

EUROSCEPTISIM, AN INCREASING PHENOMENON AMONG THE MEMBER STATES. ROAD TO BREXIT

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Abstract: In the context of a “shaking Europe”, the Eurosceptic voice sounds more loudly than ever. Known as a highly Eurosceptic member, the United Kingdom, through the lens of the rising political power of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), doubts the European Union’s plan regarding a strong and prosperous Union and it sees itself better off out of the Union after more than 40 years of rather tensed membership. This article tackles the UK’s Euroscepticism in the light of the UK-EU membership referendum in 2016, also known as Brexit.

Key words: euroscepticism, membership, United Kingdom, Brexit, member states

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THE RISE OF EUROSCEPTICISM IN EUROPE

The term “Euroscepticism” first appeared on November 11, 1985, in the British newspaper, *The Times*, to describe a skeptic opposition towards the European Union and its policies. (Apodaca, 2015)

Once seen as a British virus, Euroscepticism is now spread all over the continent. Being associated with the idea of disagreement regarding the goals of the European project, radical Eurosceptics are frightened not only of the economic effects concerning EU enlargement, but also to a great extent, of national sovereignty for the states that decide or have decided to enter the European area. (Condruz-Băcescu, 2014)

The causes of Euroscepticism and the groups of Eurosceptics are very diverse. Firstly, there are those citizens who are inherently skeptical of the EU, perceiving it as a threat to national self-determination and a violation of state sovereignty. In the United Kingdom, a lot of people seem to belong to this group, perceiving continental Europe as something else, both culturally and historically.

Secondly, a common voiced concern is the loss of identity as the fear of pan-European identity suffocating the national identity seems to frighten people. Linked to the loss of identity is the free of labor and the immigration policies of the old member states – new immigrants and laborers from Eastern Europe will impact the Dutch, French and German cultural traditions.

Thirdly, the groups of disappointed citizens from the new member states that hoped to see the benefits of EU subsidies quickly, and who imagined a rapid leap towards Western European standards of wealth.

Moreover, in the last decade, namely since the first signs of economic instability in 2008, trust in the European Union has fallen dramatically, dividing the European countries between debtors and creditors, depending on the country of origin.

Citizens in creditor countries have become more and more repellant to taking responsibility for the debts of others without having mechanisms for controlling their spending. With the fiscal compact and demands by the European Central Bank for comprehensive domestic reforms, Eurocrats have seemingly crossed many of the red lines of national sovereignty, extending their reach way beyond food safety standards to exert control over pensions, taxes, salaries, the labor market and public jobs. These areas go to the heart of welfare states and national identities. (Torreblanca and Leonard, 2013)

The depth of the economic crisis, exemplified by Greece, has brought instability and it seriously threatens the survival of the EU. The insecurity felt in the European Union is a problem that indeed affects its image. Within the European Union, Europeans' fears are linked to the changes in unemployment and general economic insecurity. Europeans feel victims of unfair policies, and the responsibility of this situation belongs to their state union. (Condruz-Băcescu, 2014).

All these struggles, together with the lack of visible improvements caused a massive decline of confidence in the European Union as an institution and its ability to achieve objectives.

This Eurosceptic portrait has been confirmed following the 2014 European Parliament elections. The collective success of the UK Independence Party (hereinafter as UKIP) and of other Eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties have heightened the concerns about the future of the European integration and, implicitly, of the European Union. The Economist wrote an article with the headline "The Eurosceptic Union" (The Economist, 2014) on that the anti-establishment parties had received a quarter of the vote or more in member states such as Greece, Italy, Denmark and France, as well as Britain. Among the parties of Eurosceptic grouping there are the aforementioned UKIP, *Front National* (in France), *Lega Nord* (in Italy) and *Golden Dawn* (in Greece).

In the case of the United Kingdom – the country to be analyzed in this article, it stands as a world power and, as such, it continues to look for recognition while maintaining a distinct identity and status, which includes a special relationship with the United States. Eurosceptic views in the UK question and reject the idea of a political union among the member states of the EU and they stand against further political integration. Eurosceptic views defend the exceptional and unique character of Britishness; this refers to the identity of the nation and its sense of forming a distinct community. In some instances, Euroscepticism is a response to "too much" diversity; an attempt to control political change, to preserve the past and protect a way of life that is fading away (Guibernau, 2016).

