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BREXIT: A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE



SOURCE: DAVE KELLAM (FLICKR)

Britain's exit from the European Union, commonly referred to as Brexit, will have far-reaching geopolitical consequences for both the United Kingdom and the entire European community. When analyzing probable reasons for the UK decision, one should bear in mind geopolitical factors and other issues, including the course of the EU-UK negotiations and the potential outcomes of London's vote to leave the European Union. Geopolitics defines to a great extent why both parties conducted talks in such a tense atmosphere that led to "hard Brexit", or Britain's divorce with Europe without a prior withdrawal agreement.



SOURCE: PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM (FLICKR)

Reasons for Brexit

The most popular reasons for Brexit include among others David Cameron’s risky decision to call a referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union or Brussels’s insufficient concessions during bilateral negotiations with London before the 2016 vote . Nonetheless, attention should be drawn to the deeply rooted causes of the UK withdrawal, also those of a geopolitical nature. For the purposes of the following report, geopolitics is defined classically as competition for power in international relations, perceived as preserving the state’s autonomy from external political powers or other constraints imposed against national sovereignty.

The United Kingdom has distanced itself from integration progress while renouncing the concept of “ever closer union” since its early membership in EU structures.

Many scholars argued that the United Kingdom has distanced itself from integration progress while renouncing the concept of „ever closer union” since its early membership in EU structures. This was practically

equivalent to London's lack of agreement to hold integration processes, understood as stripping democratic national communities of their power and shifting it to European institutions, including technocratic ones, that do not dispose of adequate democratic legitimacy. For Britons, it was of vital importance that both the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union seized such considerable power over their country. They also believed that these EU bodies acted to some extent beyond their competence conferred upon in European treaties, becoming a kind of European usurpers whose power intensified despite the lack of a mandate from the democratic national communities. London recognized this behavior as undemocratic, claiming that this eventually imposed limitations on the country's sovereignty, while an additional factor for Britain's decision to leave was the rising number of EU decisions and regulations adopted by majority voting. In consequence, the United Kingdom could only partially control EU legislation, trying its utmost to draft it in accordance with its own interests. Instead, it had to seek compromise towards Germany and France, both of which greatly accounted for the direction of EU law-making processes.

As a result, the United Kingdom needed to face two geopolitical threats: on the one hand, the ever-growing restrictions for its sovereignty from the European Commission and the Court of Justice and the leading role of both Germany and France in taking European strategic decisions and integration processes on the other. Prior to quitting the EU, the United Kingdom became increasingly forced to obstruct European policies, a

UK had two problems in the EU: increasing restrictions on its sovereignty on the part of the EC and the Court of Justice, and the growing role of Germany and France in making strategic decisions.

phenomenon referred to as „negative leadership” or the only manner to hinder adverse integration processes.

Attention should be drawn to the migration question as yet another vital aspect of integration processes for the United Kingdom. This seemingly concerned a massive influx of economic migrants from the eastern part of the European Union, which prompted the British authorities to make efforts to limit freedom of labor movement between European countries and prevent EU nationals from abusing the welfare system. The Union's plausible mistake consisted of disregarding this British postulate while the in-out referendum coincided with the migration crisis in the European Union that concerned an uncontrolled influx of non-European populations into its territory. Naturally, this negatively affected Britain's stance on future integration. Alain Finkielkraut, a notable French intellectual, said even that „if Angela Merkel had not let one million migrants into Germany in 2015, there would have been no Brexit.” The above example should be interpreted in a broader perspective. The United Kingdom began to perceive the European

Union as a destabilizing element, generating more and more costs while offering few benefits to its citizens, or at least impede their fair distribution among the individual Member States, to the great dissatisfaction of a growing number of Britons.

The nub of the Brexit problem is that neither does Britain's divorce with the European Union resolve all problems nor it prevents the society from perceiving integration

Negotiations

During the EU-UK talks on the withdrawal agreement, the latter blatantly gave ground to Brussels, going beyond its negotiating red lines. The European Union set out a clear strategy that consisted of making use of a negotiating superiority while maximizing its advantage over a less privileged partner. Furthermore, Brussels's purpose was to safeguard coherence in the internal market with respect to Europe's four freedoms (of goods, capital, services, and labor) provided for in the EU Treaties and to keep the whole of Ireland, including Northern Ireland, in the EU customs union. Last but not least, the EU's intention consisted of convincing both Britain and other states that quitting the community is a much worse solution than staying within in.

Not incidentally, a similar claim was made by Manfred Weber, chairman of the European People Party and its lead candidate in the upcoming European election at the party congress, who said that EU citizens need to be aware that leaving the Union is both worse and more

processes in a negative way. Brexit has revealed to many elites and citizens of other EU Member States what Europe's woes really are while an increasing number of continental nations expressed a similar attitude to the above integration processes. All fears and problems faced by UK citizens will remain valid within the European Union while running the risk of hitting the other Member States.

