The Problems of European Identity and the Brexit

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Abstract

In June 2016, the United Kingdom shocked the world by voting to leave the European Union. The result was one of the breaking news in the united kingdom and European union political history. Almost a year ago, it consisted of 28 Member States, but the desire of Great Britain to leave the Union set a precedent for the withdrawal of one of the Member States. Such a decision has no analog and due to this reason today it has become the subject of interest not only for researchers but politicians, lawyers, economists, and other professionals as well, in terms of its reasons and expected outcomes. The article discusses the role of Euroscepticism in the decision-making process for Britain to leave the European Union and the consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom and the EU itself.

Key Words: European identity, European integration, European Union, Euroscepticism, Referendum, Brexit

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is a Unique Political and Economic Union of 27 Democratic States that aims to bring peace, prosperity, and freedom to its citizens in a more just and secure world. Almost a year ago, it consisted of 28 Member States, but the desire of Great Britain to leave the Union set a precedent for the withdrawal of one of the Member States. The withdrawal of Great Britain from the European Union is undoubtedly an active theme for the public interested in European integration issues. The scientists are debating and researching, on one hand, about the reason for taking such a decision by Great Britain and, on the other hand, the consequences and outcomes for the both the European Union and Great Britain.

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Method

The following research methods adopted in the social sciences are used in the paper: the method of content analysis, which includes the study of literary material around the paper topic; also, an analytical method that incorporates both deductive and inductive approaches. Moreover, the paper refers to the adopted in political science research methods: comparative and systematic analysis.

At the Origins of European Integration

Going back to the origins of European integration, we can observe that Europe was politically unstable and economically weakened by the aftermath of World War II for the early 20th century. In such a situation, it is not surprising that the main political goal of the creation of the European Union was to build peace in Europe.

Nationalism has twice posed the greatest threat to Europe in half a century thus the attempt to create a peaceful and stable environment has become a priority. This required the reconciliation and peacemaking of the historical enemies - France and Germany. Inspired by the idea of Jean Monnet, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, Robert Schuman publicly announced on May 9, 1950, the necessity of creating a common supreme authority to be entrusted with the production of coal and steel of France and Germany. He also noted in his declaration that "Pooling of coal and steel production should immediately provide for the setting up of common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of Europe, and will change the destinies of those regions which have long been devoted to the manufacture of munitions of war, of which they have been the most constant victims. The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible" (The Schuman Declaration, 1950). The raw materials of war were then becoming weapons of peace.

In 1951, the Treaty of Paris established the "European Coal and Steel Community". Its Founding Members were: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Two treaties of Rome were signed on 25 March 1957 - the Treaty

establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC). Great Britain refrained from joining the Union because it trusted neither France nor Germany. It still had numerous political and economic interests outside of Europe and exported very little portion of its steel in Europe, but the nationalization of its coal and steel industry had just taken place. Although the idea of a united Europe seemed utopian in Britain, one of the main reasons however was sovereignty, the restriction of which, that might be caused by its partial transfer to a supranational organization, was not in their national interests (McCormick, 2016.).

Jean Monnet, the EU's chief architect, who had always been positive about Britain's membership in the European Union used to say that he had I never understood why the British did not join the European Union. He added that it must have been because it was the price of victory - the illusion that Great Britain could maintain what it had, without change (Wilson, 2014).

Great Britain as a Member of the European Union

In the 1960s, Great Britain saw the trend of growing and strengthening the European Union, creating a strong alliance, and changed its mind of being offside. Moreover, after the Suez Crisis, Great Britain ceased to be a powerful state at the level that it had been previously considered. The European Union, along with its economic strength, was becoming an accountable political power. Great Britain filed its first application for membership in the European Union in 1961 and it is second in 1967, however, French President Charles de Gaulle imposed a veto on both attempts, which occurred to be insurmountable obstacles. He accused Great Britain of being hostile to the reconstruction of Europe and emphasized its great interest in the relationship with the USA. It is available in the literature that Great Britain was considered the "Trojan Horse" of the United States of America in the European Union.

