COUNTDOWN FOR BREXIT: WHAT TO EXPECT FOR UK, EU AND TURKEY?
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As the most divisive issue of the British politics since 2016, the Brexit phenomenon continues to shake the two biggest mainstream parties, Conservatives and Labour. The Conservative Party is affected by the tension between the Soft and Hard Brexeters, but the divisiveness Brexit brings about hits Labour even worse. A No Deal or Hard Brexit is likely to strengthen Scotland’s bid for independence. Scotland’s probable departure from the UK will surely be encouraging for other secessionist movements in Europe, however it should be noted that the window of opportunity Brexit opens for Scottish nationalists constitutes a rather exceptional case in Europe. One could argue that the “Norway model” for post-Brexit UK could be valid for Turkey too, but that model aims to bring about a deeper integration than what the proponents of “EU-Turkey exclusive partnership” prescribe for Turkey.

The Brexit vote with its background and context

The then British PM David Cameron’s decision to bring UK’s EU membership to public vote in 2015 as a result of the rejection of his reform demands by the EU (Kirkup, 2015), and the British electorate’s decision to leave the Union at the referendum on 23 June 2016—known as Brexit—triggered a turmoil which could not be resolved yet by April 2019. Historically the UK has been a reluctant component of the European integration process. The UK joined the European Economic Community in 1973 and brought its membership to public vote in 1975, in other words the Brexit referendum had been preceded by another vote of the same kind 41 years ago. Besides UK has never been a part of the Eurozone and Schengen Area and the British governments generally preferred to side with their trans-Atlantic partner USA regarding the international affairs in which the latter’s position diverged with the prominent Continental European powers such as Germany and France. Asking the British people’s opinion as to whether continue as EU member was amongst the promises in the Conservative Party’s election manifesto before the 7 May 2015 general election for the House of Commons. Cameron’s aim was to appease the anti-EU wing of his party and avoid some of the Conservative votes’ swing to the anti-EU, anti-immigration and rightwing populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (Jensen&Snaith, pp. 1304-1305 & 1308).

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The results of the referendum proved unexpected for Cameron—who would resign from office as a result—and for most of the political observers, though. Persuaded by the “post-truth” propaganda of political figures such as UKIP’s Nigel Farage and pro-leave Conservative politician Boris Johnson, 51.9% of the electorate voted to leave the EU. The referendum also revealed national divides within the UK: Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%) preferred to remain within EU whereas England (53.4%) and Wales (52.5%) voted to leave (Hunt&Wheeler, 2019). As the most divisive issue of the British politics since then, the Brexit phenomenon continues to shake the two biggest mainstream parties, Conservatives and Labour, by generating internal disputes amongst those with divergent views regarding the different options to handle the UK’s exit process. The Brexit phenomenon has been seen as an incident during which “the racism and xenophobia (...) have been given voice and legitimacy” and which had negative effects over the economy such as the Pound hitting a record low level against the US Dollar\(^2\) (from 1.50 to below 1.35 in a single day) (Vardag, 2016).

The divide was not only between the nations UK comprises, but also between the cosmopolitan/pro-globalization segments of the society and the members of the traditional/unskilled working class, in other words between the white and the blue collars (Goodwin&Heath, 2016). The high level of remain votes in the global and cosmopolitan city of London reaching almost 60% in contrast to the leave votes that were close to 60% in the post-industrial areas of Midlands (Vardag, 2016) was a clear manifestation of that. The generational gap was even more obvious. The majority of the voters between the ages of 18 and 49 voted to remain whereas more than 60% of those above 49 preferred to leave (Statista, 2016).

**The aftermath of the referendum**

Britain’s exit process was initiated by Theresa May, who took up as PM following Cameron’s resignation, on 29 March 2017. Based on the provisions of the Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty\(^3\) giving “the two sides two years to agree the terms of the split”, the UK would be due to leave the Union on 29 March 2019 at 11 pm (Hunt&Wheeler, 2019). It was obvious that the terms of UK’s departure from the EU would be subject to a long and detailed negotiation process between the two sides. Retaining some sort of economic integration between the EU and UK was possible (and

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\(^2\) In July 2016, the Pound fell to its lowest level in the Asian markets since 1985 (Tara Cunningham, “Pound crashes below...”, The Telegraph, 6 July 2016, [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/07/06/ftse-pound-brexit-asia-markets-turmoil-eu-referendum/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2016/07/06/ftse-pound-brexit-asia-markets-turmoil-eu-referendum/)).

desirable too for most of the British politicians), but the likelihood and the extent of this would be determined by the bargaining process between the parties. Hoping to strengthen her electoral support prior to the beginning of the negotiations, May called for early elections. The 8 June 2017 general election would prove to be highly disappointing for the Conservatives, though. Getting 42% of the votes nationwide, the Conservative Party lost its parliamentary majority whereas Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour enjoyed a significant surge in its votes (40%), making Corbyn the most likely PM of Britain in the consecutive election, which is normally scheduled to be held in 2022.

