

Brexit: Time for a Reflection Period about the *Finalité* of European Integration

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Some events seem to be outside the scope of political imagination, even if they are not improbable. That the United Kingdom, one of the European Union's (EU) largest and politically most influential Member States, might leave the EU, is one of these events. The outcome of the referendum of June 23, 2016 has evoked surprise and notions of doom. "Catastrophe", "explosion of a bomb", "drama," are only some of the terms used by politicians and media observers to express their surprise and to signal that they are overwhelmed by the outcome. Reactions in the immediate aftermath of the referendum were uncoordinated, conflicting, and did not show a strong spirit of European integration. For example, it is not self-evident why the foreign ministers of the six founding Member States should gather to strategize over the response to the referendum, thus effectively excluding the 21 other Member States.

The outcome of the referendum calls for a period of reflection. It has created a situation in which the Member States should try to clarify the purpose and destination of the integration process. Obviously, in light of conflicting views, such a process will be difficult and may only yield a plan that is far from comprehensive. Further, for historians of the integration process, a call for a period of reflection may well evoke mixed feelings. A "period of reflection" was launched after the rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands in late spring 2005, seeking to reconnect the citizens with the European project and lead to a decision about the fate of the Constitution. In January 2007, the German Presidency declared that this reflection period was over, and soon thereafter, the substance of the Constitutional Treaty was converted into what would later be called the Lisbon Treaty. Then, the main objective appeared to have been to ameliorate the effects of the negative referenda in France and in the Netherlands. This, of course, is a recurring pattern: similar moves took place after negative referenda in Denmark and Ireland. The art of circumventing or correcting popular referenda is – so it seems – rather well developed, and it is thus not surprising that some EU federalist are musing publicly about ways to undo the referendum of June 23rd. Retrospectively, it is still unclear what exactly the authorities were reflecting about after the negative referenda on the Constitutional Treaty, and how they thought their reflections would reintegrate disaffected

European citizens. An open discussion of diverging political options was not in evidence then; instead, the question only seemed to be how to achieve “more Europe”.

The immediate aftermath of the British referendum does, therefore, not bode well for those who hope that it might inaugurate a period for real reflection. Some seem to hope that a quick exclusion of the United Kingdom, combined with an unfavorable new status at the kid’s table, will serve as a warning for other Member States contemplating a devolution. Others seem to suggest that the referendum of June 23rd might serve as a springboard for a fast reform process headed towards “more Europe”, thereby overcoming resistance that might otherwise have hampered the deepening of the EU. Interestingly, few seem to think seriously about ways to bring critical, doubtful Europeans “back in”. Instead of convincing the EU citizens of the value of the achievements of the integration process, the old routines of the EU federalists have been activated again.

Granted, it is easy to downplay the democratic significance of the referendum of June 23rd. It is also possible to question its democratic legitimacy. The events leading up to the referendum warrant a discussion about the value and appropriateness of direct democracy. But it would be wrong to coningle the question of the proper place of direct democracy in the integration process with decisions as to how to deal with its outcome.

It seems almost tragic that a thorough discussion about the future of the integration process did not take place before the referendum, but will instead be forced by its results. The routines of the political process in Brussels seem immune to any deep reflection or meaningful contributions to the way the future of the EU should be imagined, other than to propagate “more Europe”. A questionable sense of a historic and unalienable mission, institutional interests, and an occasionally odd sense of moral superiority come together. It is not clear to what extent the increasing alienation of the EU citizens is taken as a sign of warning rather than as the political aberration of uninformed people without the “right consciousness” and “understanding” of the post-national constellation. One has to wonder, today, how many more defections by Member States will be necessary until those in the lead in Brussels accept the idea that a European integration against the will of its citizens will ultimately fail.

The search for the “finalité”, i.e. for the goal of the integration process will not be easy, and it will not yield clear results. The interests of the Member states were always conflicting, and EU integration was always about a complex compromise, leading, ideally, to a positive calculus for each Member state. Recent debates about “European values” might have led the architects of EU governance to believe that “value”-talk might serve as a substitute for effective EU governance and interest satisfaction. This, of course, would be erroneous. More than ever before are the diverging interests of EU Member States visible: One group of countries wants less austerity and more transfers. Others want more supra-

national political governance, under their own guidance, without a meaningful impact on their sovereignty. A third group believes in the value of abstract rules, enforced by a neutral instance, and wants to avoid transfers as far as possible. This is not a situation in which compromises will be easy.

But the necessity of a fundamental discussion about the future course of the integration process is obvious. The EU is based on an increasingly heterogeneous group of countries. Warning signs abound: The enlargement to 28 Member States with different cultural backgrounds, widely varying economic status, and quite distinct political interests could bring the institutional setting of the EU architecture to a breaking point. Even so, rather straightforward reforms, such as the reduction of the size of the European Commission, have so far been impossible. Instead, additional players, such as the European Council or the European Parliament, have emerged. Attempts to improve efficiency have been rather unsuccessful. If the EU has one *raison d'être*, it is efficient problem solving. It lacks, however, the institutional preconditions to achieve this.