THE UK AS EUROSCEPTIC MEMBER

Britishness Seen from Within and from Without

World politics and international relations taught us that every country has a certain idea of its role in the world, an idea that shapes its identity and the way it sees itself in relation to other countries. There is no doubt that the historical epoch of the British Empire has significantly influenced the way the British political elite sees the position of the country in Europe. Throughout time, the British Empire had colonies on every continent and in all the oceans, which later on became independent. In the mid-20th century, the British Commonwealth was created - a voluntary intergovernmental association mostly composed of the former colonies of the Empire. All of the subordinate territories are now independent states with sovereign governments, but they all more or less remain symbolically loyal to the British Crown. Hence, Britain shaped the history of the world for over three centuries, and it comes as no surprise that many British politicians and a large part of its population still feel somewhat superior to the other European countries.

Indeed, Britain's history has been very different to that of most continental powers. Its colonies, trade, investments and patterns of emigration and immigration have been focused on North and South America, Africa and Asia as much as on Europe. Although Britain has been involved in countless European wars, its history has been more oriented to other continents than that of any continental power. (Grant, 2008) This had an important impact on how UK perceives the Union, as the British historian Vernon Bogdanor points out "for centuries, we lived in splendid isolation, protected by the Navy and the Empire... Now, of course, that period of isolation has long gone, but perhaps it still retains some of its impact upon the British people, who do not want ties with the Continent." (Bogdanor, 2013)

The British have never been terribly popular members of the European Union. Long before they joined, many continentals thought them too different to be constructive members of what was then the European Economic Community (EEC). In January 1963, General de Gaulle held a press conference to set out his reasons for vetoing UK's application for membership. Some may still resonate today: "England in effect is insular, she is maritime, she is linked through her exchanges, her markets, her supply lines to the most diverse and often the most distant countries; she pursues essentially industrial and commercial activities, and only slight agricultural ones. She has in all her doings very marked and very original habits and traditions... In short, the nature, the structure, the very situation [conjuncture] that are England's differ profoundly from those of the continentals. What is to be done in order that England, as she lives, produces and trades, can be incorporated into the Common Market, as it has been conceived and as it functions?" (De Gaulle, 1963).

The UK's Rocky Relationship with Europe: A Short Incursion into History

The formation of the European Union had its origins following the Second World War, in the desire to tie Europe's nations so closely together that war will no longer bring such damage on each other. Winston Churchill was the one who fully supported this idea, proposing for Europe "a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom (...) a kind of United States of Europe". (Churchill, 1946)

Britain did not partake in the founding of the EU. The founding club of states established basic rules that cannot easily be changed, and thus members who join later will very often encounter difficulties to adapt to the rules already in place.

However, Britain had a couple of opportunities to participate, but it decided to stay on the sidelines. The first step towards creating a federal Europe was made in the 1950s, when negotiations over the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community began. The Labour Government of Clement Attlee was invited to take part but officially declined the offer. Later, when the ECSC was put in place, the six founding countries wanted to extend the common market for coal and steel into a general common market. In 1957, the Treaty of the European Community (also known as the Treaty of Rome) was signed, which led to the creation of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. This was a very important event in the formation of the modern European Community, but the Conservative Government of Anthony Eden did not recognize its importance and refused to sign the treaty.

Jean Monnet, one of the architects of the ECSC, said “I never understood why the British did not join. I came to the conclusion that it must have been because it was the price of victory – the illusion that you could maintain what you had, without change.” (Wilson, 2014)

In the aftermath of the treaty, the six EEC members flourished economically whereas Britain suffered continuous economic decline. In 1961, the Conservative Government, led by Harold Macmillan, launched the idea of opening negotiation for admission to the EU but it was vetoed by the French President Charles de Gaulle. He argued that their strong link to the USA as well as the British Commonwealth could hinder the British in their dedication to the EEC. In 1967, the Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson filed another application but the De Gaulle rejected it once again. Two years later, the new French President Georges Pompidou removed the veto and finally in 1973, the UK, led by the Europe-oriented Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, joined the EEC.

At the time, the Labour party was opposed to the EEC and promised to hold a referendum on withdrawal if they came into power. In 1975 the Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson, kept its word and held a referendum. However, in June 1975, 67% of voters agreed on continuing the membership in the EEC.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was appointed Prime Minister. The Iron Lady is often referred to as being Eurosceptic as she openly expressed her very negative attitude towards the EEC. The period of her service was marked by an increasing political isolation of Britain from Europe. She was ardently against complete economic, political and social integration. Her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, argued that Britain contributed much more to the European budget than the other countries. In response, in 1984 Margaret Thatcher’s government negotiated a rebate on the British contribution, and thus received some of its money back. The main reason for this was the fact that a great share of the European budget is spent on the Common Agricultural Policy and since farming does not represent a major sector in the UK economy, Britain felt that it benefited much less than other countries.

