

How has Brexit, and other EU crises, affected party Euroscepticism across Europe?



Analysing the results of a new expert survey, Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart write that Brexit has so far had a very limited impact on national party politics across Europe beyond the UK, particularly compared with the earlier Eurozone and migration crisis. While the longer-term, dynamic effects of Brexit on party Euroscepticism might be greater and there are a number of countries to watch where such impacts might develop, perceptions of its 'success' or 'failure' will be filtered through competing narratives and questions raised about whether broader lessons can be drawn from the British case.



Denmark is the country most 'to watch', write Szczerbiak and Taggart. Photo: A Danish People's Party slogan – 'More Denmark, Less EU'. Credits: [News Oresund](#) (CC BY 2.0)

A distant and abstract process

In 2015 and earlier this year we conducted two expert surveys in which we examined the impact the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit on Euroscepticism on party politics across Europe. We drew on expertise from the University of Sussex-based [European Parties Elections and Referendums Network \(EPERN\)](#) to gather data on all EU member states together with Norway, Serbia and Switzerland. The project was funded by the [ESRC's 'UK in a Changing Europe' project](#). (We are extremely grateful to the ESRC and all of our respondents, although analysis and interpretation of the comparative findings are our own).

Our main finding is that there has been a clear difference between the impacts of the different crises. The Eurozone crisis had a particularly powerful effect, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the party systems of those countries most affected by the bailout packages: Germany, Greece and Ireland (to a lesser extent, Slovakia, Finland, Spain, Portugal). The migration crisis had a particularly strong effect on party politics in the post-communist states of central Europe (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic), and also Bulgaria – but, interestingly, not most of the post-communist Balkan EU members (Croatia, Romania, Slovenia) and candidates (Serbia), nor the post-Soviet Baltic states.

The UK's June 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU has, on the other hand, had a very limited impact on national party politics, particularly when compared with these two earlier EU crises. Its main effect has been to reinforce and legitimise existing what we term 'Soft' or 'Hard' Eurosceptic narratives, rather than lead to an increase in Eurosceptic party politics overall or shifts from Hard to Soft Euroscepticism. In our earlier writings, we defined: Hard Euroscepticism as principled opposition to the project of European integration (based on the ceding or transfer of powers to supranational institutions such as the EU); and Soft Euroscepticism as when there was not a principled objection to EU European integration but there was opposition to Union's current or future planned trajectory (based on the further extension of competencies that it was planning to make).

Beyond the immediate news impact of the actual referendum vote, Brexit has hitherto been a rather distant and abstract process, with little apparent popular resonance – certainly compared with the two earlier crises which, in some countries at least, appeared to have a powerful public salience and perceived impact upon many people's day-to-lives. The survey was conducted before Article 50 was invoked and this meant that EU states had not formally reacted to Brexit. However, the initial nature of the process, even after Article 50, would seem to suggest that it will be complicated, elite-driven and multi-institutional. For this reason, the process may continue to have low public resonance throughout the Brexit negotiations; except in Britain, of course, where it is dominating and over-shadowing virtually all other political issues.

What might change this is the chance that particular issues which have a public salience in particular countries may flare up in the course of the negotiations, such as the post-Brexit status of EU citizens currently in the UK. However, it is also possible these will be contested as so-called 'valence' issues over the competence (or lack of it) of the governing party that is conducting the negotiations. It is also important to note that Brexit might decrease as well as increase Euroscepticism, especially of the Hard variety, if it becomes associated with too much economic, political and social uncertainty and dislocation.

Countries to watch

Within this overall framework there are a number of countries 'to watch' where we think that there have been interesting responses to the Brexit crisis or where such responses might develop, particularly when the impact of this is re-inforced by or linked to the two earlier crises:

- *France* (parliamentary election in June 2017) – France has a strong Eurosceptic party on the radical right (the National Front) and some smaller (Soft Eurosceptic) ones on the radical left. All three crises have provided an impetus for the National Front: the Eurozone crisis created space for their Euroscepticism to flourish; the migration crisis allowed the increased focus on security to mesh with the party's policy on border control; and the Brexit crisis allowed it argue that 'Frexit' is now clearly possible and galvanised the issue of a referendum on EU membership for the party (as well as increasing Soft Euroscepticism on the mainstream right). Eurosceptic candidates of left and right won a sizeable share of the vote in the first round of the April/May presidential election and National Front leader Marine Le Pen secured over one-third in the second round run-off; although there was also evidence that she rowed back from emphasising Euroscepticism as an issue as the campaign progressed.
- *Ireland* (next parliamentary election before April 2021) – the Eurozone crisis pushed Euroscepticism to the fore of the Irish party system and transformed the salience of these issues. However, interestingly, Brexit appears to have dramatically *reduced* party-based Euroscepticism in this country due to: economic uncertainty, the opportunities it presents for Irish 'reunification' and for Ireland to act as a bridge between the UK and EU, and its association with English nationalism.
- *Denmark* (next parliamentary election before June 2019) – with its strong tradition of Eurosceptic public opinion and single issue parties/movements, and a propensity for EU referendums, Denmark is possibly the country most 'to watch' in terms of parties attempting to follow the Brexit route. Although Brexit and the two other crises had a moderate impact on party Euroscepticism, Denmark has a strong Eurosceptic party on the radical right (Danish People's Party) which is pushing for a 'British solution' and wants a referendum to leave the EU. A new right-wing Eurosceptic party (the New Civic Party) has also emerged recently which appears likely to enter parliament after the next election and is also calling for an EU referendum and for the Union to be re-focused solely on to free trade.
- *Italy* (next parliamentary election before May 2018) – Italy has a large, radical anti-establishment

Eurosceptic party (the Five Star Movement), which is performing strongly in opinion polls, and another medium-sized radical right Eurosceptic grouping (Northern League). Party Euroscepticism in Italy was given much greater salience and opportunity by the Eurozone crisis, and sustained by the migration crisis, where the EU was accused even by mainstream parties of abandoning Italy. The Brexit crisis has not, however, given this a significant boost. Its main impact appears to have been introducing the new word 'Italexit' into the political lexicon, although Eurosceptic parties refer mainly to leaving the Eurozone rather than the EU itself when they discuss this.