The long negotiation process between the EU and the May government finally resulted in a deal which satisfied neither the opposition MPs in the parliament nor a sufficient number of the Conservative MPs. The 585-page long agreement bringing about an estimated 39 billion Pounds cost for UK to leave the EU mainly dealt with the status of UK citizens living in the EU and vice versa, as well as it aimed to prevent the return of a standard border (with checkpoints etc.) between Ireland and Northern Ireland (Hunt&Wheeler, 2019). May however lost the vote on this divorce plan in the parliament three times: By 230 votes on 15 January (being the biggest defeat for a sitting government in House of Commons history) (Hunt&Wheeler, 2019), by 149 votes on 12 March, and by 58 votes on 29 March.

The matter enters a complicated phase as a result of the rejection of PM’s deal. As long as the Article 50 is not revoked, i.e. the Brexit is not cancelled by British government, three scenarios are on table: A “Soft Brexit” in which the UK may remain within the single market and/or the customs union along with retaining rights such as free movement for EU and UK citizens, a “Hard Brexit” which will only keep “few of the existing ties” between the parties, and a “No-Deal Brexit” meaning that the UK will leave by “cutting ties immediately” and trade with the EU members according to the WTO rules (BBC, 2019a). Apart from them, a major renegotiation, another referendum, a snap election, another no-confidence vote against the government—May survived a vote of no-confidence tabled by Labour on 16 January— and No Brexit as a result of unilateral revocation of the Article 50 by the government are plausible (Barnes, 2019). The initial deadline for leaving the EU was 29 March, but due to the uncertainty caused by the rejection of May’s deal by the parliament, the Brexit has been delayed beyond that date (BBC, 2019b). On 11 April the European Council agreed on an extension and therefore the deadline for UK’s exit has been set as 31 October 2019.

**Brexit’s effects over UK domestic politics**

Whatever the path, Brexit continues to affect British politics as a divisive issue nearly three years after the referendum. A public petition signed by nearly 6 million Britons calling for the revocation of Article 50, i.e. No-Brexit, which has been “the best-supported proposal in the history of the
House of Commons and government’s e-petitions website”, was rejected by the government (Guardian, 2019). In its response the government stressed that “revoking Article 50, and thereby remaining in the European Union, would undermine both [the British] democracy and the trust that millions of voters have placed in government”. The same official source also noted that “80% of those who voted in the 2017 general election voted for parties who committed in their manifestos to uphold the referendum result”, pointing to the total percentages of votes Conservatives and Labour (as well as other pro-leave parties such as UKIP) received (Guardian, 2019).

The Conservative Party today is largely pro-Brexit and the proponents of Hard Brexit have a considerable weight over the party’s leadership. Parties having an official anti-Brexit stance (namely Liberal Democrats, Greens and most of the regional parties) have limited electoral support indeed, and as the shadow international trade secretary Barry Gardiner puts it, the Labour is no longer a pro-remain party and has already accepted the result of the referendum (Stewart & Elgot, 2019). Known as a leftwing Euro-sceptic, Labour leader Corbyn regards the neoliberal EU regulations as an obstacle for his prospective socialist economic policies. Corbyn prefers to negotiate a permanent customs union with the EU but opposes to stay as a member of the European single market, “so he can carry out his plans to nationalize key industries without being hampered by EU competition rules” (Hunt & Wheeler, 2019). However May opposes to “Labour’s idea of a customs union-based exit plan” by stating that customs union or single market memberships are against the Conservative 2017 election manifesto and that her Brexit plan will bring about “the benefits of the customs union while enabling [Britain] to have an independent trade policy” (Walker, 2019).

**What to expect for the British politics in the short term?**

Theresa May’s government is already worn-out and very unlikely to complete its term in the office. The Brexit issue has not only deepened the inter-party cleavages and polarization within the British society, but also induced intra-party strives. The Conservative Party is affected by the tension between the proponents of Soft and Hard Brexits, but it would not be exaggerated to contend that the divisiveness Brexit brings about hits Labour even stronger. Labour is affected by the tension stemming from the fact that it has become the main political actor preferred by the pro-remain voters in 20174 and that it is actually not a pro-remain party as of 2019. In February, 8 Labour MPs joined by 3 other MPs who resigned from Conservative Party, left their party since

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4 The Labour win in the Kensington constituency of London in 2017 was a striking example in this regard. Being the most prosperous constituency of UK, Kensington has never elected a Labour MP till 2017. Labour candidate beat her Conservative rival by just 20 votes. This unprecedented result was surely linked to the fact that 68% of the Kensington voters voted to remain in the referendum a year earlier whereas the Conservative candidate was a pro-Brexit
they disliked Corbyn’s standpoint on the Brexit issue. Members of this new initiative who call themselves Independent Group\(^5\) are not likely to hinder a prospective Labour government—at least for now—given that their electoral attractiveness is not predictable. However Jeremy Corbyn needs to strike a balance at some point in order to maintain the pro-EU young and urban population’s support and meanwhile pursue a progressive policy for exiting the EU that would preserve EU’s merits for leftwing policies.

