



Europe at a crossroads, but can we read the signposts?

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Sussex European Institute

SEI Working Paper No 142



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First published in March 2017

by the **Sussex European Institute**

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Abstract

Europeans face many challenges both at home and abroad as the pressures bear down on the European Union and its member states to respond. There are many dilemmas to be resolved and many choices to be made about the direction of travel. Helen Wallace offers here a personal reflection on the current state of affairs in the politics of the European Union, some future scenarios for the future of European integration and some thoughts about how Brexit reflects on the UK's past relationship with the EU and prospects for withdrawal.

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Reflections¹

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These are not easy times to be a European. They are probably not easy times for a German or Danish European. But they are excruciatingly difficult times for a British European. So I am not in a good mood at all and so what follows may be a bit gloomy.

I first became acquainted with the then European Communities of the Six in 1967. My fellow students and I watched the de Gaulle press conference in November 1967 in which he vetoed the United Kingdom's accession (along with the candidacies of Denmark, Ireland and Norway). I wrote my PhD thesis in the early 1970s on aspects of the United Kingdom's accession to the then European Communities. It was a period of positive optimism as regards the changes in view for the British. It was period of relative dynamism for the European Communities infused by new blood from the new member states – Denmark and Ireland as well as the UK. It seemed a good personal and professional choice to become a specialist on European integration. And I have benefited from the spectacular development of the field of European studies as an academic specialism – and not least since it has enabled me to find so many friends and colleagues across Europe. So nearly 50 years of my life have been permeated by involvement in this European – and British – story.

Europe at a Crossroads is my title here – with the attached question: but can we read the signposts? I think my underlying answer to my own question is that it is very hard to second guess which direction we Europeans shall take – but it seems certain that we shall not all choose the same road. Yes – this is a crossroads with more than a couple of routes to choose

¹ These reflections were presented in lectures at EURECO in Copenhagen on 16 November 2016, CESifo in Munich on 28 November 2016 and Sussex European Institute on 1 December 2016.

from – some major roads and some minor roads. And yes the words on the signposts are not clear to read. And we have no political Sat Nav to determine which way to go, not least since we cannot all insert our intended final destination. In what follows I lay out the wider picture of the European family more broadly and then make some comments about the specifics relating to the United Kingdom.

Context

The European story has of course evolved across those years. There have been periods of policy expansion and membership enlargement interspersed with periods of stagnation and problems. But, at least until relatively recently, overall there was a steady pace of gradual additions to the policy repertoire of what has become the European Union, combined with institutional refinements. Over the past decade, however, the context has changed and European responses have become more ambiguous and ambivalent. So let me indicate what for me some of the key elements are in this changed context. And of course I cannot cover everything and shall be selective.

First: the process of globalisation has developed apace with numerous consequences. One of these is the declining weight of Europe in the international economy which seems set to be a secular trend. Thus Europeans are becoming much less confident of their role and influence over what happens. Another is that globalisation has changed the socio-economic outcomes within our European countries – and we saw the struggles to ratify the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the European Union. I was a student in Flanders in the period in the 1960s when the move towards Belgian confederation really took off, so perhaps no surprise that the less prosperous Walloons have had indigestion – led by a Prime Minister, Paul Magette, who used to be an academic political scientist who specialised in European integration!

The deep interdependence of this globalised world means that European countries, including as combined in the European Union, are vulnerable to cross-contamination and to new pressures. One source of contamination was the financial crisis of 2008 which continues to

haunt us in the travails of the eurozone and the persistent difficulties in the banking sector. And these problems bite in the stronger European countries as well as the weaker ones. Just look at the stresses and strains on Deutsche Bank. As for new pressures, the changing demography of Africa, combined with the poor functioning of many African countries, has prompted a surge of migrants seeking a better life in Europe. And not only from Africa.