The resignation of Charles de Gaulle opened the way for Great Britain to join the European Union. Thus, because of the first enlargement in 1973, the United Kingdom became a member of the European Economic Union.

The United Kingdom has been a member of the European Union for 47 years. For nearly half a century, anti-European sentiment in the United Kingdom was gradually gaining ground. However, in the first stage, Great Britain still looked forward to being part of a common European family. This is evidenced by the referendum on stay in the European Union held in 1975 by the New Labor Government. The result was positive, with 67.2 in favor, and 32.8 opposed (Statista Research Department, 2015).

According to a poll of the referendum, the population focused on economic benefits, safety, UK participation in international affairs, prosperity, and a peaceful future. The damage of World War II was not overcome and due to it, the close European cooperation was considered as the most important means of preventing future conflict (Walsh, 2016).

European Identity as a Guarantee of Peace

It seems that peacebuilding has been and remains a priority for Europeans. This is evidenced by a Eurobarometer survey of the population of EU Member States in November 2019. The question was as follows: What did they consider to be the best positive result achieved by the EU 55% of respondents believed that the peace among the EU Member States was one of the best achievements of the European Union. Since, among them, 54 % of surveyed British population separately confirm the same (Standard Eurobarometer 91, 2019).

As early as 1946, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill, following World War II, called for the European people to create a European family. To establish peace on the continent of Europe, the people of Europe must have a common sense of citizenship and be united in the common European identity (Colliver, 2016).

Once the peace has been achieved, establishing a common sense of European identity within the European Union has become a priority. European identity is understood as a sense of personal identification with Europe, in a cultural and political sense. At the same time, the symbols of the European Union have appeared to express European unity, such as the anthem, the flag, the passport of the European Union (in use since 1985). The EU has a motto: "Unity in diversity" (Spiering, 2002).

However, the idea of a common European identity had opponents from the very beginning, which was reflected in the rejection and distrust of the idea of transforming the Union into a close political and economic union. The Professor of the University of Cambridge, Mr. David Abulafia writes: "The myth of a common European identity has emerged mainly in the historical debate to explain the "Inevitability" of the European Union" (Abulafia, 2015).

In 2006, the residents of the European Union were questioned about a sense of European identity. Eurobarometer data confirms that 42 percent of EU citizens did not express such feelings, among whom mainly were British population (67 percent) (Tournier-Sol, K. & Gifford, C. 2015).

The Rise of Euroscepticism in the European Union and Brexit

Great Britain has always been a clear Eurosceptic state in the European Union. It can be said that Britain has never been a full member of the EU. It is noteworthy that Margaret Thatcher, one of the most prominent figures in the United Kingdom in this regard, has always denied the progress of European integration and was recognized as a Prime Minister with staunchly Eurosceptic views (Ultan, Ornek, 2015).

The growth of Eurosceptic attitudes was gradually becoming irreversible not only in the United Kingdom but in the whole European Union. It became especially active after the Maastricht Treaty. Since treaty that was seen as a threat to national sovereignty and national identity, further exacerbated by the project of European citizenship.

The situation has worsened since the 2008 financial and migrant crisis. Euroscepticism was no stranger to European society, although it still found its most fertile ground in Great Britain. It is also noteworthy that the United Kingdom from the very beginning rejected Schengen and the Euro Area and occupied different position in the European Union.

The level of public support for the EU has historically always been lower in Great Britain than in the other Member States. British Citizens had less sense of European identity and paid more attention to national sovereignty (Lee, 2016).

Great Britain did not consider itself a part of Europe. This attitude was based on both geographical and psychological feelings. The political elite of the State and part of the society expressed a pessimistic attitude towards EU membership and demanded withdrawal from the European Union.

