

Europe: a question of survival

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The choice of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU) poses a fundamental question that can no longer be avoided – that of the survival of European integration. Chancellor Merkel rightly defined Brexit as a “watershed” moment for Europe. She omitted, however, that beyond this turning point lies the crossroads between a spiral of political and economic disintegration and the very difficult path towards re-asserting the European project.

The steady erosion of trust among Europeans – between and, crucially, within member states – of which the vote for Brexit provided striking evidence, has reached a tipping point. This is the point at which confidence in the ability to weather the storms that have broken out in the EU since the eruption of the economic and financial crisis, and to bridge the political cracks that they have produced, evaporates. Eurosceptic parties in France, Italy and the Netherlands have celebrated the outcome of the British referendum and called for holding popular consultations on EU membership.

Confidence is the oxygen of political bodies and initiatives. Restoring it after the historic blow of the Brexit vote is therefore the imperative challenge facing those in charge of Europe. That requires drawing the right lessons from the outcome of the British referendum and taking action accordingly. Brexit has been widely interpreted as the culmination of a populist drift that is engulfing Europe (and the US) and redesigning politics. The new paradigm would pit nationalists and protectionists against globalists and cosmopolitans – the latter camp including much of the erstwhile political mainstream from the centre-right and centre-left. In short, Brexit epitomises the assault on the establishment that is mounting across Europe. Political divides across Europe may not be as clear-cut, not least given the wide variety of populist forces from the extreme right and left, expressing different claims and often pursuing irreconcilable goals. However, this interpretation captures two important features of current political trends.

First, the populists-establishment fracture has come to reflect - in many countries - the divide between those calling for change and those defending the *status quo*. Defending the *status quo* or partial fixes that appear not to deliver in the face of mounting challenges – such as a European project of diminishing returns for many Europeans – is of course much harder than advocating change, even if in vague and radical directions. Second, the populist message elicits passions, whether it is the comfort of national myths and identities, anger at elites and/or foreigners or the craving for social justice. Conversely, the response of the moderates is too often about arcane calculations and architectures for what is essentially damage limitation. Passions can be elusive, misleading and even dangerous, but complexity seems uninspiring.

European integration risks becoming the collateral damage of acute tensions within societies that deepen frictions between countries and which the EU is perceived as unwilling or unable to address. In turn, this perception hides a deeper problem and a paradox.

The real problem at the roots of the current political crisis in Europe is one of coherence and credibility. Populist, mostly anti-European forces appear to mean what they say: they want to build walls, reject trade deals, and leave the EU or the Eurozone. The measures they advocate may well be ineffective and detrimental down the line, but they seem prepared to match words with deeds. Pro-European moderate forces often do not. Sometimes, as in the case of

the UK, they seem uncomfortable (or have no credibility) in making a positive case for Europe. Frequently, they disingenuously scapegoat the EU for national ills. Parts of the traditional establishment are turning much more tepid on Europe. Besides, when European leaders speak out in favour of the EU and the European project, they talk the talk but in many cases do not walk the walk. From Eurozone governance to the refugee/migration crisis and security and defence issues, national governments have not equipped Europe to adequately deal with the challenges it faces. They did what was needed to avoid breakdown but not enough to address underlying vulnerabilities and divisions and move forward with a shared sense of purpose. They have not been consequential.

This leads to a sad paradox. For one, the political forces that come across as most determined have no real solutions on offer beyond empty claims. The UK is starting to experience the harmful consequences of the decision to leave the EU. For another, those who could actually design and deliver effective solutions at EU level appear divided, reluctant or unable to do so. The result is that Europe is ever more fragmented and polarised. In this context, the vote for Brexit sets a precedent that cannot be overlooked.

Many argue that the new awareness of the depth of the crisis may not be enough to bring about an adequate response. Problems may be shared but politics are national. National leaders cannot afford to go against the grain of respective public opinions. Calling for 'more Europe' would fuel the populist flame. Berlin watchers in particular, see little scope for a step change in the approach of the German government to EU political and economic governance. In the 48 hours following the Brexit result, statements from European capitals, and notably from Paris and Berlin, signalled differences in tone and substance as to what the next steps should be. With elections in France and Germany coming up in 2017, this is no time for leaping forward. In a Europe of 27, the prospects of a 'hard core' of member states would alienate others, and the presumptive members of this core differ on key issues anyway.

At this moment in time, much of the above is largely correct. However, this analysis points to a 'more of the same' scenario that, based on the evidence of the last few years, is unlikely to stop the erosion of the bonds that hold Europe together and could lead to disintegration. Tectonic shifts in the politics of Europe may change the calculus of various political forces in coming weeks and months. The disparate grievances that fuelled the vote for Brexit will likely prevail elsewhere if not countered by a robust, shared political message squarely placing European cohesion, prosperity and security front and centre, and above all by consequent action.

Europe does not need an exclusive hard core but it needs a core deal that restores confidence in the European project. The EU's size and diversity will surely require various forms of flexibility. However, at a time of unprecedented political flux and centrifugal forces, the bedrock for anything else is a core political deal focusing on sharing responsibilities, resources and risks, and tangible initiatives that embody it.

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