Moreover, for Margaret Thatcher, Britain was losing its independence and sovereignty by transferring the power of decision-making to Brussels. In her “Bruges Speech” in 1988, she stated that “to try to suppress nationhood and

concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardize the objectives we seek to achieve (...) Working more closely together does not require power to be centralized in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy.” (Thatcher, 1988)

However, Margaret Thatcher had been unable to stop Europe’s march towards political union, and was gone by the time the Maastricht Treaty was signed by her successor John Major in 1992. This involved huge transfers of power to the new European Union. Britain secured opt-outs from the single currency and the social policy chapter. But to the treaty’s critics – including many Tory rebels – it undermined the British tradition of the inviolable sovereignty of parliament. (Wilson, 2014)

The Rise of UKIP

UKIP’s origins trace back to 1993, when Alan Sked established the Anti-Federalist League, which campaigned against the Treaty of Maastricht. Currently led by Nigel Farage, who has been an insider since the party’s foundation, it distinguishes itself as the British party calling simply and directly for UK withdrawal from the European Union. UKIP is situated on the center-right of the political spectrum, and the party states that it is a patriotic party. (Hope, 2014) Patriotism in this context, this should be understood as proudness of Britain and its current standing, and firmly believing in the country being better off without the EU. (Vuorinen, 2015)

UKIP’s success was not obtained overnight. Small parties, as it was the case of UKIP in the 1990s, have the habit of disintegrating into internal warfare or being wiped out by unexpected changes of the electoral system and political fashion. But UKIP managed to keep on its own track and defy the predictions of those who did not take them into consideration. (Hunt, 2014)

After many years in which UKIP almost did not matter on the British political stage, but with an increasing influence among its citizens year by year, the party managed to achieve its first seats from the European Parliament in 1999, when three Members of the European Parliament were elected. In 2004 EU-elections UKIP performed very well, as the party 12 seats (16% of the votes) from the European Parliament. In 2009, the party came second in the EU-elections in the UK winning 13 seats (16.5% of votes). On the following round in 2014, UKIP, against all odds, beat the current governmental parties, the Conservatives and Labour, winning 27.5% of votes. UKIP’s success has steadily grown, as time by time, the party has increased its number of seats in the European Parliament (Hunt, 2014). These electoral outcomes undeniably underline the “rise” of the party; consequently, UKIP is Britain’s most prosperous single-issue party.

Nowadays, most of the UKIP’s actions are largely centered on Nigel Farage, who is the most known figure of the party. In an interview conducted by Catherine Dalton, Farage is characterized as being polite, yet persuasive character. It seems that Farage’s dauntless style and personality bisect people, and he is either loved or hated (Dalton, 2013). His colorful and verbally rich speeches are made well known by the media: he has insulted German chancellor Angela Merkel saying that “she is incredibly cold. I always say – I agree this is a bit rude – but whatever you think of the public image of Merkel, in private she is even more miserable. I warm to more extrovert people.” (The Guardian, 2014) As concerns the former President of the European Council - Herman van Rompuy,

Farage declared that he “has the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk.” (The Guardian, 2010) Farage’s comments in the media are generally rather witty and drastic, but it should arguably be seen as part of his public character.

Some of Farage’s comments on the EU are indeed very harsh. During a European Council meeting held in Strasbourg on November 24, 2010, Nigel Farage said that “we don’t want that flag. We don’t want the anthem. We don’t want this political class. We want the whole thing consigned to the dustbin of history.” He had also a few comments for the Eurocrats saying that “your obsession with creating this Euro state means that you’re happy to destroy democracy. You appear to be happy for millions and millions of people to be unemployed and to be poor. Untold millions must suffer so that your Euro dream can continue.” (Farage, 2010)

During the various occasions when they have the chance to speak, UKIP members actively highlight the EU-memberships costs to Britain, and offers alternatives as though what an independent Britain would look like. They argue that Britain would save £55 million of membership fees daily, if UK withdraws. UKIP manifestos feature a large variety of policies, but everything is centered on Euroscepticism. UKIP had come up in 2015 with tougher policies regarding various issues, three of them being considered as highly important: immigration, NHS (National Health Service) and the economy.