**Brexit and the future of the EU**

Scottish independence has become one of the major issues in British politics in line with the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) since 2010 (the year Conservative Party came to power following the 13-year long Labour rule). The question “Should Scotland be an independent country?” received support from 44.7% of the Scottish voters in the 2014 independence referendum, therefore maintaining Scotland’s union with the rest of the UK and leading to a leadership change in the SNP. The SNP however enjoyed a landslide in the following year’s general election by gaining 56 Scottish seats out of 59, making the pro-independence party the third biggest group in the House of Commons. Although it lost 21 seats in the 2017 snap election, the SNP once again managed to become the strongest party in Scotland and the third biggest party represented in the British parliament.

As a clearly pro-EU party located at the centre-left of the political spectrum, the SNP has perceived Brexit as a threat against its strategic goals. Most of the Scottish electorate had already voted against Brexit in the 2016 referendum, and since then the SNP officials affirmed several times that a second independence referendum was an option. The SNP leader and First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon however refused to call for an immediate second referendum in February 2019, by stating that it was time for “calm consideration” before the fate of Brexit becomes clear (Carrell, 2019). It seems likely to expect that a No Deal or Hard Brexit will strengthen Scotland’s bid for independence, however a Soft or No Brexit scenario may favor Scotland’s continuance as a part of the UK. Scotland’s probable departure from the UK will surely be an encouraging factor for other secessionist movements in Europe (such as the pro-independence Catalan nationalist). However it should be noted that the window of opportunity Brexit opens for the secessionist SNP constitutes a rather exceptional case in Europe, given that no other EU member is expected to withdraw from the Union in a foreseeable future.

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\(^5\) See [https://www.theindependent.group/who-we-are](https://www.theindependent.group/who-we-are)
Brexit, Turkey and EU

Amongst the EU member states, UK has traditionally been the most supportive country with regard to Turkey’s accession to EU. Unlike in any other EU member state, almost all major political actors in Britain have endorsed Turkey’s membership for decades. Even Boris Johnson, a pro-leave politician who deliberately lied to British electorate about the so-called prospective Turkish migration during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, announced that the UK would “support Turkey’s bid to join the European Union despite voting to leave the bloc” three months after the referendum, this time as the UK Foreign Secretary (Osborne, 2016).

For Turkey, Britain’s exit from the EU is meant to be the loss of the most enthusiastic supporter of its membership bid within the EU, but it should be noted that Turkey’s accession perspective has already vanished. In late 2016 the EU foreign ministers decided not to open a new negotiation chapter with Turkey, in November 2017 some of the financial aids to Turkey regarding accession process have been lifted, the following year EU Commission issued the most critical country report for Turkey ever, and in June 2018 the European Council noted that Turkey moved “further away from the European Union” (Cop, 2019).

Amongst the alternatives of No Deal Brexit is the so-called Norway model or Norway option, meaning that the UK may become an EEA (composed of the EU member states as well as Norway, Lichtenstein and Iceland) or EFTA (all EEA members plus Switzerland) member after leaving the EU. The probable Norway model aims to keep UK within the European single market and is seen as “the least damaging form of Brexit” by many (Payne&Bienkov, 2018). Remaining within the European single market without being an EU member reminds of an exclusive partnership model between the EU and Turkey whose accession is, realistically speaking, impossible in the foreseeable future.

The “privileged partnership” option with Turkey instead of full membership was raised by French President Macron indeed, but that idea was soon rejected by Turkey (Karadeniz&Coşkun, 2018). One could argue that the Norway option for UK could also be valid for Turkey, but it should not be forgotten that the EEA or EFTA membership brings about more advanced integration between the EU members and non-EU members, particularly in the domain of free movement of persons, than what the proponents of “EU-Turkey exclusive partnership” prescribe for Turkey.

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6 For instance the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties were all in favour of Turkey’s accession in the lead-up to the 2010 general election (Burak Cop, “Türkiye için risksiz seçim”, Ntvmsnbc, 03/05/2010, https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/turkiye-icin-risksiz-secim,yxv5L6c0qkqUZvzQl7ow0w ).
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