- The '*Visegrad Four*' post-communist Central European states – the *Czech Republic* (next parliamentary election before October 2017), *Hungary* (before spring 2018), *Slovakia* (before March 2020), and *Poland* (before October 2019) – although the Eurozone crisis had little impact on party politics in these countries (notwithstanding helping to bring down a Slovak government in 2011) and the Brexit referendum simply re-affirmed existing Soft Eurosceptic narratives, the migration crisis did lead to a significant re-framing of the way that the EU is debated in these states, leading to a sharpening of Soft Euroscepticism among mainstream political actors. Interestingly, this phenomenon has not really affected other post-communist states such as the Baltic republics (where security continues to trump all other considerations) and (except for Bulgaria, where the migration issue meshes with existing tensions with the Turkish minority) the Balkan states. In the Western Balkan 'front line' states, the greater concern is that the EU manage the flows and burden share rather than oppose compulsory migrant relocation in principle.
- *Austria* (next parliamentary election before October 2018) – the Eurosceptic Freedom Party is polling strongly and its presidential candidate Norbert Hofer performed very well in the 2016 election being defeated in a re-run second round run-off. The Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis both had the effect of crystallising the Freedom Party's Euroscepticism but also, because of the direct impacts of both crises on Austria (with a relatively large intake of migrants), also appeared to move the centrist Social Democrats and Christian Democrats to adopt a more critical tone towards the EU. Brexit had an initial effect of bringing 'Oxit' into the political lexicon but all parties have since moved to a position of clarifying their support for EU membership in principle.
- *Greece* (next parliamentary election before October 2019) – Eurosceptic parties can be found on both the radical left (SYRIZA and Communist Party) and right (Independent Greeks, Golden Dawn and, before it started to wane, the Greek Orthodox Rally). Not surprisingly the Eurozone crisis had a substantial impact on the Greek party system and led to major debates about, and criticisms of, the process that led to the country's economic settlement with the EU. Similarly, the migration issue led to a particularly intense debate around accusations that the EU was not felt to be doing enough to help Greece and was proving incapable of handling another crisis. However, although Brexit has contributed to the general sense of uncertainty about the future of the EU and stimulated some debate about whether Greece should leave, it has not had the same impact as the two earlier crises. Over time, SYRIZA has also become somewhat less Eurosceptic; although, given that it has been the main governing party since 2015, this could be part of what Nick Sitter (writing about the Scandinavian countries) has termed the '[government-opposition](#)' dynamic, whereby previously Eurosceptic opposition parties often become more pro-EU when they enter office and *vice versa*.

Less impact than expected?

There are also two cases where the impact of the Brexit crisis was not, or does not appear to have been, as significant as some commentators expected:

- *The Netherlands* – given the previous electoral successes of radical right Eurosceptic Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, there was considerable interest in how the Brexit crisis would play out in this country, particularly during the recent March 2017 parliamentary election. Earlier, the Eurozone crisis had some impact with the Freedom Party attempting to use it to bolster its arguments about sovereignty, while the radical left (Soft Eurosceptic) Socialist Party also objected to the costs of the bailout. The Freedom Party also used the migration crisis to call for a closing of the Dutch borders. However, although the party originally lauded the UK's 'independence day', Brexit barely featured as one of the themes in the Freedom Party's election campaign when, although it slightly increased its share of the vote and remained the main opposition grouping, the party performed below some commentators expectations.
- *Germany* (parliamentary election in September 2017) – the Eurozone crisis was essential to the emergence and initial electoral success of the radical right Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany – and also re-inforced

the Euroscepticism of the radical Left Party. However, while the migration crisis shifted the Alternative for Germany's policy focus, this came out more as anti-immigration than Eurosceptic and the party did little to tie these two issues together. Moreover, although both the Alternative for Germany and Left Party used the Brexit vote to legitimate their existing opposition to the EU, it has had little salience so far and certainly not provided either party with a boost in the run-up to September's federal election.

Competing narratives and British exceptionalism?

However, when considering the impact of Brexit it is also important to distinguish the short-term and long-term – and the dynamic effects of one of the largest member states leaving the EU on the organisation, both in terms of perceptions and the reality of how it operates (or even survives) in the future. Put simply: it is too early to tell what these might be. On the one hand, if the Brexit process is a relatively smooth one and Britain is, or appears to be, successful outside the EU bloc there is a possibility that it could be used as a model for other Eurosceptic parties who could then shift to adopting a (Hard) Eurosceptic stance. On the other hand, if it is not a success, or not perceived to be one, this could discourage Soft Eurosceptic parties from adopting a Hard Eurosceptic stance, and all kinds of Eurosceptics (especially Hard ones) from articulating their position (as appears to be happening in Ireland at the moment).

However, there are two reasons why even then the perceived 'success' or 'failure' of Brexit may not lead to a long-term changes in the levels, nature and salience party Euroscepticism. Firstly, unless developments are completely unambiguous (which is unlikely) the question of whether or not Brexit is a 'success' or 'failure' is likely to be highly contested, with any subsequent developments filtered and interpreted through the different narratives of Euroenthusiasts and Eurosceptics respectively. Second, even if the outcome is seen as more clear-cut, questions will still be raised about British exceptionalism and whether broader lessons can really be drawn from the British case; this is particularly likely to be the case if Brexit is a 'success'.

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