A second key element of the changed context is that we find ourselves in an increasingly dangerous world. Gone is the optimism that followed the end of the cold war when many hoped that decades of adversarial international relations would be followed by more cooperative and peaceful times. Russia has become more of a maverick power than a constructive partner. And it now looks likely that the United States under President Trump will become a more maverick partner. Around the borders of the European Union are a range of failed and fragile states which present us with huge challenges – North Africa, the Middle East, Ukraine. As we have seen in responses to the refugee surge, these conflicts bite into our societies and our mutual understandings, as well as causing foreign policy dilemmas. We are also paying a heavy price for the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A third key element is that domestic politics have been disrupted by the rise of populist parties, many of them Eurosceptical, and in many European countries – and now it seems in the United States as well. The forms and impacts vary from country to country but the phenomenon is prevalent. It is present across the spectrum of EU member states – in more resilient countries as well as the less resilient. Numerous factors seem to account for this fluidity in our political systems, some internal to each country, some specific to the state of Europe, some generated by the migration and refugee surges as well as the issue of terrorism, some seemingly the by-product of disorienting globalisation.

We need to beware of over-simplistic explanations. What, however, does seem to be clear is that commitment to the European integration process has been weakened by claims that the European Union suffers from what some call a ‘democratic deficit’ and others term a ‘legitimacy deficit’. This is an old complaint, but one that has been accentuated by declining

trust in politicians and the traditional political establishments within individual countries. Whatever the causes, the consequences seem rather clearly to include more nationalistic inclinations in parts of our electorates, more parochialism, more xenophobia, and less confidence in international or transnational frameworks.

A fourth and new key element is the Brexit decision by the UK. Traditionally the story of the EU has been one of periodic enlargement with more would-be candidates standing in the queue for accession. Yes, a couple of territories had previously withdrawn from the EU. Algeria left the then European Communities when it became an independent country in 1962, no longer part of France. And Greenland chose to withdraw from the EU with Danish acquiescence after a referendum in 1982. But the referendum vote for Brexit is a completely different case. Here for the first time is a major member state seeking to reverse over four decades of full EU membership. Apart from the specifics of the United Kingdom case – to which I shall return – there are concerns elsewhere in the European Union that Brexit risks causing contagion in other member states in which EU commitments are being challenged.

Responses by the EU to these changes of context

What then of the emerging responses by the European Union to these changes in context?

As regards the broad process of globalisation the European Union has some economic tools but only some. One core part of the response has been to seek to develop more bilateral trade agreements with major trading partners. This has turned out to be frustratingly difficult in practice. As I already mentioned the agreement with Canada came very close to being derailed. Even before the election of President Trump, the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment partnership (TTIP) was running into the sands. To be noted in both cases – the difficulties of reaching a successful conclusion are partly about what each government can agree to deliver, but also much to do with the domestic political processes needed to underpin and to endorse any agreement. Efforts are also being made to strengthen bilateral trade relations with China and India as two of the largest economies in the world, but in both cases the negotiations have been hard going. In both cases there is also a competition among EU

member states to develop their own business and investment opportunities with these growing economies.

At the other end of this spectrum are questions about how to respond to those impacts of global economic trends deep inside the societies of the European Union's member states. The EU as such has limited instruments for dealing with these – and indeed individual member states have limited instruments for responding to the displacement of production and the pressures on wages that are all too apparent. Alas it has become all too easy for 'Europe' to be the scapegoat for problems that have more diverse origins.

As for the financial crisis and turbulence since 2008, the policy-makers responsible for the operation of the eurozone have been hard at work seeking to mitigate the fallout from the turbulence both for individual countries and for the system as a whole. Discussions continue about structural reforms in this or that country – Greece being the most visible case, but by no means the only one – and discussions continue about plans to develop at least a banking union and maybe down the line a fiscal union for eurozone members. Without going into the details, it seems rather obvious that at best this is a job only half done – and one which requires a high level of political as well as economic cohesion within the eurozone. A couple of points about this need to be stressed: first, this topic raises the issue of the relationship between eurozone members and other EU member states, also much affected by the strains within the eurozone; and, second, there remains a question mark about the plausibility of other EU member states joining the membership of the eurozone in the foreseeable future.

