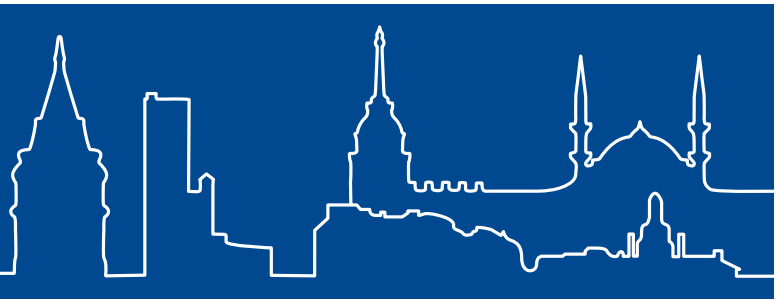
IPC–MERCATOR POLICY BRIEF



BREXIT: WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

Senem Aydın-Düzgit

On 23 June, the British public voted to determine whether their country were to leave or remain inside the European Union (EU). The turnout was at 72 per cent, and the result was a narrow call with 52 per cent of the voters choosing to end Britain's membership of the EU. Britain was never an ordinary EU member state. Its membership was contested from the start, both within the EU by those who wished to see a more federal Europe, and within the country itself, where a national identity resting historically on the supremacy of the national parliament's sovereignty enjoyed an uneasy relationship with Europe. Although opt-outs from the Schengen Treaty and the monetary union were both products and manifestations of this conflicted relationship, they were also instruments to manage Britain's uneasiness with attempts towards further political integration in the absence of any other institutional mechanism. This changed radically with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty which, through its Article 50, introduced for the first time the legal possibility for member states to exit the EU. This in turn ignited a major debate in Britain, where the case to leave the Union began to be pushed primarily by the Eurosceptic backbenchers of the Conservative Party.

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Prime Minister David Cameron's relationship with the Eurosceptic backbenchers in his party had never been easy. He took several measures in the past-such as withdrawing his party from the centre-right federalist EPP group in the European Parliament- to fend off their criticisms. Especially after the 2010 elections where the number of Eurosceptic MPs in the party increased to comprise almost half of all the total party MPs, the vocal opposition to the EU within the party and the calls for a national referendum on the country's EU membership increased. In a bid to unify his party, Cameron finalised a deal with the European Council in February 2016 to secure a "special status" for Britain inside the EU before setting the date of the national referendum. The deal that contained certain provisions on immigration and institutional reform satisfied no one and paved the way for a bitterly fought and polarised referendum campaign.

The leave campaign rested largely on populist arguments on migration where it was presented as the major culprit for the deterioration of the British national health system, the education system and depressed wages; on displays of outright racism thanks to the discourses of far-right UKIP and its leader Nigel Farage; on the disconnect between the "people" and the "Brussels elite"; and on the delusions of a "golden age" of British sovereign power that could return once the country was out of the Union. The ''leave'' campaign in particular did not shy away from resorting to distorted arguments and even outright lies in securing the vote to exit from the Union. Take, for instance, the issue of Turkey's membership to the EU which had suddenly occupied a key position in the ''leave'' campaign. Although accession negotiations are almost technically frozen and Turkish membership does not seem to be in sight for the foreseeable future, the "leave" campaigners, and in particular UKIP, employed Turkish accession as an imminent "threat" which was going to result in a mass influx of migrants into Britain. The "politics of fear" was also dominant in the remain camp where the threat of economic devastation was mainly used to lure voters into voting in favour of membership. Hence an issue as complex as EU membership was reduced to a bitter fight between a nativist politics of identity and economic scaremongering, lacking a credible future vision on both sides.

An early study demonstrates the ways in which these tactics may have played out in the outcome.[1] It identifies the top five statistically significant factors behind the voters' choice as the level of education, income, age, occupation and the possession of a passport (hence an indication of international travel). Unsurprisingly, those with a higher education, professional qualifications, income and a passport are found to be more likely to vote for remain. The generational divide also becomes apparent where preference for Brexit seems to be higher among the older generations. A considerable regional divide is also present. While London, Scotland and Northern Ireland overwhelmingly voted in favour of remain, every other region chose to leave the EU. Setting aside the regional exceptions (which, like in the case of Scotland, seems to defy the general demographic trends), the real opposition to the EU seems to have come from the British working class and the lower middle classes, hence the so-called "losers" of globalisation. Much ink has already been spilt on how these results can be interpreted, and many of the present theories will undoubtedly come under rigorous scholarly scrutiny in the years to come. For now, the most popular explanations centre on a combination of economic insecurity and fears (directed against immigration), culture and values (i.e. nativists vs. cosmopolitans), and heavy economic inequalities.[2] Although yet to be

tested, the populist claims to identity seem to have resonated with a certain segment of the electorate whereas the remain camp seems to have failed to construct a promising future vision other than "catastrophe without the EU", thus limiting its appeal to those who are already considered winners of Europeanisation and globalisation and further alienating the rest of the population.

