

BREXIT – PUBLIC DIPLOMACY REFORM AND COUNTER-REFORM OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract. *In 2015, by proposing a referendum on Brexit the British Prime Minister David Cameron seems to have forgotten the golden rule any politician should know before initiating a referendum: make sure that he will not lose it. He naively considered that the economic argument would be strong enough to keep the UK in the EU, ignoring the dimension of the immigration issue in the minds and thinking of ordinary people. He simply forgot that nationalism and xenophobia may prove stronger than any rational macroeconomic argument.*

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Brexit was an unexpected decision of the British electorate. It has been a matter of public debate for over a decade, but until the referendum, it was not seriously taken into account as a viable realistic possibility. On June 23, 2016, the day of the Brexit referendum, the Dow Jones dropped 600 points when the preliminary results were announced, wiping out earnings for a full year. Financial analysts had believed that the British electorate would choose to make the economically and financially motivated decision to remain in the EU. The dramatic fall in the index was caused by the shock of an unexpected result which defied the logic of economic argument. Prior to the referendum, Brexit was supported by only 40% of the electorate, the rest of the voters being influenced by the frenzy of the moment and the desire to change ... whatever it may be.

As a result of specific circumstances (terrorist attacks, economic recession, the images of the massive wave of immigrants who entered the EU in 2015) a significant part of the Europhile electorate may become Eurosceptic. However, this is not just a decision brought about by circumstances, but the cumulative impact of the successive attempts of the EU to reform. All the political reforms aimed at deepening integration, an integration automatically detrimental to the sovereignty of the Member States and the effects of the 2004-2007 EU mega-enlargement – during which the EU doubled its membership by incorporating Central and Eastern

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European countries with a level of development and GDP well below the levels previously accepted, contributed cumulatively to the switch towards Euroscepticism for a significant part of the British electorate, especially the neutrals. The EU's officials refusal to accept British Prime Minister David Cameron's proposals, which contained demands for some reforms and adjustments of EU law in order to keep people who exploited the system out of Britain, was the "drop that caused the glass to overflow".

In the post-Brexit period, almost all of the politicians, Europhiles or Eurosceptic, speak of Brexit as a turning point in the history of the European project which, in order to survive, must be reformed. The content of the reforms involves a dispute that could lead to the end of the European Project itself. The overcoming of the economic crisis, security, migration, development differences between Member States require change, but some reforms are at the core of the EU's key element of freedom of movement and residence within the EU.

In parallel with reform, the EU has to cope with centrifugal trends in Member States, populist movements, financial crises, terrorist threats, wars in neighbouring areas, unprecedented migration waves. We are in a paradoxical situation in which the future of the EU may depend on Brexit's economic and political failure. The economic success of Britain outside the EU would give unprecedented visible and hard arguments to populist leaders (including those in the founding states). The European project was from the outset an elitist project whose development would have been stopped if it had depended on national electoral campaigns, party policies or demagogic speeches. Brexit raised again the question of the issue of the lack of legitimacy of the European Project in the year 2017. The pacification of Europe through Franco-German reconciliation has been achieved, the Cold War is over, the Central and Eastern European member countries are democracies with a functioning economy. Free trade without tariff restrictions, freedom of cross-border movement, the possibility of residence and labor in another country exist in other economic and political structures based on bi and multilateral treaties, without the need for a supra-state structure.

A part of the world resulting from decolonization is now represented by economies with an impressive rate of growth and with which the old colonial powers are tempted to enter into privileged partnerships (Indonesia, Singapore, and India). Brexit is a result of "the excess of integration". The deepening of internal vertical integration alongside the unprecedented acceleration of horizontal expansion with central and eastern European countries with a level of development and political culture different from that of the original (relatively unitary) formula of the Member States was expected by many to cause fractures. The EU 27 is today too diverse (culturally, politically and above all at the level of economic development) for any solution adopted in Brussels to satisfy everyone. Under these circumstances, the Brexit precedent tells us that in a rich and strong Western European country, a Euro-skeptical government may demand derogations or reforms whose rejection by other Member States (net beneficiaries of the system) could bring about a new

secession. The threat of a new referendum has become a tool for exerting pressure in the hands of any government of an EU member state¹.

