the curve in upgrading their procedures, inclusivity, and ability to represent citizens in the 21st century. The strength of this sense of loss helps explain how the United Kingdom's Brexiteers can get away with the nationalist lie of "taking back control," which dissimulates a far less democratic agenda.

Brexit and the Future of Europe

The domestic democratic crisis reverberates onto geopolitics and European stability. Brexit is symptomatic of the fragmentation in Europe following a decade of successive crises from which it is struggling to recover. The referendum came at a time when, to the semi-detached U.K. observers of the EU's shambolic responses to the crises, these events vindicated the view that continental Europe is incapable of dealing with its own problems. Caught in a storm, the United Kingdom voted to leave the ship before it sank.

Brexit signals the end of the European teleology of an "ever closer union." The history and progress of EU integration has been premised on the assumption that integration moved forward. It was progress. Teachers of European integration use the bicycle metaphor to explain the irreversible logic of the EU: one can take a break, by putting one's foot down and not lose balance, but bicycles do not have a reverse gear. The process of integration requiring further integration is in the language of the treaties—it is part of the EU's constitutional makeup.

Through its departure, the United Kingdom may not just be the first major cause of disintegration in Europe, it may end up as a Trojan horse for forces that want to undermine European institutions. Whereas Europe and the EU have thrived in a benign international environment, today there are international actors, from Russian President Vladimir Putin to U.S. President Donald Trump, who do not dissimulate their lack of affection for the EU or for multilateral institutions, which the EU best personifies. The risks that Brexit may be exploited by ill-wishers to weaken the EU is not far-fetched.

Furthermore, following its departure, the EU may have an unstable neighbor in the United Kingdom. The country is already painfully split between "remain" cities and "leave" countryside, "remain" Scotland (which is likely to pursue independence) and Northern Ireland, and "leave" England, with the exception of its cities. The impasse of the Brexit saga in Northern Ireland is a reminder of how the twenty-year old peace process there is still fraught with complex, and potentially dangerous politics. It is impossible to predict what the ripple effects might be for the rest of Europe, if any.

Brexit will also affect the balance of power in Europe—an issue that was the cause of two world wars. Even in peaceful times, France and Germany need to find their balance. The past decade saw a relative rise in German influence. The United Kingdom, even outside the eurozone, has had a positive influence on the balance power between the two, offering France a partner on security and defense matters. It has also provided a strong transatlantic link and been a sympathetic partner to Central European countries.

In a Europe of 27 member states, the Franco-German alliance will remain necessary but insufficient to ensure the health of the EU. However, it is drifting, if not deteriorating. Many had placed high hopes on the aftermath of the 2017 elections in France and Germany, yet little beyond some symbolic gestures has taken place. Tensions between them are turning into tit-for-tats, underscoring how the old-fashioned view of EU integration led by the largest members at its center has passed its sell-by date. Yet looking around one sees few who could step up to assume more leadership responsibilities. Spain is consumed by its constitutional crisis and is struggling from election to election to produce a long-lasting government. Italy, with the astonishing rise of its radical populist parties, is hardly capable of driving a pro-European mainstream, and Poland, the sixth-largest member state, has become an outlier under the Law and Justice government.

Some are proposing a more diversified future for Europe. Macron, the only leader who has been explicit about his ambitions for the EU, argues that "differentiations, the vanguard, the heart of Europe" should be embraced rather than feared as leading toward further fragmentation. He recognizes that so far the project of European integration has been carried forward under the security umbrella provided by United States and shielded from the interference of democratic politics. Today neither conditions apply as before, but the vanguard will still drive integration. According to Macron, "at every key moment in its history, Europe will move forward first of all through the determination of a few. This ambition is never a source of exclusion, it is the seed of European unity and sovereignty."[9] Macron's recent comments on the state of the EU and NATO, even if expressed in more provocative tones compared to 2017, do not depart from this vision, which is at the heart of France's view of European integration.