The Brexit vote thus gives us much to contemplate about, not only concerning the future of Britain, but also the fate of politics and democracy in Europe and across the globe. On the one hand, there is the more immediate and practical question of the conditions and mechanisms under which Britain will exit the EU, which are far from being certain. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty has to be invoked by the leaving state and stipulates a two-year timetable for the two sides to agree on the terms of departure. After Cameron's resignation, the new leader will invoke Article 50 or attempt to undertake another form of inter-governmental agreement with the EU, which was a proposal put forward by the leave campaign before the referendum. The options that are currently on the table range from the Norwegian model where the country remains a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), contributes to the EU budget and allows for the free movement of people to the complete opt-out model where Britain's relationship with the EU is reduced to that of a mere partner whose trade with the Union is subject to the WTO rules like any other. The chosen path will determine the economic consequences of Brexit (i.e. the complete opt-out expected as the least desirable outcome for the British economy) as well as the territorial unity of the country (i.e. with the expected second Scottish referendum of independence). The option that will define the future of the relationship will hinge as much as on the choice of the new Conservative leadership as on the attitude of the EU. German Chancellor Merkel already expressed that there will be no talks with Britain until the country invokes Article 50.

The major challenge that will be faced by EU policy makers after Brexit is to strike the right balance between keeping Britain engaged with Europe to the maximum benefit of both sides while making the exit option an unattractive precedent for other member states to follow. It is well known that the EU is already struggling under the weight of the migration crisis and the slow recovery in the Eurozone, the management of which are fuelling disintegration tendencies channelled primarily through right wing populist parties in the EU. Brexit reduces the EU's economic and foreign policy weight in the global scene and feeds into Euroscepticism both at home and abroad. In doing that, it also plays into the hands of Russia as its main contender for power in its wider neighbourhood. Brexit also has implications for the EU's most successful foreign policy to date, namely the enlargement policy and in particular, EU-Turkey relations. Enlargement policy is already in dire straits due to the Eurocrisis and the various economic and political troubles in the Western Balkans and Turkey. The fact that a major champion of EU enlargement is no longer a member state and thus out of EU decision-making structures naturally does not bode well for enlargement policy. Nonetheless, the way in which Brexit is managed and resolved may have considerable ramifications for the EU's relations with enlargement countries like Turkey that do not have the prospect of immediate membership, but that could take their place in novel arrangements of differentiated integration triggered by Brexit.

Beyond its immediate ramifications, Brexit confronts us with the unsettling fact that populist politics of fear is not an isolated, but a global phenomenon which produces results with an

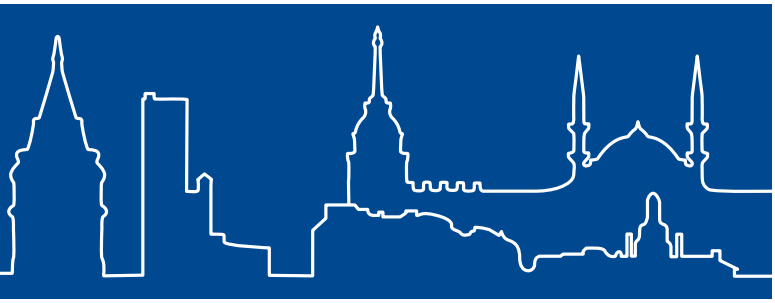
electorate that feels alienated and relatively worse off in the face of globalisation and rapid socio-economic change. It shows us that in the absence of a credible and appealing agenda of reform and a vision for the "good society", rational arguments to "correct" populist claims may not at all resonate with voters who choose to follow reactionary and emotional appeals to claim what is "theirs", be it economic and/or cultural resources. It also reminds us once again that we need to think more on the functioning of representative democracy and the ways to improve it, particularly concerning the use of referenda which rest on an outdated definition of the concept of demos.

END NOTES

1 | John Burn-Murdoch, "Brexit: The Demographic Divide", Financial Times Data, 24 June 2016, available at http://blogs.ft.com/ftdata/2016/06/24/brexit-demographic-divide-eu-referendum-results/

2 | For an overview, see John Cassidy, "Why the Remain Campaign Lost the Brexit Vote", The New Yorker, 24 June 2016, available at http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/why-the-remain-campaign-lost-the-brexit-vote

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