Another possible scenario is the attempt to deepen integration into a kind of forced march imposed by a strong Euro-coalition of a number of Western European countries (Germany, France, Italy, Belgium), whose effects could effect a double secession: on the one hand, from the net contributing northern countries with a massive Eurosceptic population (which already have their own functional integration model) which the Netherlands could join, and, on the other hand, from some countries where the populist right-wing parties could utilise the slogan of national sovereignty (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland... the Visegrad group)². The “business as usual scenario”, one of the scenarios recalled recently by President Juncker at the anniversary summit in 2017, also poses risks of slow decline, erosion of the community spirit and permanent obstruction, either from bureaucratic machinery or from various Member States. Under this scenario the European Union will sink slowly under its own weight.

Brexit – a result of public communication deficit

For the pro-European business community, but also for political leaders, there are two lessons to be learned from the result of the Brexit referendum (ironically organized by the British Prime Minister to confirm the European commitment of Britain):

- Do not overestimate your capacity to persuade your own electorate of the fairness of a cause³.
- The disparity between the statistical evidences and the self-perception of the population in relation to the quality of life and the living standard associated with it.

To sum the causes may be synthesized at the level of communication, perception, and difference. To this we can add:

The generalized Euroscepticism found across the British political spectrum

EU membership of the UK, a country with a Commonwealth, a vision and strategic interests that are on a global scale and hence deserving of preferential treatment, has been presented for decades (by both pro-European and Euro-skeptics) as a favor that this country offers to its European partners.

¹ Octavian Manea, “The UK’s departure – Brexit – cannot be reversed and constitutes the first major backwards step in the process of European integration”, published on <http://defencematters.org/news/four-scenarios-post-brexit-europe/1096/in> 13.09.2016, accessed on 10.05.2017.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Daniel Korsky, “Why we have lost the Brexit Vote”, *Politico*, 10.10.2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/why-we-lost-the-brexit-vote-former-uk-prime-minister-david-cameron/> accessed 10.03.2017.

*The image of “unfair games” played by
European partners (Member States or the EC)*

In November 2015, British politicians, and implicitly Prime Minister David Cameron, did not ask for anything out of the ordinary or exaggerated from the Council of the European Union. They did not demand a limitation of the right to free movement and access to the UK labor market by citizens of other EU countries, but a limitation of access to social services by those who exploit the system. More specifically, he proposed access to social insurance only for those who have contributed to the scheme for at least four years and allowances for non-UK children at the level of the country in which they are resident. With regard to the request that non-euro area Member States have the right not to be part of any “ever closer union” policy initiative, it did not bring anything new to what other states, like Denmark or Sweden, were asking for. David Cameron obtained (on behalf of the so-called “British emergency brakes”) something but only after negotiations and threats. In the face of British Euro-skeptic public opinion, he returned defeated and even more humiliated ... although he did not demand too much or anything unjustified.

For the British public, the public impression of the whole approach can be translated as follows:

– It is exhausting to try to get concessions from 27 Member States plus the European Commission.

– The “stay in” and a vote for the *status quo* emerged as passivity, as a partner’s weakness in the face of circumstances. An attitude that is not at all advantageous in the eyes of a public opinion already animated by the crisis of terrorism, the emigration crisis and, in general, the “*Hannibal ante Portas*” discourse of populists and tabloids.

For some of those who prior to the February 2016 negotiations would have voted “stay in”, the failure of the reform negotiations had the effect of grapes in Aesop’s fable⁴. If one cannot change reality, one can change one’s perception of this reality. *If we cannot reform the European Union in the way we want, what we can do is to consider the EU as a structure that does not deserve our effort to stay.*

Narrowing the vision through selection

In the UK, the debate within the media for and against EU affiliation focused on weighing the benefits and disadvantages (a kind of cost-benefit analysis). Narrowing the vision is a propaganda technique that involves selecting from a complex reality only those aspects that make up a particular point of view. And in the case of the Britain, the public reacted emotionally and circumspectly. In general, even in an advanced country, the average person does not engage in complex political, economic or strategic analyzes. The image and argument of returning to the UK tradition as a solitary actor benefiting from its versatile

⁴ Gary Younge, “Brexit a disaster decades in the making”, *The Guardian*, 30.06 2016, online edition: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/30/brexit-disaster-decades-in-the-making>, accessed 10.03.2017.

comparative advantages, such as tightening connections with Commonwealth, etc., had the expected communicative effect.

Easy-to-understand and viable populist arguments were not used to the full potential by the Pro-EU team. For example, the argument “The bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” ... the fear of the unknown, change and uncertainty, particularly aimed at unsophisticated working class people (usually pro-Brexit people), were not used enough. Simple supporting arguments and statistical data were not used by the Pro-UE party:

- Of the 5.3 million social security recipients in the UK, only 1.485 are in Romania, or 0.01%, yet Romanians and Bulgarians were presented as a burden, and exploiters of the social insurance system.