Immigration is seen by UKIP as being far too high, seeing that “seven million immigrants came to live in Britain under the last Labour government and another two million have arrived under the Tories” (UKIP, 2015a). UKIP demands that border control must be completely return to Britain, and immigrants entering the UK must be financially independent for five years. Within these five years, immigrants are not allowed to use the services of the private sector. For these reasons, UKIP promises to “set out in full how we would aim to reduce migration, guarantee border security, accommodate sensible numbers of foreign students, protect asylum seekers, and make sure new migrants do not place undue pressure on our NHS”. (The Telegraph, 2015) On the matters of social benefits and other civil assistance, these are to be awarded for British citizens only, or to people who have stayed in the UK for five or more consecutive years. Child benefits will only be paid for children who are UK-citizens, and live in the country for good.

These exacerbated tensions and pressures coming from UKIP has been felt by the ruling Conservatives, with Prime Minister David Cameron promising to renegotiate Britain’s role in Europe and hold an “in-out” referendum on EU membership in the next Parliament, if his party won the majority at the 2015 Parliamentary elections – which, against all expectations, he did. (Mason, 2014)

Later on, David Cameron has called for this (second) referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU to take place on June 23, 2016. The implications of this referendum – the UK outside the EU and the EU without UK – are to be presented in the next section of this article.

All things considered, UKIP nowadays portrays itself as a significant minor party with over 35,000 members (UKIP, 2015b). The rise of the party has been noteworthy, and UKIP can now safely be considered as a true, political force that can conveniently challenge the current governmental parties. The success of UKIP attracted broad attention, widely taken as evidence of a wave of public Euroscepticism across the continent.

BREXIT 2016: THE UK WITHOUT THE EU AND VICE VERSA

As it is very difficult to predict how will the picture of the UK look like after a possible Brexit, the arguments of both sides – “remain” and “leave” – will be presented in this section. Several fields will be taken into consideration in order to depict this picture: trade, immigration, international influence and the identity conflict between British and European.

Trade

The discussions on the UK trade with Europe and with other international actors are very diverse when it comes to perceive them through the lens of Brexit. On one side of the spectrum, there is the pro-Europe thinktank, the Centre for European Reform (CER) that says that on its own, the UK would have much less bargaining power than being part of the EU (CER, 2014), while on the other side, there is the Eurosceptic Bruges Group saying that Britain will be able to negotiate with other international trade actors without being encumbered by the differing interests of other EU nations that often have different outlook to the UK (Myddelton, 2013).

The EU’s single market employs several tools to boost trade among EU countries. First, it eliminates tariffs on goods. Second, it establishes the right of companies and people to sell their goods, services or labor, or to invest in other member states. Third, it reduces the cost of potential exporters having to comply with 28 different national rules. Thus, the EU creates regulatory standards, and then requires all member states to allow goods that comply with those standards to be sold unhindered across the single market. (European Commission, 2012)

However, one of the chief reasons why UK wants to leave the EU is that it wants to conclude its own agreements with other international trade actors like China, Brazil, Japan and India, but the EU regulation hinders it to do so. CER writes that the EU has a “plethora” of foreign trade agreements with third countries and a complex system of unilateral trade preferences and if Britain leaves, it will not inherit the EU’s bilateral trade agreements; it will have to renegotiate trade agreements with non-European countries from scratch. Renegotiating these would be far from straightforward. The process would be time-consuming, leaving Britain’s exporters facing higher barriers to trade and uncertainty over market access, which would reduce investment (CER, 2014).

The Bruges Group is for the UK to leave the EU saying that less than 10% of the British economy is involved with trade with the EU yet 100% of the economy is hamstrung by excessive EU regulations which disproportionately harm small and medium sized enterprises (Myddelton, 2013). Outside of the EU, Britain can retake its seat on the World Trade Organization and negotiate according to its best interests instead of being represented by an EU trade commissioner who is currently from Belgium. Britain will then be able to negotiate without being encumbered by the differing interests of other EU nations that often have different outlook to the UK (Myddelton, 2013).

Immigration

Immigration is a disputed political issue in the UK both because the costs and benefits are not distributed evenly and as perceptions have become disconnected with reality, partly due to hostile media coverage (Irwin, 2015).