Let me turn briefly to a subject that deserves a longer commentary – the migration surges of recent years. We need to be very careful in how we frame the discussion of three separate phenomena that are all too easily elided: economic migration; displaced persons from countries such as Afghanistan and other fragile states; and the acute refugee crisis of Syria and neighbouring countries. As for economic migration inside the EU and into the EU, it is understandable that people are keen to find a better life in what they believe to be the more

promising societies and economies of this or that European country. This is not a new phenomenon but it has intensified. The EU has been slow to develop programmes that might in a constructive and effective way stimulate economic development in the countries of origin – and of course there are no easy answers except to say that we can only hope that these efforts will intensify. And we have to own up to the fact that European countries with poor demographic profiles actually do need young workers both skilled and unskilled. But this phenomenon has morphed into something else with the experiences of human-trafficking, of casualties in the Mediterranean, of crowded camps in Italy and Greece and indeed in northern France, of barbed wire fences at this or that European border. The pictures across the media convey a depressing image of the European Union in disarray, whatever the complexities of the issues and the shortage of solutions.

This brings me to the dangerous state of the world – and of our European neighbourhood. Here we have a mixed record of some more, some less effective responses. The legacy response to the neighbourhood has been enlargement for some and forms of association for others. This has been on balance successful for those accepted as full members of the EU, although there are troubling developments in some countries. But we may well have reached the limits of enlargement policy for the time being, given what we know about public opinion in many of our countries and not least the temptation of governments under pressure to turn issues over ‘to the people’ in a referendum. It remains to be seen how far the prospect of EU membership can be delivered for the remaining countries that were part of Yugoslavia.

Association arrangements have not turned out so well, as we know from the case of Ukraine – and we should note that the EU is here too apparently held hostage by domestic opinion in this or that member state. The recent Dutch referendum on the Ukraine association agreement is a worrying signal of our difficulties in taking policy forwards on a collective and effective European basis. Among other things Europeans have been slow to develop a strategy towards Russia and doing that gets harder not easier. How any such strategy develops in the future will surely now be influenced by the way in which US policy develops under President Trump.

As for the Middle East and North Africa – here are problems that seem both long run and indeed testing, maybe intractable. We Europeans cannot escape the consequences of the conflicts in the area – the refugee surge illustrates this only too painfully. We are hampered by disagreements about what to do and by uncertainty as to what would actually make a positive difference. And everything is complicated by the increasing engagement of Russia in Syria and now by the question marks about how US policy might develop.

Let me add here a couple of specific points that are worth stressing – one more positive and one less so. The European Union did play a positive and constructive role in bringing Iran to the negotiating table over the issue of its nuclear potential. The agreement reached holds out a promise of a better relationship with Iran in the future and perhaps the opportunity to engage Iran more constructively in the international system. It is to be hoped that European policy-makers will be tenacious in holding to this course and in putting pressure on the incoming US government not to undo what has been achieved.

The other specific point concerns Turkey. As we know in theory Turkey remains an accepted candidate for EU membership as and when it could be demonstrated that Turkey meets the criteria for accession. Negotiations are currently on hold for several reasons, including issues relating to Cyprus as well as the ways in which Turkey's internal politics are developing. It seems rather clear that there are deep reservations inside many EU member states about the acceptability of Turkey as an EU member – and here too it could well be the case that referenda would have to be held in some countries to endorse this. But this does not get us off the hook. Turkey is a geopolitically important neighbour for numerous reasons. And it is hugely in our collective interest as Europeans that Turkey remains a stable democracy. So we have to stick at efforts to sustain a viable partnership with Turkey – however difficult that is to achieve.

So the balance sheet of responses is not very cheering and the images of European hesitations are not very encouraging. I make these remarks with no pleasure. As I commented earlier, part of the problem is that our domestic politics have become so contentious in so many

European countries. It becomes hard to distinguish which of our problems are genuinely hard to address from those which are of our own making. So let me speculate a bit on some possible scenarios for the future development of the European Union.

