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Great Britain and the European Union Beyond Brexit

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Introduction

Brexit is a term coined of the words “British exit”, referring to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. First used in 2012 by the founder of the British Influence think-tank Peter Wilding, it became the most frequently used political term in 2016, the year when the British electorate chose to leave the European Union and thus change the political landscape of the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The root of Brexit

The long relationship between Britain and the European Union could at times be complex. Sharing power and decision-making with Brussels has been a continuous reason for dissatisfaction fuelled by several politicians, particularly in the UK Independence Party and partly among the Conservatives. But Brexit as a valid political option only came to life when it was included in the Conservative

party Manifesto of 2015. For many months Cameron's team gathered on the second floor of 10 Downing Street, shaping the Manifesto that would have a big, positive impact in securing the re-election of the Tories. Their main target, set out by the political strategist Sir Lynton Crosby, hired to run the election campaign, was to do no harm. The focus would be on the economy and a weak opposition, a promise of a modern Conservative party that would decisively lead Britain into the future. With the focus on winning over the nation, Sir Lynton neglected party politics, a concern for David Cameron who had been fighting endless attacks by the more conservative Conservatives, attacks that led to an unpleasant division within his party, to a large extent responsible for the unexpected results of the 2014 European election in which the Tories came third. The success of UKIP (UK Independence Party), a right-wing political party that has been focusing its narrative on Euroscepticism, showed its threat to the Conservatives. Fearing that its leader Nigel Farage, an outspoken EU critic, would attract an uncomfortable number of Tories (and voters), the Prime Minister felt he needed to find a way to satisfy the Eurosceptic members on the right edges of his party. A referendum that would leave the decision on Britain's future within the EU to its people seemed like a valid way to satisfy their repeated demands to address the issue. Besides, it had been 40 years since the British people had not been given an opportunity to

give their stance towards the EU and Cameron felt a referendum was the right thing to do.

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He was confident the result would be in favour of staying in the EU and thus silence the Eurosceptics in the same way the Scotland referendum had silenced those calling for an independent Scotland. David Cameron personally insisted the promise of a referendum to be put on page 72 of the Manifesto, despite objections from the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. The focus on the economy suddenly became out of focus. Soon there would be no one left to modernise the party, for David Cameron would resign within hours of the referendum, followed by George Osborne. The one thing that remained was page 72.

The fight for Europe

The referendum campaign was closely followed not only in the United Kingdom but all over the world. As Britain's rhetoric for independence from Brussels got louder, it attracted anti-European voices from other parts of Europe. However, despite the growing

populist sentiments globally, David Cameron and the majority of Britain's intelligentsia were confident that the public would vote to stay in the European Union. The Prime Minister's confidence was such that at the G20 summit in Brisbane he predicted a referendum result of 70:30 for the Remainers. In the end, the Remainers lost by 52:48. Several circumstantial factors led to such a result.

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The Prime Minister's efforts to secure a deal with the EU member states in Brussels, particularly on the subjects of immigration and sovereignty, were criticized as inefficient in the British parliament. At the same time, the Brexiteers got a crucial addition with Boris Johnson who gave their campaign a significant boost. Labour, although traditionally a pro-EU party, was campaigning unconvincingly led by their Eurosceptic leader Jeremy Corbyn. The media played its role too, although the result shows that it did not have the final say on the voter's decision. Had it been the case, the British would probably have voted Remain, in line with what The Daily Mail, arguably the most influential daily paper in the country, had been advocating.

However, the reporting poisoned by the 24 hour news obsessed with headlines didn't exactly help the Remainers either. The Brexit camp with Boris Johnson speaking in punch lines designed to create headlines had a better deal for anyone who wanted to confirm his stance that Brussels was disabling Britain's success and immigrants made the locals poor. So vague was the reporting on the misleading information advertised by the Leave campaign, that only after the referendum did it become clear that the public relied on facts that were not true. The British media highly underestimated the national mood. The stable economy and global perspective wasn't satisfactory to 17,410,742 British citizens who voted for Britain to part with the EU.

The new chapter

Britain's unique geographical characteristics have become even more pronounced during the negotiation period of parting from the European Union. The island mentality, its peoples nostalgia related to the country's abundant history and the inability to find its new defined role on the geopolitical stage of the world are particularly visible now, in the debate about Britain's future outside of Europe. For decades Britain's geopolitical outlook was in tune with its geographical position: it nurtured a close partnership with Europe while investing in a special relationship with the USA,

emphasizing their shared history, language and values. Outside of a unified Europe, Britain will have to define its position in the Western world and fill the gap that is likely to be created with constructive relationships with its European neighbor and the rest of the world.

