



In Europe, national interest rules supreme

Marian L. Tupy

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Prior to the June 23 referendum on British membership in the European Union, British voters were subjected to a barrage of warnings about the dire consequences of British withdrawal from the EU on the British economy and on Britain's international standing. Experts, foreign and domestic, predicted recession and urged voters to back the Remain campaign. Britain, they argued, would be isolated and it might, even, lose its seat on the United Nations Security Council.

As the date of the referendum neared and opinion polls tightened, warnings gave way to threats. U.S. President Barack Obama threatened to put Britain at the "back of the queue" in any trade deal with the United States if the former chose to leave the EU. And German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble ruled out a post-Brexit membership of Great Britain in the European single market.

And then the British people voted to leave the EU and the response from European governments was, by and large, mild and measured. To everyone's surprise, much of the blame for Britain's withdrawal from the EU fell on the heads of the Eurocrats on Brussels. Why did that happen? Simply put, emotions gave way to the cold calculations of national interest. Britain might be on its way out of the EU, but the country remains an important part of the global economy and of the system of international relations.

Armageddon postponed

Following the Brexit referendum, an interesting split has emerged on the European continent. Representatives of European institutions doubled down in terms of their belligerent rhetoric toward Britain. Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, expressed his desire for the British government to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and for Britain to leave the EU as soon as possible. Martin Schultz, the President of the EU Parliament, bemoaned the result of the referendum, contemptuously noting that "It is not the EU philosophy that the crowd can decide its fate." So much, then, for democracy as a founding value of the European Union. Not to be outdone, Schultz's MEPs booed Nigel Farage, one of the leaders of the Brexit campaign, on the floor of the European Parliament.

Representatives of national governments, on the other hand, sounded positively reasonable in comparison. Instead of hostility toward Britain, they blamed Brexit on the intransigence of Eurocrats in Brussels. Had the British Prime Minister David Cameron's drive for a

“fundamental” renegotiation of Britain’s relationship with the EU been met with a face-saving compromise, they reasoned, the British voters might have voted to remain in the EU.

For example, Estonian President Toomas Ilves said that Juncker’s behavior had been “abominable.” The Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski said that “the European institutions should start to admit they made a mistake” and that “at least a part of the European leadership” should step aside. The Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said that the “British people have reacted to European policy. Nobody has the right to be angry with the British voters.” The Czech Foreign minister Lubomir Zaoralek said that he did not see Juncker as “the right man for the job” and added that “someone in the EU maybe should contemplate quitting.” And Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban blamed Brexit on the EU’s inept handling of the migrant crisis. Together, the Visegrad Four countries demanded that “the powers of the EU executive be reined in and more competences be returned to capitals.”

Let us now look at the reactions from France and Germany – the so-called “engine of European integration.” A week after Brexit, the French Finance Minister Michel Sapin stated that “every aspect of trade deals, including freedom of movement, will be ‘on the table’ for discussion when the UK negotiates its exit from the EU,” thereby implying that Britain could remain in the single market on terms acceptable to the British electorate.

The putative Republican Party candidate for the French Presidency, Alain Juppe, has called “for a new balance of power between Brussels and member states and a halt to further EU enlargement, ending Turkey’s membership bid.” And senior German ministers have advocated for “shrinking the executive Commission, trimming its powers, and bypassing common European institutions to take more decisions by intergovernmental agreement.”

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi issued a self-serving demand for “loosening of recently adopted EU regulations that make shareholders, bondholders and depositors liable for the losses of failed banks before taxpayers.” Renzi, who said that the EU was run by “a technocracy with no soul,” hopes to use the EU’s weakness to bend the EU budget deficit rules in order to “pump billions of euros into his country’s ailing banks.” And those are the friends of the EU!

Now consider the Eurosceptics. The Dutch Eurosceptic leader Geert Wilders noted that he will push for a Dutch referendum on withdrawal from the EU at the next election in 2017, while the French politician Marine Le Pen welcomed the British vote as “the beginning of the end of the European Union.”

Finally, consider the damascene conversion on the other side of the Atlantic. The US President Barack Obama said that “having the United Kingdom in the European Union gives us much greater confidence about the strength of the transatlantic union” and, as mentioned earlier, threatened to put Britain to the “back of the queue” in any trade deal with the United States.

After Brexit, however, Obama quickly switched from scaremongering to downplaying the result. “I would not overstate it,” Obama said five days after the referendum. “There’s been a little bit of hysteria post-Brexit vote, as if somehow NATO’s gone, the trans-Atlantic alliance is dissolving, and every country is rushing off to its own corner. That’s not what’s happening... I

think this will be a moment when all of Europe says, ‘Let’s take a breath and let’s figure out how do we maintain some of our national identities, how do we preserve the benefits of integration, and how do we deal with some of the frustrations that our own voters are feeling.’” Quite so.

So, what have we learned?

Great Britain may be leaving the EU, but it has not fallen off the edge of the world. The country remains the world’s fifth largest economy and fifth largest military power. It is in the interest of all of its trading partners to see Britain safely anchored in the global economic system and prosper. In or out of the EU, Britain will still be an important export market for Germany, which accounts for 10 percent of all British imports, and for France, which accounts for 6 percent of all British import. Similarly, in or out of the EU, Britain remains an important military power and the second most important member of NATO. As such, Central European countries, especially Poland, and the Baltics, will do what’s necessary to keep the British happy and on their side in order to deter Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

The national interests of European countries vary greatly. Former communist countries, for example, are much more fearful of Russia than, say, France and Portugal. It is for that reason that a truly common European defence and foreign policy eludes the Eurocrats in Brussels. But the national interests of the EU member states do intersect in one crucial way – they all want a good post-Brexit relationship with Britain. Some want it for commercial reasons, while others want it for reasons of national defence.

None summed up the post-Brexit reality better than Geert Bourgeois, the Flemish Prime Minister. According to Bourgeois,

“There is a growing consensus in EU capitals that it would be fatal mistake to try to ‘punish’ Britain... More and more people now agree that there has to be a ‘soft Brexit.’

“I can’t imagine a situation where we have more barriers on trade in both directions. You [Britain] are our fourth biggest export market. It is in our mutual interest to find a solution, and the majority of the EU now agrees that anything other than a soft Brexit would have a huge cost.

“We will be able to negotiate a trade agreement. It may be sui generis but it can be done.”

Simply put, national governments face incentives that are different from the incentives faced by the Eurocrats. The chief objective of the latter is the pursuit of “an ever closer union” and they appear to be willing to punish those who make that goal of “an ever closer union” more difficult to accomplish.

Conclusion

The national identities of European states have been evolving separately, and often in competition with one another, for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. Concomitantly, a pan-European demos does not exist. For the vast majority of European peoples, being a “European” remains a geographical, not a political, distinction. Thus, while European travellers

to the United States may say that they are from Europe, in Europe they almost always refer to themselves as being from Britain, France, Germany, or whatever country they are from. This is likely to continue because people's identities will always be influenced by culture, religion, history and linguistics, not just ideology. The reactions of the European states to the outcome of the British referendum on EU membership clearly show that national interest and, consequently, the nation-state remain the basic motivations and the basic building blocks of international relations, including European relations.

Marian L. Tupy is the editor of www.humanprogress.org