Scenarios for the future development of the EU

There is a range of potential scenarios that might develop in Europe:

- **Scenario One:** Traditionally one recurrent scenario favoured by some policy-makers and some commentators has been a big leap towards a political union in the European Union, albeit one that might not carry with it all of the current membership. I was always a little sceptical about the viability of this scenario and these days it looks to me somewhat improbable. I find it hard to see how a majority of EU member states would or could sign up for such a big leap forwards. Some people still argue for at least a version of this centred on the membership of the eurozone. I am not convinced that even this is plausible – and for myself I would regret an outcome which caused an even bigger divide between the eurozone and other members of the European family.
- **Scenario Two:** At the other end of the spectrum we now have to consider a disintegration scenario, that is to say the unravelling of the European project. Of course personally I hope that this is not a likely scenario but there are some troublesome indicators as I have commented in my previous remarks. I noted the other day a comment by Frans Timmermans, one of the Vice-Presidents of the European Commission, who admitted that for the first time in his 30 years of involvement in the EU a disintegration scenario could now be imagined. Brexit complicates this picture of course, which I deeply regret. We could have quite some discussion on the plausibility of such a stark scenario. It needs some thoughtful and meticulous analysis by social scientists as well as sober reflection by practitioners.
- **Scenario Three:** Perhaps a more plausible scenario is that we could see the continuing development of persistently varied degrees of integration across the continent. This would presumably include some reinforcement of the mainly eurozone group. It is less clear than it used to be how far the Schengen members can reinforce their cohesion, given the stresses and strains around the migration and refugee issues.

And it is also less clear than it used to be how far there is a leadership group of member states on foreign and security agenda, again not least with the prospect of the United Kingdom outside the European Union. Overall this scenario is one of a patchwork version of European integration, whatever label we might stick on it – variable geometry, multi-speed, concentric circles and so forth. And there are tricky issues here about the governance and institutional requirements to enable a patchwork scenario to work.

- **Scenario Four:** My preference was always for a different version of this – namely a European Union with less promiscuous ambitions and a tighter focus on the key issues for transnational collaboration, more flexible, and more pragmatic. This would focus attention on making the system work rather than being tempted by frequent changes of the operating system. It would concentrate on making the core policy areas deliver substantive outcomes and resist adding to the policy portfolio and especially in the areas of policy where there are legitimately differences of practice, priority and culture among the member states. This scenario would leave more space for a country such as the UK to play an influential role in some key policy areas – and indeed it is this kind of scenario that has been favoured by UK governments in the past. It would also leave more space for a country like Denmark to feel at home inside the system. Alas, Brexit rather knocks this scenario on the head.
- **An additional remark here:** of course Germany has always been a major player in the European integration process across most of its policy activities though less obviously as regards foreign and security policy than other policy areas. Latterly the role of Germany in influencing what happens has become even more critical than before. My own view – no doubt coloured by my own personal preferences – is that the system was better calibrated with the United Kingdom as well as France to engage with German governments in defining developments. So much now rests on German shoulders – and we need to follow closely how the Franco-German relationship evolves not least since there are quite some differences of substance between France and Germany.

Brexit

This brings me to Brexit and the prospect of the United Kingdom withdrawing from the European Union. Let me give you an account of how we have ended up in this situation.

Several themes have repeatedly underpinned the UK's place in the European family:

- For the founder members of the European Union – and for many (maybe most) subsequent joiners membership was a first best option. For the UK it was always at most a second best option (except for the few British pro-Europeans who were clear enthusiasts). The language of UK membership has across the years been the language of ‘on the one hand’, but ‘on the other hand’. For most member states membership has been tied to a kind of national project: for the founders both a security anchor and a way to economic regeneration; for the southern and eastern Europeans a democratisation anchor and a way to economic transformation; for many of the former members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) a route to being embedded in the wider European family. In contrast for the UK membership has been essentially transactional and satisficing.
- To put this another way – for most EU member states membership of the EU and its core aims provided a means to escape from the shadows of the past and to invest in strong aspirations for a better future. Hence the gradual extension of EU policies and commitments has been viewed through a lens of making the future more predictable and less uncertain. The building of reciprocity underpinned by the shared jurisdiction of European law was largely seen as an essential factor to provide guarantees of mutual engagement. In contrast the UK debates about the EU have been permeated by nostalgia for a period when the UK walked taller and was more proudly independent and self-reliant. In this context the reach of European law into what one Foreign Secretary (Douglas Hurd) called the ‘nooks and crannies’ of daily life became widely viewed as irritating and intrusive.
- To put this yet another way – the evolution of the European Union has been marked by a debate between deep integration and shallow integration, with periods of negotiation around treaty changes where choices were made as to whether, where and

how to deepen integration. Typically the UK has found itself arguing the minimalist rather than the maximalist case – with the one striking exception of the Single European Act in 1986 when the then UK government pressed so hard – and so successfully – for tighter rules to achieve a single European market. The frequency of treaty reform initiatives over subsequent years served to reinforce UK resistance to deeper integration.