The EU benefited by its advantage over the UK negotiations, intending to show both Britons and other nations that leaving the Community is worse than staying within its structures.

costly solution that staying within European structures. It does not come as a surprise that the United Kingdom turned out vulnerable in negotiations as it had failed to secure desirable terms of the contract. Jeremy Hunt, a British conservative MP who served as foreign secretary at the time when the above agreement was negotiated, compared UK's tough divorce with the EU to the Soviet Union, claiming that Brussels sought to punish London for its decision.



ŹRÓDŁO: PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM (FLICKR)

UK further concessions were discussed at a government meeting in early July 2018 during which the Conservative Party outlined two major standpoints on Brexit. The first of them, referred to as „soft Brexit”, strived to maintain close ties with the EU within the framework of the customs union while the second one was a tilt towards a no-deal „hard Brexit” stemming from the lack of a favorable agreement for London.

A „soft Brexit” plan put forward by UK Prime Minister Theresa May did not appeal to two top advocates for its hard version. Brexit Secretary David Davis and Foreign Minister Boris Johnson later resigned, insisting that May’s proposal was heading towards „Brexit in name only”, a solution that might deprive Britain of its sovereignty while committing the country to a quasi-colonial relationship with the European Union. They further argued that a „soft Brexit” stands in contradiction to the will of the nation expressed in the in-out referendum. This eventually undermined May’s cabinet.

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Notwithstanding that, the Prime Minister pursued her strategy regardless of growing reluctance from the Conservative Party, publishing Brexit white paper that depicted the government’s negotiating stance.

The question of how the United Kingdom intended to leave the European Union was of utmost geopolitical importance for the future of Europe. First, it will exert considerable influence on London's strategic relationship with Washington that could develop to a great extent in the case of „hard Brexit” while its „soft” option would leave London within the strategic orbit of both Berlin and Paris. Secondly, the status of UK nationals after Brexit was about to be sealed whereas it is yet little known whether it will be modeled on a marginalized status of Norway that de-facto benefits from an economic exchange with the European Union while having no ambitions to become a regional power. London plays for a high stake: economic benefits, subjectivity in the international arena as well as ambitions to be granted a more autonomous role in the future. Thirdly, there emerges a question whether Brexit would encourage both the European Union and the Franco-German leadership or it rather would undermine it. Conditioned by Brussels, „soft Brexit” paved Europe's way to tackle the crisis whereas any harder solution could be a devastating blow to the continental Europe, both in terms of plausible economic losses and its less powerful geopolitical role.

In November 2018, the European Union and the United Kingdom negotiated the near 600-page draft withdrawal agreement. The document came under bitter criticism in Britain, leading to a few dismissals in Theresa May's cabinet. In December 2018, Westminster rejected the deal by an overwhelming majority of 230 (432 votes to 202) . In fact, the negotiated project can hardly be referred to as beneficial for those British people who demanded that „Brexit means Brexit”, or breaking all ties with Brussels. A fierce controversy broke out

after the backstop was revealed, meaning an emergency solution on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that would be launched if both parties failed to reach an agreement on their mutual relations after the UK leaves the European Union. While the EU and UK encountered grave difficulties in concluding the final deal, the backstop mechanism could in the future emerge as a permanent solution aimed at normalizing ties between both parties to the agreement. The backstop would bound the whole territory of the United Kingdom within the EU customs union, though meaning that Northern Ireland would have closer links than any other part of Britain. As a result, a customs border could be created in the Irish Sea across the United Kingdom, implying controls over at least some batches of goods shipped. The solution was, however, sharply criticized by Northern Irish unionists.

Under an agreement adopted in November 2018, the United Kingdom was forced to

Under the deal, the whole UK would remain bound by the EU customs union, though Northern Ireland will have closer ties than any other part of Britain in line with the backstop mechanism. London would no have the freedom to enter into trade agreements with other countries.

acknowledge EU's *acquis communautaire* in the fields of an internal market, including the environment, social protection, state aid, competition and taxation, while having no right to develop it. Also, London needed to recognize a role for the European Court of Justice that would see it still having direct legal authority, which so far has been a thorn in the side of UK Brexit supporters. Most importantly, the United Kingdom could not withdraw from the backstop deal in a unilateral manner, meaning that any other agreement to replace it in the future would potentially turn out to be less favorable for London. At one of the EU summit, French President Emmanuel Macron threatened that the United Kingdom would remain trapped in the „backstop” if it failed to submit to France's demands on access to British fishing waters.