France's recent block on starting accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and Albania—widely criticized as a strategic error and a major failure in EU credibility—is emblematic of the French view of a future EU that is better integrated even if smaller. In Paris, deepening and widening the union were always seen as hard to combine. In this light, Brexit could be viewed as an opportunity to create circles of EU membership from the eurozone to progressively looser arrangements. A web of "closer ties" could supposedly bind a ring of countries around a smaller EU, which could include the Balkans, on a supposed path of "gradual association" to the EU, the United Kingdom, depending on how Brexit evolves in 2020, and the members of the European Economic Area, possibly accentuating the dividing line between eurozone members and not.

In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Edward Gibbon had the insight that empires collapse from their center—they can survive the crumbling of the periphery. The United Kingdom has straddled the periphery of the EU—a large and influential country but one remaining outside some important institutional arrangements. Should it choose to stay roped onto the EU in some way after Brexit, the disruption of its departure may be contained. This would reflect Macron's approach. The eurozone-centred notion assumes a smaller EU remains sufficiently attractive to hold the ring of friends around it in terms that are benign and convenient to the union. Yet when the EU was too distracted by its internal problems to look after the Balkans, the door was opened for Russian propaganda and investments from Turkey, China, and the Gulf states, which now offer more attractive propositions to the EU accession which has just been denied by France. The United Kingdom too may choose to move further away from the EU's regulatory framework to offer the United States the trade deal Trump has been tweeting about. Macron's closer ties or special partnerships with the EU's neighbors also imply that they can pursue their own special partnerships with others, which may not be to the EU's liking.

The EU is not just challenged by Trump, Putin, and Brexit. Its own centers are dithering too. It also contains "Remain Eurosceptics"[10] who love the single market

9 Emmanuel Macron (2017), 'Initiative for Europe, Speech held at the Sorbonne, Paris', September 26, 2017.

10 Simon Kuper (2019), 'The EU's enemy within: Eurosceptic Remainers', The Financial Times Magazine, March 21 2019.

and structural funds, and—having changed their tune while following the Brexit mess—they plan to stay in the EU and try to undermine it at its core. There are also nationalists with ambitions for a renationalized union of sovereign states. This seems to be the view around which Orbán, Le Pen, Italy's Matteo Salvini, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, and Austria's Heinz-Christian Strache might coalesce, though Hungary's prime minister is the only one who has articulated this vision in several speeches since his notorious elaboration of "illiberal democracy" in 2014.

These forces thought this year's European Parliament elections would provide the opportunity to, as Orbán put it, "wave goodbye not only to liberal democracy and the liberal undemocratic system that has been built on its foundations but also to the entire élite of '68."[11] They failed to secure enough votes to significantly change the parliament's composition, but remain strong in several countries and benefit from an unprecedented international alliance to support them. However nationalist they are, they can coalesce to push back on what they see as Brussels' interference and further European integration. And, in a system that rests on consensus, just a few emboldened countries can paralyze the EU.

Advocates of European integration have found comfort in the fact that the United Kingdom's vote to leave made public opinion on the continent bounce back in favor of EU membership, leading to some Eurosceptic populist parties changing their mind on pursuing referendums for their respective countries. The re-found unity among member states around Brexit after many quarrelsome years has also surprised many. The rock-solid solidarity of other countries with Ireland in the Brexit negotiations goes to the core of what partnerships and alliances are about: mutual support.

Many believe that the unity found to negotiate the process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal can provide the new ground for the EU to move forward, as if Brexit had some kind of purge-and-regeneration effect—ironically the mirror image of the renewal effect British Brexiteers are advocating.

But all need to understand that Brexit is not unique to the United Kingdom. The forces of nationalism, international disruption, and authoritarianism that are behind it are present across the continent and are unleashed when democratic institutions and actors do not perform their duties.

If the democratic recession is at the heart of Europe's travails, it can also be the solution to them. Imagining different forms of engagement and transnationalization of democratic practices could address the dislocation and displacement of democracy as well as the shortcomings in its legitimacy, accountability, and decision-making processes. Alongside preventing a chaotic Brexit with all its consequences on domestic and international politics, Europe's future also requires creative thinking about innovating its democracies locally, nationally, and in participating international organizations.

11 Quoted in Elizabeth Zerofsky (2019), 'Viktor Orbán's Far-Right Vision for Europe', The New Yorker, January 7 2019.

About the Author

Rosa Balfour is a senior transatlantic fellow at The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
http://www.gmfus.org/