- The disinclination of the UK – under both Conservative and Labour Governments – to embrace some of these central policy initiatives and reforms took the UK on a path of exceptionalism, seeking opt-outs from new commitments. Thus the UK chose not to adopt the euro, and the UK vigorously resisted joining the Schengen area. The intensity of British reluctance about both of these commitments grew with the problems of the eurozone from 2008 onwards and then again with the surges of migrants and refugees of recent years. Increasingly the UK seemed to be outside the mainstream; what might have been profiled as a couple of exceptions (however important) turned into a recurrent inclination to look for the exception – or even better the opportunity to issue a veto. This was illustrated vividly at the European Council of December 2011 when the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron, blocked an agreement to develop plans to stabilise the eurozone under the normal treaties and through the regular EU institutions.
- Yet there is a paradox in the story – actually and demonstrably UK governments have left their fingerprints all over EU policies and practices. They have been in positions of crucial influence on at least three of the big achievements of the European Union. As we saw above, it was the UK government – under Margaret Thatcher – which was the keenest advocate of developing the single European market, an objective that meshed well with repeated British insistence that the EU should be rather liberal than protectionist in international trade. It was UK governments that contributed so pragmatically to the development of the Union’s common foreign and security policy from idea to substance. It was the UK government of the mid-1990s that pushed vigorously for the European Union to accept so many countries from central and eastern Europe as welcome candidates for enlargement, probably the European Union’s biggest foreign policy achievement in the aftermath of the cold war. And the paradox is this – those same UK governments never took political ownership of these

important achievements in the debate at home in the UK, with the result that it is much easier to find references to what they forced on us than to what we forced on them.

Nowadays

This brings me to nowadays as regards Brexit. The referendum produced its outcome after a campaign in which the ‘leave’ campaign focused its slogans on identity issues, and very effectively, while the ‘remain’ campaign focused its arguments on the transactional and economic interest arguments. The outcome was geographically disparate, with London, Scotland and Northern Ireland producing remain majorities, while non-metropolitan England and Wales produced leave majorities. Here is a picture of a dis/United Kingdom with particularly tricky questions about the island of Ireland and intriguing issues about Scotland’s place.

As for the path to making Brexit mean Brexit: the process is uncertain, including as regards the place of the UK and devolved parliaments; the timeline is uncertain; and the substance is unknown, not least since the leave campaigners had no agreed Brexit plan and there is astonishing ignorance about what is involved in unravelling EU membership – think about it as being like a complex accession process in reverse. This text was completed in the week that the UK Parliament – both chambers – reached the final stages of considering the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill. This provides for parliamentary endorsement for the UK government to trigger Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union and hence the beginning of the negotiations to achieve Brexit.

As yet we know little about how the rest of the European Union and its member states will respond as and when the negotiations go forwards. Elections are pending in Germany, France and elsewhere. There is fear of contagion to other member states. No systematic evaluation has yet been done of the implications for the European Union itself of losing the UK as a member. So we are in for probably quite a long period of uncertainty – and a major distraction from the other issues in the European in-tray, as well as a complication for other

discussions about the development of the European Union as such. This is not a happy conclusion.

Could we have foreseen these developments? Well none of us has a crystal ball or a gift for prophecy. I have to confess that I always suspected that a referendum in the UK could well lead to this result, a comment I make with no pleasure.

But there is a wider issue here for all of us in the social science community and in the field of European studies. Academics studying the European Union have on the whole preferred either to bury themselves in the minutiae of the process or to engage in broad theorising or to focus on the pro-integration trends rather than the potentially disintegration trends. It is time to revisit our research agenda.

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