

RESEARCH COLUMN

Why the British 'leave-vote' may end up rescuing rather than undermining the EU

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Doomsday preachers suggested that Brexit and Trump would mean the end of the liberal world order as we know it and thus the end of the EU. The research presented in a forthcoming book of which this small column is an excerpt suggests the opposite. Not only have Europeans turned their back to populism by voting yes to reforms and pro-EU-parties and governments in different member states over the past months, but Brexit and Trump also seem to have given a new momentum to the European project. The forthcoming book reflects on why Brexit cannot be generalised to the rest of the continent but is the result of a complicated and special British conception of what it means to be a sovereign state. Moreover and paradoxically, surveys show that the greatest fear among Europeans today is not more European integration but right wing populism and European Disunion.

There are three perspectives to have in mind when analysing Brexit and how it has affected the EU: The rise of populist movements and their effect on the national member states, the British conception of sovereignty which ended up playing a decisive role in the referendum debate, and the uniqueness of the UK compared to other member states.

Firstly, populism should not be seen as an unstoppable global and European trend – it is and always was a very crude narrative proposed by the media and certain commentators. As it is obviously impossible and risky to predict about the future the analysis here is based on a critical examination of the projections made about populism as a general Western phenomenon fostered by anti-establishment sentiments following the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the election of Trump in November 2016. Little in the collected data we have looked at for this research suggests that populism is a coherent unstoppable wave that is taking all liberal institutions down. In fact, on the contrary several things today suggest that because of Brexit and Trump, Europeans are moving closer together, not further apart. An investigation of the past three national/presidential



Secondly, the main finding when it comes to the British goodbye to the EU was its conception of sovereignty as a zero sum game. More Europe means less Britain. But as I argue in my article and book this is a highly problematic conception today where being sovereign is much more about being able to influence ones own destiny rather than having to copy others decisions. My argument in the attached article is that this is exactly what the UK will be forced to do if and when it leaves: copy everyone else's rules – including the EU's – simply in order to be able to trade. My message is thus that solving problems jointly with other nations should not be equated with a loss of sovereignty but as a unique opportunity to actually form one's own destiny.

Lastly, we need to understand why the UK case is special and how this affects its relationship with the EU. Historically, the EU in Britain was framed as a 'business arrangement' – in the wording of James Callaghan – and played into the utilitarian idea, that pooling sovereignty with other European states should be based on a calculation of the cost and benefits of doing so. Hence, during the referendum campaign, the leave-campaign was premised on the belief that the UK could quit the project, because it now had higher costs than benefits, with no deleterious consequences. The EU had simply developed beyond the control of the UK and especially the British people. To this comes, as I explain in the article, of course the country's 'glorious' colonial past together with its isolation – also in terms of general knowledge – from the rest of Europe. It thus both amused and shocked a lot of people that the most googled words on the eve of the Brexit referendum – when the result *had* been announced – was: 'What is the EU'?

elections in Europe – the Dutch, Austrian and French – shows not tendencies of a populist surge among Europeans but in fact the opposite.

This tendency is further confirmed when investigating recent opinion polls and surveys documenting that the rise in right wing populism in Europe has indeed been decreasing together with a stabilization in the support for right wing parties. It can also be shown that the largest fear among Europeans today is in fact not globalisation or more power to Brussels but almost the contrary: a rise and increasing empowerment of right wing populism.

Whether other countries – i.e. the Scandinavians – in the future will follow in the UK's footsteps and opt for a referendum is hard to predict. However, a lot will probably depend on the deal that the UK manages to negotiate with Brussels. Denmark in particular has previously on many occasions used the UK as a negotiating shield and as a copycat for deals that Denmark wanted to obtain for itself. It is therefore also quite clear that should the Brits get a deal that – when seen from an equally sovereignty obsessed nation's perspective – is too tempting, another referendum on Europe cannot be entirely excluded.

The above is a twisted summary of a chapter that will be published in F. Fabbrini (ed.), *The Law & Politics of Brexit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A more in depth working paper version can also be read [here](#)