What is perhaps even more important is that EU integration has always been characterized by “muddling through”, by compromise, a long process of half-way steps into the future, and the realization of projects by incremental progress. All this might have been unsatisfying, but it worked, at least in areas such as the establishment of a single market, the agricultural policies or the subsidization of regions. There might have been inefficiencies, administrative problems, and a waste of money. But these problems were not really visible, not the least because nobody wanted to look too closely. The success of EU integration was measured by the formulation of programs and policies, not by results. In recent years, however, the EU has embarked into areas in which results are suddenly a measuring stick, and what has emerged does not look too good. Economic governance in the Eurozone was sub-optimal, and the reaction to the stability problems of the Monetary Union did not eliminate the structural problems of a union of countries with widely diverging competitiveness and growth prospects. The creation of the Schengen zone was successful internally, but the accompanying plan to entrust the Member States at the periphery of the EU with the establishment of a functional external border regime was a failure. To highlight this is not intended to blame the European Commission. The responsibility lies with the treaty making and law making authorities, who never seriously asked or answered the question how to deal with “crisis situations”. As a result, an imperfect and compromising architecture has emerged that functions during relatively good times, but that might collapse in times of strain.

The recent political developments have illustrated the failures of EU policies in ways so far unprecedented, for example, in areas such as the EU agricultural policies. While over-supply in food was hidden in warehouses or dumped onto the world market, the failure of the Schengen regime or the Dublin regulation became an issue for the evening news. It

does not help to attack the frightened reaction of large parts of the people to pictures of refugee treks in the heart of Europe with accusations of a “wrong consciousness” or worse. The political reaction was also not helpful: A manifest disrespect for the operation of the common rules did not strengthen the belief that the EU is in control; politicians who argue that the protection of borders has become impossible do not contribute to the feeling of sound governance. And the attempt to force through measures of ad hoc integration, such as the redistribution of refugees in areas that have not been subjected to treaty integration, very probably increased the feeling that European Integration was not about self-governance but about the imposition of an external will.

A similar narrative could be told with regard to the crisis management in the Economic and Monetary Union: The establishment of the EFSF and the ESM evoked feelings of betrayal in Germany (citizens did remember the “no bail out”- promise and the pledge not to establish a “transfer union”). But the same feeling of betrayal became also manifest in the South: the loss of governmental freedom, the imposition of austerity and the involvement of a “Troika” were considered to violate principles of democratic self-government, which were never put on the table of EU integration. Indeed, an architecture based on the idea of market discipline and market pressure has been converted into an architecture based on supranational and horizontal pressure. Some economically strong countries assumed a policing function that they were never meant to play in a community of equal Member States. This endangered the inner texture of the EU.

The problem, of course, is that expectations about “good governance” are widely diverging. Conceptions of what constitutes a “good live” could not be more diverse. On the one hand, strong voices in the discourse propagate a cosmopolitanism with disdain for borders, nationalism etc. They do not have any difficulty with the idea of becoming members of a European “republic”. In a more or less arrogant undertone, they prefer to attack their opponents as attached to a mentality taken from the 19th century without a proper understanding of post-national constellations. These voices place their trust into the liberalizing forces of the EU – and the value of their EU citizenship. On the other hand, others seem to feel that a supranational organization as dis-functional as the EU will not be in the position to stabilize their lifeworld; instead, they might suspect the EU of being one of the causes of the disarray. Will the EU be able to convey that it is able and willing to take care of the living conditions of the citizens most affected by market liberalization and globalization? Will the EU be able to stabilize borders, to ensure that a job will not emigrate, to protect citizens against the danger of terror? It will be a long way. The EU is per definition a de-stabilizing force – in the sense that it opens national and sub-national structures. It will not be able to replace the state, at least not in the foreseeable future. The recent attempts in this direction seem to be misguided: The strength of the Member states is the strength of the EU.

The question today is not deeper integration, but better problem solving. Despite their public rhetoric, it is not clear whether EU federalists have accepted this diagnosis. Some give the impression of wanting to walk in the same direction, perhaps even at a faster pace than before. They ask for more powers for the European Commission and the EU Parliament. They call for the establishment of a European Finance Minister with strong powers and command over an EU Budget used to subsidize projects of questionable value. The search for better EU governance has not yet begun, and it is questionable whether the EU institutions are the right platform.

At the heart of this search is the question of how much self-determination and how much efficient problem solving are warranted. These principles according to which such questions are decided may not be squared without conflict. It is a myth that the EU can at the same time be made more democratic and more efficient. Instead, the more efficient the EU becomes, and the more its institutions are able to overrule veto players, to overrule national decision making processes, or to raise and spend money, the less the influence of the individual. Size matters. The more decisions are left to the culturally embedded decision making processes in the member states or to a sub-national level, and the more veto players are allowed to raise their voices, the more the feeling of control and democratic self-determination will prevail. It is one of the grand delusions of the EU institutions to negate this conflict. Could it be that the supporters of the leave campaign in the UK might not have understood the specifics of the balance, but that they saw the dysfunction of the EU and opted for self-determination, even at an economic cost? Is this as irrational as some suggest today?