Furthermore, London would no longer have the freedom to enter into trade agreements with other countries, including the United States, though with the exception of investment and services that were not covered by the EU customs deal. Instead, it was asymmetrically bound by all trade deals concluded with any third countries requiring the European Union as an intermediary. This meant that these states could benefit by the privileges negotiated under the EU-UK deal in Britain yet Britons themselves did not gain advantages comparable to those secured by European companies within the framework of this agreement in the territory of third countries unless London negotiated further assets in a separate deal.

While, in line with the EU-UK agreement, EU-made goods had free access to the UK market, resulting in Europe's trade surplus, London-dominated financial services encountered

The EU-UK agreement provided for unimpeded access to the UK market, resulting in Europe's trade surplus, while making it difficult for London-dominated financial services to enter the EU territory.

a limited possibility of entering the EU territory. Also, the document excluded commercial banking industry while the remaining financial services could be included within the internal market with the authorization of the European Commission and on the basis of a procedure for comparing EU and UK legal standards under so-called equivalence decisions, making the agreement of November 2018 highly unfavorable for the United Kingdom. Not surprisingly, some UK politicians criticized the deal, referring to it as succumbing to the EU pressure and warning against turning Britain into Brussels's vassal state. After Westminster turned down the EU agreement, the „hard Brexit” scenario is now more likely to happen than ever before, given the EU's stiff stance on the UK deal that rejected further renegotiating possibility.

Since Westminster turned down the EU agreement, the “hard Brexit” scenario is now closer than ever before.



ŹRÓDŁO: WIKIMEDIA.COMMONS.ORG

Consequences

A no-deal Brexit procedure will be conducive to further deterioration of the already tense economic situation of the euro area at the beginning of 2019, leading to stagnation and recessions in some of its countries. This may translate into a renewal of the crisis that earlier had set the EU monetary union on the brink of collapse. Britain's divorce with the European Union constitutes a devastating blow to European integration, implying far-reaching consequences for its upcoming processes. The British example is first and foremost bound to show EU nations issues disregarded by both Britons and then also by other societies, all the more so that an increasing number of voters were in hopes of modifying integration processes in a comparable manner to the one advocated by British citizens. Unless European elites take

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this matter into consideration, a UK Brexit scenario is likely to hit the other EU Member States, therefore EU decision-makers need to consider how integration processes should be properly managed. This results in limiting the role of both the European Commission and the Court of Justice while reversing all previous mechanisms of transferring competencies from

the domestic to the EU-wide level. The European Union is now facing a serious challenge of rebuilding democracy in Europe, meaning a necessity to take more account of the democratic powers within the national communities. Outvoting them within EU decision-making processes would both be tantamount to violating democratic principles, posing a serious threat to the Community, if to take into account present disintegration tendencies that prevail in Europe.

Meanwhile, Brexit has unleashed actions performed by the political elites that however went into the opposite direction. France and Germany managed to reinforce their leadership over integration processes while calling for increasing the number of cases to which majority voting would apply, thus boosting a possibility to overwhelm weaker countries. There also increased the pressure, also from the EU Commission and the Court of Justice, to implement EU regulations. The Franco-German leadership sought also to accelerate integration processes in defense and foreign policies and to continue transposing competences related to migration policy to the EU level. Both states intended to remodel the EU internal market, departing from the four freedoms while endowing most powerful national corporations, mainly French and German ones, with a high level of protectionism. Furthermore, they aimed to impose their national solutions regarding labor market and social welfare to the other EU Member States, despite their reduced fiscal capacities or a more liberal model of their national economies. It is also to be expected that they will exert strong pressure on non-euro area Member States to enter the zone.

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Such political trends, fed by both Paris and Berlin, are tantamount to further deepening divisions within the European Union. In consequence, Brexit highlighted a rift within the euro area into more economically competitive Northern countries and those less developed in the South, also dividing Western and Central European states over the future of migration policy. Berlin is now free to profit from differences between German and France in its bid to seek support from less powerful Member States yet nothing is known whether these attempts will contribute to improved effectiveness of EU governance. Moreover, the above internal splits affected the individual Member States, including France and Germany, which may impede plans of European elites.

A few crucial geopolitical tendencies could have been observed in the Brexit era. In an aftermath of Brexit, the European Union has lost its most numerous military power and its second-largest economy, which weakened the whole Community. This is to be proved by a smaller multi-annual EU budget than before the UK's divorce with Brussels, not to mention an intensified economic and geopolitical dispute between Western Europe and the United States that may further grow after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

An increasing number of EU Member States, including France and Germany, strives for normalizing geopolitical relations with Russia while Britain's exit is deemed to stimulate this process. Simultaneously, EU internal tensions

and splits will only aggravate despite upcoming Britain's EU divorce whereas the Member States will be prevented from making prompt and strategic decisions on potential crises and new reforms. ■

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