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It's not just British leavers - the rest of Europe is responsible for Brexit, too

Eric Jozsef

The UK departure from the EU isn't a solely British issue, yet Europeans have connived with Brexiters in pretending it is



📷 'Brexit is a tragedy we have collectively allowed to unfold.' A protest outside the EU leaders' summit in Brussels, October 2019. Photograph: Yves Herman/Reuters

“Brexit will never happen. Too complicated, too damaging to the British economy, too anachronistic.” How many times in the last three years - from Rome to Berlin, Paris to Bucharest - did we hear this belief asserted so confidently as to admit no discussion? The United Kingdom's exit from the [European Union](#) is now imminent. Yet much of Europe's public and many of its politicians have not truly grasped the consequences of the historic break that is about to take place, nor have they tried to understand the reasons.

On 31 January the first concrete step in Boris Johnson's political game plan will be achieved. And, even if no new barriers will immediately be apparent at the borders, we will from this date start to drift apart. Johnson won his bet using a simple strategy: he sold the illusion that the politicians who lead Europe's nation states still hold the reins of power in a globalised world. He won on the false promise that Brexit allow the British people to “take back control”.

Some claim Brexit is a positive thing because London was blocking the EU's progress. What shameless cowardice

The mere fact of breaking with the other 27 EU member states, at any price, has allowed him to convince people that, in the 2020s, a British prime minister - or a French president or a German chancellor - is still master of their country's destiny. That people can, from the false comfort of their nation state, face the geopolitical changes and upheavals of the world (such as the current tensions in the Middle East) all alone. But what do the UK, France, Italy or even Germany weigh today when they each represent barely 1% of the world's population? We know all this, just as we know that only a deeply integrated Europe will enable us to meet the world's new challenges: climate change, migration, the need for regulation of financial capitalism to reduce inequalities, the coordinated taxation of multinational companies to stop tax avoidance and maintain revenue for our social systems, the channelling of revolutionary technology.

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Brexit is a tragedy foretold, but it is one that we have collectively allowed to unfold. We continental Europeans made the unforgivable mistake of allowing people to believe that the issue was a solely British one, ignoring Brexit's existential dimension for all Europeans. Some of the continent's more fervent Europhiles and federalists have even come to claim that [Brexit](#) is a positive thing because London was blocking the EU's progress.

What shameless cowardice. What a wretched excuse for our leaders to hide behind. When we approved Schengen and the single currency, we did so without the UK. Our delays, our missed appointments with history cannot be blamed on British resistance. Perhaps we might even have avoided Brexit if we had been able to follow through on Winston Churchill's 1946 call to “build a kind of United States of Europe” whose pull across the Channel would have been irresistible.

Instead, we stood by and watched Brexit happen. For the first time since the foundation of the European project in 1957, we conveyed the message that this project was reversible. In doing so, we actually encouraged the return of the very nationalism and xenophobia that the EU was created to oppose. We have betrayed the memory of the murdered Labour MP [Jo Cox](#) and allowed the spectre of internal UK frontiers to resurface.

We forgot that the roots of the European Union - which should not, of course, be confused with the roots of Europe - lie in the memory of the 20th century, in the desire to overcome two world wars and in the fight against totalitarianism, and that the UK, with its famous democratic tradition, played a decisive and essential part in this fight. We ignored the threat that the Brexiters' victory poses to all European democracies by the success it represents for the forces of extremism. All this to the great satisfaction of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump who, in their geopolitical ambitions, want nothing more than divided Europeans and the disintegration of the EU, and are working daily to achieve it.

Difficult times lie ahead for our fragile democracies. Beyond Brexit we must remain united, and not abandon the idea of the UK formally returning to the European family in due course. In the meantime, we must continue to reimagine the EU and to act in concert with the British people. All the more so since the UK general election on 12 December showed that opponents of Brexit are in the majority (since the “remain” or second-referendum-backing parties [won more votes](#) than the Tories and Brexit party), voters in the big cities and, above all, among younger people in Britain reject a narrow, isolationist future. Together we must continue to work towards our future with redoubled effort, building bridges and joint initiatives. The British people who mobilised against Brexit showed us the way. Never in the history of the EU have we seen such popular demonstrations in favour of Europe. Nor should we resign ourselves to the notion that the EU without the UK is set in stone for ever. Is it not the hallmark of democracies, unlike authoritarian regimes, that voters reserve the right to change their minds?

The new president of the commission, Ursula von der Leyen, wants to involve civil society in a new initiative to discuss the future of Europe. We must demand that citizens and associations from the UK (as well as from Ukraine and the Balkans) are allowed to participate in one way or another. I will confess to something else. For a long time, the supremacy of English as the de facto European lingua franca seemed excessive to me. The dominance of English seemed to challenge the European motto “united in diversity”. Now I think that after Brexit, we should fight to keep English on the European stage, including in the EU institutions - as a reminder of an absence, and the promise of a return.

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