- The reform of the system for granting allowances to children from other Member States who are not resident in the UK, as requested by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2015, *de facto* affects only about 400 children of Romanian citizens and is not a plague on the social security system in that country.

The exploitation of images detached from their context, and the exploitation of anxiety and xenophobia and other manipulative techniques ad as champions the *Brexiters*.

Arguments related to and using xenophobia and hostility to immigrants and the idea of a crisis of immigration was by far the main strategy used by the *Vote Leave* campaign. The Cameron government, both in 2010 and in the 2015 campaigns, promised to take measures to limit immigration to several tens of thousands a year. The net inflow of 330,000 immigrants in 2015 left Cameron without a convincing answer. It was the only unbeatable argument based on concrete data of those used by the *Brexiters*. Added to this:

- The agitation of Turkey’s accession to the EU and the immigration effects of the foreseeable elimination of visas for Turkish citizens;

- The gross exaggeration of the weekly amount that the UK government sends as a contribution to the EU budget;

- Portrayal of a sovereign Britain that controls its destinies and exploits global trade opportunities that are hampered by EU membership.

The actors in the dispute were very different in their approach and temperament. The Pro-EU team was less virulent, vigorous and passionate than the Brexit representatives. Stuart Rose, chief of the *Britain Stronger in Europe* campaign, former CEO at Marks & Spencer, did not compare in terms of incisiveness with Nigel Farage. Britain’s Stronger in Europe’s executive director, Will Straw, is also a low key character as compared to *Vote Leave* executive director, Matthew Elliot, or Dominic Cummings.

The absence of European patriotism and the inability to achieve an emotional bond with the European ideal affected the pro-EU party. European patriotism is not comparable with national patriotism, even though theorists speak of post-sovereignty, post-industrial, post-national. The younger generation, who voted for the EU, lacked a so called pro-European patriotism, a passion that pro-EU leaders and their campaign failed to induce. The pro-EU voter did not listen to the language of the bureaucracy of the European Commission, nor to the dry and dull

argumentation of statistical data, but to the idea of community, cosmopolitanism, the possibility of Europe wide travel and socializing (although the latter does not necessarily depend on Britain's membership of the EU). Some undecided voted *Remain*, scared of the grotesque discourse and manipulative imagery of the *Brexiteers*. However, the Pro-EU party could not demonstrate sufficiently convincingly in the year 2016 why the EU exists, what it does, its usefulness and where it is going. Nothing or too little of the Pro-EU speech appealed to any emotional attachment to the *European ideal*. The whole pro-EU speech focused on the idea that Brexit would have negative economic effects, in other words, of two bad options, the choice to stay was the lesser of two evils.

"Sovereignty," "taking back control of our own borders," "taking our country back" are all the slogans that ordinary people reacted emotionally to. In the face of the reality of statistics, Brexit's agitators came up with the argument "you can show as many papers, graphs and statistical data as you want... we know one thing... the British citizen wants his country back... full stop."

The inability to articulate the argument in simple, unsophisticated, unpretentious language, and especially as presented by the privileged, politicized elite cost *Remainers* dearly. The emphasis on cost-benefit analysis and on statistical data amplified this impression. The rhetoric of an argument centered on low transaction costs usually leaves the impression of a certain elitism. In the present case it left the impression that the real beneficiaries of Britain's EU affiliation are London financial institutions and economists, a visceral ugly group of people in the eyes of the average British person, especially those living in declining industrial areas over the last three decades. Other arguments, such as the removal of roaming tariffs, promised by the EU, sparked ironic remarks. The economic argument for belonging to the EU was not credible enough because, unlike the 1970s, Britain's economic situation was better than the EU average, wages were higher, and social assistance was more generous⁵.

The Pro-EU party also used propagandistic techniques and populist arguments easily dismantled by the *Brexiteers*. Among the most common can be identified:

- A lack of clarity regarding the likelihood of the mandatory reintroduction of border controls with Ireland;
- The (unlikely) prospect that, in the event of a Brexit, the EU states will introduce visa requirements for the British citizens;
- Claiming that there would be the immediate disappearance of three million jobs as a consequence of Brexit;
- Presenting EU membership as a matter on which the nation's own survival depended (... although Scotland's detachment from the UK was not impossible);
- Presenting the EU 2016 as the largest and most prosperous economic bloc in the world to which the UK owes its prosperity. Failing to establish whether the British citizen knew that the EU of the last 10 years (EU 28) differed from the EU as it was in the first 30 years (EU 6-9-12).