The decision to withdraw from the EU was preceded by several considerations. We consider just a few, but the most important ones. The opponents to European integration believed that the European Union posed a threat to British sovereignty. Over the last few decades, EU Treaties have led to the transfer of several powers from the competence of individual Member States to the EU Institutions. Eurosceptics emphasized that the Executive Authority of the European Union, particularly the European Commission, is not directly accountable to voters in the UK or any other Member State. Although the British leaders have certain influence over the election of members of the European Commission every five years, after the election of authority, none of its members has obligations to the national government or representatives elected to the European Parliament (Lee, 2016).

Immigration policy was one of the main problems. The continuous wave of migration from the Middle East caused serious discomfort in British society. The steadfast position of the supporters of Brexit was as follows: Great Britain could never control the immigration before leaving the EU because the freedom of movement gave other

EU citizens the automatic right to live in the United Kingdom (Clarke, Goodwin, Whiteley, 2017).

The European Union has no authority to collect taxes but requires the Member States to make annual contributions to the central budget of the EU. The skeptically inclined public opposed the contribution of large sums of money by Great Britain into the EU budget. They believed that Great Britain could use these funds for its welfare and it was better for the Country's Parliament to decide for itself how to spend them.

Furthermore, the supporters of Brexit believe that Great Britain had to adopt the laws based on instructions from Brussels and decisions approved by the EU court, which was the cause of the Conflict of Laws. Therefore, demanded the UK courts to become independent again (Smith, 2016).

On June 23, 2016, Great Britain voted to leave the EU after 43 years of membership. The question of the referendum was: Should the United Kingdom remain a Member of the European Union or leave it? A nationwide majority of 51.9 percent voted to leave the European Union and 48.1 percent of voters supported remain within its frame (Gremades, 2017).

It should be also noted that the majority of young voters supported the EU membership, while the older generation found themselves in favor of leaving the European Union. These statistics show that the benefits offered by the European Union, such as free movement, etc., are acceptable to the younger generation, while such openness is unacceptable for the older generation with nationalist views (Statista Research Department, 2016).

Finally, on January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom left the European Union and began a transition period that will last until the end of the year. At this point, the UK remains in the European Union Customs Union (EUCU) and the Common Market and the main issue is the negotiations on a future free trade agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

RESULT

The results of the 2016 referendum once again confirmed that the UK never understood the main idea of European integration and perceived it only as of the European market. By this decision, the opponents of European integration have escaped the "Shackles of Brussels" and turned the political will into reality. The State met Brexit unprepared. This indicates that Political goals are given higher priority in the UK than the strategic and economic interests of the country (Badridze, 2017).

According to the supporters of Brexit, the main problem of sovereignty was solved by their victory. However, as some scientists objectively argue, there is a risk that the UK will not be able to maintain its unity and lose Scotland. Scots voted to remain in the European Union in the referendum held regarding the withdrawal of Britain. In 2014, they agreed to live within the UK mainly because of the European Union; otherwise, an independent Scotland would automatically leave the EU. We think the United Kingdom shall face a serious challenge.

It is worthy to highlight that the EU itself is facing a difficult situation. It was, in no way, in its interests to set a precedent for a Member State to leave the alliance, which would be a temptation for the other EU Member States.

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom and the strengthening of the nationalist background, and the tendency of which has been observed, have put the EU at risk of a domino effect, which may lead to a reduction in the number of EU Member States. The fact is that the unity of the EU has cracked. The decision of Great Britain to leave the Union is largely a sign of negative consequences.

The EU is currently one of the most important global actors in the international arena, occupying a leading position in the world in terms of economy. This is the outcome of 70 years of cooperation, as a result of which Europeans have achieved not only the long-awaited peace but also an unprecedented level of economic and social development. Now, the most important thing for the 27 Member States of the European Union is to develop and execute the strategy for maintaining unity. Historically, the

European Union has successful and effective crisis management experiences, which brings the hope that it will be able to cope with today's challenges with dignity and ensure its enlargement once again.

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