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In the month when the United Kingdom was set to officially leave the European Union, an unsettling uncertainty about the future of Britain and the EU remains. At the time of writing this piece, although only days away from the agreed date when Britain is to leave the EU, there are few facts about the weeks ahead. There is even, however small, a doubt whether the United Kingdom will leave the European Union after all.

However, considering that Brexit is a more likely option, it is important to understand the impact it is going to have not only on the British Isles but on the European Union too, currently facing the biggest disruption in its history. Following the referendum result in 2016, there were

fears that other members of the EU will follow Britain's example. However, the negotiation process has likely discouraged nations of other member states to embark on the unsettling and complicated referendum journey. This may signify a stable EU, but without Britain, a very different one, too. Without the reserved British stance on further integration and efforts to make Europe more economically liberal, the future of the EU will to a large extent be in Franco-German hands. The absence of the UK might weaken the strong bond between Europe and Washington. Traditionally, it was Britain who successfully led the dialogue between Washington and Brussels reassuring both sides. On the other hand, left without its long term European partner, Britain will naturally seek for a "political brotherhood" across the Atlantic. Brexit poses a great risk for Britain's financial industry that may lose its global importance if the negotiations fail to secure a financial passport that would allow foreign banks to work in the UK. Adding the implications of a more limited trade with European countries, the United Kingdom will invest great efforts in its partnership with United States, which will be welcome by President Donald Trump who has previously expressed sympathy for the Brexit cause.

China is more likely to be on the side of the EU in this split. Given that Britain accounts for only 13.6% of China's trade with the EU, it is likely it

will remain cautious when it comes to a closer relationship with the UK. A post-Brexit Britain is highly unlikely to benefit from its relationship with Russia, considering the diplomatic tensions that have lately marked the dialogue between the two countries. Whereas the Russian moneyed elite may feel more freedom to consider Britain their second home once the EU rules do not apply, it will to a large extent depend on whether the two countries settle their disputes on various issues, additionally damaged by the poisoning of a former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in England.

The European Union is likely to suffer from the absence of Britain. This would not be limited only to its economy. Britain has added to the EU not just a vibrant economy but deep democratic values and institutions that set an example to newer members of the EU with weaker democratic values and human rights. One could argue that some states of the EU will have lost an important mentor in building strong institutions. If long-term Brexit shows to have been a success for Britain's economy, it will undoubtedly be used in the populist dialogue that could be damaging for the stability within the European Union.

Another leading post-Brexit question will be security. Britain has been the country with one of the largest military capabilities, defence budgets and credibility on security issues. Its

parting will potentially weaken the security of the EU. While it is expected that new ways of joint security and intelligence efforts between the EU and the UK will be established for the benefit of the world's safety, it will take time to do so. Brexit should have no significant impact on the UK's position in NATO, where it has an important role. However, the fact that there will be two cooperation entities, the one between NATO and the EU and NATO and the UK, will create a new dynamic. It will be crucial for Britain to display that the repeated notion that leaving the EU does not mean leaving Europe is much more than just words.

Conclusion: Looking for optimism

The continuous delay of a Brexit deal and inability for Theresa May to reconcile her government and Brussels have created an unfavourable image of Britain. In the past months, the reputation of British pragmatism, competence and negotiation capabilities have been severely damaged. However, interestingly, the ongoing uncertainty has not created an economic shock, contrary to most predictions. In reality, the economy has grown at an average of about 1.5% per year since the referendum, the wages have risen and the level of unemployment is the lowest on record. On the other side, retail spending and investments have slowed sharply, although it is imprecise to separate the impact of Brexit from other circumstances. The pound

is still showing the belief of the financial world that Britain will take pragmatic steps to remain a key international player.

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It is currently easier to recognize the damage Brexit will do than its opportunities. However, in the years to come the United Kingdom will potentially have the chance to benefit from its independence from the EU. Commercial policies, investments and trade will be in the hands of Westminster, as will its agricultural policy and diplomatic narrative. What may be seen as isolation could prove to become freedom to create new opportunities and new global partnerships.

In her traditional televised speech of 2018 the Queen might have opened a topic that will set the tone for a post-Brexit United Kingdom. With positioning the Commonwealth in the central part of her speech, the Queen might have reminded the British that their natural instinct should be to look towards a historical alliance that includes 53 countries with 2.4 billion people, a third of the world's population.

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