⁵ Carmine Gallo, "Three Communication Fails That Triggered the Brexit Vote," *Forbes*, on line edition 26 of June 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2016/06/26/three-communication-fails-that-triggered-the-brexiteer-vote/2/#31f16ebd3fac>, accessed 10.03.2017.

– It is not known how the United Kingdom may have evolved without EC-EU membership (the EEAS operates economically without the political dimension).

The logical reasoning and statistical data that showed that Britain gained substantial net benefits due to the influx of immigrants did not produce the desired effect in front of an audience scared by the sight of millions of immigrants who stormed Europe across the Mediterranean in 2015-2016. The *Leave* campaign, which was more populist, more xenophobic and with an anti-elitist tone against a system that (in their view), favors the business environment and ultimately the university environment at the expense of the working class, was not far from the ideological spectrum of the *class struggle*.

The Age of the Electorate as a factor

Most *Brexiteers* are older, less cosmopolitan, and looking back to the *good old days*. Older people are more likely to exercise voting rights. Pro-EU potential voters were generally younger people, less likely to vote, especially if on the voting day there is something better to do. The referendum had serious competition from the Glastonbury Music Festival, the European Football Championship in France, and the *Hollyoaks* TV series. The 500,000 young people who went to the European Football Championship in France could have tilted the balance in favor of the *Remainers*. The vacation period and summer activities also were factors explaining the absenteeism of the youth who (even if without enthusiasm) would have voted *Remain*⁶.

From the point of view of communication, the explanations and analyzes already provided, converge on the perception of the disparity between the realities highlighted by statistical data (especially regarding the central and eastern European immigration and its social effects) and the exaggerated perception exploited by populists. The European Union, through its representatives, cannot be accused of propaganda. Junker or Tusk did not present apocalyptic scenarios as a consequence of Brexit, but alternative reform scenarios. Probably a confirmation of this is the absence of this propaganda. The EU's public discourse has degenerated into a new language of new rigid formulas, perceived as slogans that generate a sense of saturation. As for the US, there was a discrepancy between the attitude of Congress and the Presidency. Congressional politicians were unpleasantly surprised by Brexit's outcome, as the UK was seen as a bridge between the US and mainland Europe, as a way of imposing US solutions and attitudes on the EU. As for the new president, Donald Trump, whose choice was as unpredictable as Brexit, he might have transmitted a message to Brussels by nominating as ambassador to EU Ted Malloch, a well-known Anglophile, who became notorious through the statement that he remembers with nostalgia by the collapse of the Soviet empire, and hopes to be the contemporary of other political events of its kind.

⁶ Tim Sullivan, Ray Fishman, "If your argument is based on Economics you have already lost," *Harvard Business Review*, 24 June 2016, online edition, <https://hbr.org/2016/06/if-your-argument-is-based-on-economics-youve-already-lost>, accessed 10.03.2017.

Conclusions

The rise of populist parties in the EU is progressing alongside the radicalization of Muslim minorities (in some major cities), feeding each other's rise. Despite the discourse of various theorists about post-nationalism, post-industrialism, postmodernism, or the "end of history" ... the fall into history seems to be always possible, with everything that supposes.

Freedom to choose has always been an essential attribute of a democratic society that the British citizen is proud of. A referendum on such a complex issue and with such important implications may have required more preparation time in order for the British citizen to make an informed vote. The British citizen was neither prepared nor accustomed to making such decisions, nor was he sufficiently informed, nor was he allowed enough time. The EU and Sovereignty were not perceived to be British priorities (according to surveys), being always superceded by the issue of immigration (especially cultural / identity), and economic issues (health, jobs, social assistance). The *Remain* option was backed by leaders of the three most important parties, union leaders, most economists and businessmen. Still, the massive vote for Brexit reflected deep frustrations accumulated for decades as a result of social and cultural changes in the UK. The vote "OUT" was a vote for returning to the values perceived as traditionally British. Cultural values are more important than economic disparities in such areas of dispute. As a result of Brexit, besides the inherent economic problems, the British political class and intellectuals were left with the difficult task of reconciling a divided nation and the European Union, with the task of drawing the necessary conclusions for such a redefinition.

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