The free movement of people – one of the “four freedoms” of goods, capital, services and labor – is a fundamental principle of the EU’s single market. Member states open their labor markets to immigrants, knowing that the others will do the same. However, since the EU’s enlargement to the East in 2004, many Britons feel that the reciprocal arrangement has broken down: free movement is no longer perceived to be an arrangement that works for the mutual benefit of both Britons and other Europeans. (CER, 2013)

UKIP wants to see a work permit system introduced, so that EU nationals would face the same visa restrictions as those from outside the EU, which it says would reduce migration numbers. This would create job opportunities for British workers and boost wages, as well as easing pressure on schools, hospitals and other public services.

According to CER, there are many high-skilled European immigrants in the UK, who raise British workers’ productivity and hence their wages. EU immigration is good for the public finances, as immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in public spending. There are some costs that arise from higher demand for housing and public services, but current levels of immigration help Britain to deal with the costs of an ageing population, by replacing retiring workers and by raising more taxes to pay for health and pension costs. (CER, 2014)

If Britain left the EU, it would almost certainly reduce immigration in a period when demographic and economic changes make access to European labor a significant benefit. And it might endanger the residency rights of over one million Britons living on the continent. Ultimately, Britain must decide whether the economic benefits of free EU migration are a reason to stay in Europe.

International Influence

The UK currently enjoys considerable influence both in and through the EU. In the event of Brexit, changes will be inevitable, affecting the impact the international influence the UK and the EU will have.

Language plays a fundamental role in influencing beyond one’s borders. The English language is the most commonly used language of EU institutions and in the event of Brexit it is likely that this will stay the case as English is so widely spoken and used internationally. Changing it to any other language would affect the influence the EU has on its global reach and external communication.

According to the Global Diplomatic Forum, 5% of all staff from EU institutions are British nationals, who are regarded as offering significant contribution especially to the European External Action Service. Brexit may result in loss of qualified talents for the EU institutions (Global Diplomatic Forum).

The UK has traditionally taken leadership (alongside France) in major EU negotiations and engagements with the international community, as seen with the Iranian nuclear deal and the war on terrorism. Brexit may affect the influence the EU has in major international events, given that at present there are underlying doubts and concerns over the coherence and efficiency of the European Common Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. With Brexit, the UK will lose the EU umbrella, affecting the significant leverage it has on the international scene. The UK may also lose France and Germany as major international partners in coordinating international policies (Global Diplomatic Forum).

Identity Conflict: British or European?

For some Britons, the Brexit vote is not just a vote on economic issues or on immigration, but it goes deeper than this. Their problem is that of identity, which makes them question whether they are British or European.

For a great share of the British population, it is crystal clear that the direction in which the EU is heading is that of continuing centralization of power in the EU and away from the member states, that the Eurozone accelerates its moves towards being a single European Superstate (Fiske, 2016).

While further integration seems worrying to them, the part that troubles them the most about the European project is the repeated and continuing attempts to create a “European identity”. The Leave campaigners contest what they call the focus on indoctrinating children into a European identity. This indoctrination is, they say, a great deal of EU propaganda in schools with colorful cartoon books having been distributed to primary schools for several years, all of which promote the EU. Moreover, a legislation called “Learning EU at School” was even passed in the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2015).

The Brexiters perceive the proposals the EU is planning as frightening as it proposes to massively integrate the EU into the daily education of British children, with textbooks being rewritten to give more prominence to the EU and for children to be taught the “values on which EU integration is based”, with the aim for them to take an active interest in European Integration and to overcome Euroscepticism. Eurosceptics see this as an attempt to ensure that their children grow up feeling more European than they do British. Thus, the message of the Leave campaign is that of a Britain that is not only independent, but a Great Britain which is proud of retaining its own sense of national identity (Fiske, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The implications of Brexit are major. In a world in which Europe’s demographic, economic, financial, military and diplomatic weight is already in a certain decline, it would lose its second-most populous member, its second-largest economy and its principal military power. Brexit would alarm the EU’s allies around the world, led by the U.S., which is unequivocal in its support for continued U.K. membership of the EU. But it would comfort the EU’s rivals, first and foremost Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

Brexit would also represent the most tangible manifestation of European disintegration. It would strengthen the already strong and growing tendencies in the EU and risk unleashing a chain-reaction that would culminate in other member states deciding to leave. At the end of this road could lie, in the worst case scenario, the collapse of the Euro, the fragmentation of the European market, a much weaker Europe in the world, and less peaceful international relations in Europe.

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Submitted:
November 18, 2016

Revised:
November 28, 2016

Accepted:
November 30, 2016

Published online:
December 29, 2016