

COMMENTARY

Could the Brexit domino effect come back to haunt us?



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Fabian Zuleeg , Jannike Wachowiak

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The common perception of Brexit as a failed project might change over time, implying that its domino effect could still rear its ugly head.

The British vote to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 sent a shockwave through the other member states. At the time, the Leave campaign's success triggered fears of a domino effect that would unravel the EU project. But against all expectations, Brexit has neither fuelled anti-EU sentiments (<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/flashlight-europe-022016-brexit-has-raised-support-for-the-european-union>) among Europeans nor emboldened political leaders to demand their own country's exit. On the contrary, the divisive nature of the British debate and the reality of Brexit has had a deterrent effect.

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Nevertheless, the Brexit domino effect could still return if Boris Johnson continues to

escape any accountability and retells the Brexit story uncontested.

The reverse domino effect

From the continent, Brexit continues to look like an act of self-harm with severe economic and political costs, including the distinct possibility that it might actually pave the way for the break-up of the United Kingdom. While the EU is also weakened by the loss of one of its largest member states, the impact is less severe as it secured an agreement that safeguards its vital interests. Brexit remains an existential challenge for the UK but manageable for the EU.

This is partly thanks to how the EU handled the issue. Faced with a potentially existential threat, the EU displayed an unprecedented level of unity, with member states gathering behind the European Commission's negotiating strategy. The excruciating British debate highlighted the economic and political costs of being a third country – that EU membership matters –, leaving the remaining members with a sense of vindication. However, the EU should be careful not to become too complacent and continue to pay close attention to the [EU-UK relationship](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/The-EU-UK-relationship-It-is-what-it-is~3bb140) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/The-EU-UK-relationship-It-is-what-it-is~3bb140>), as the feared domino effect may still rear its ugly head.

Shaping the Brexit narrative

The EU clearly has a desire to close this regrettable chapter of European (dis-)integration and relegate the EU-UK relationship to a third-order issue, preferably to be dealt with by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement's (TCA) technical committees. But recent disputes, be it on [COVID-19 vaccine supply chains](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EU-crash-course-in-geopolitics-Lessons-from-the-foreign-policy-battl~3d1e7c) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EU-crash-course-in-geopolitics-Lessons-from-the-foreign-policy-battl~3d1e7c>) or the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, have demonstrated that both sides' political engagement, and not just technical management, will be needed.

The EU's UK strategy should account for a partner whose approach to EU-UK relations, and therefore to problem-solving, remains above all political and firmly focused on the domestic audience. The current UK government, supported by parts of the British media, will continue to politicise its relationship with the EU and weave the narrative of Brexit as a success story. For the sake of his political survival, Boris Johnson will paint every British success as a Brexit dividend and blame any negative impact on the EU.

Meanwhile, Brexit will drop off the EU27's agenda. This will make it more difficult for the EU bodies monitoring the EU-UK relationship (e.g. the newly established Service for the EU-UK Agreements). By UK's trying to use the noise and communicate a unified message in the face of European 'Brexit fatigue' and other, more pressing priorities. Consequently, the UK narrative will be largely uncontested.

Perception matters (more?)

As a result of Brexit, the UK will be relatively poorer in the long run. However, once the immediate economic chaos subsides, exceedingly few will compare the new status quo to what would have been if the UK remained an EU member. And against the backdrop of the COVID-19-induced economic crisis, the exact impact of Brexit will be more difficult to discern than otherwise.

Furthermore, the UK will not be the only European country navigating economic difficulties. An underperforming Eurozone, even if due to other structural reasons, would be a useful pawn in the Brexit success story.

Finally, following the Brexit slump, the UK economy will start to grow again. While it might still be relatively weaker than if it had not exited the Union, it will nevertheless feel like progress and growth and be sold as such by the Conservative Party at the next election.

In the end, it could be political factors, rather than economic ones, that will crucially tip the scales of the public verdict on Brexit over time. How easily public perceptions can be swayed is observable in European reactions to the UK's successful vaccine rollout. A major German tabloid's headline of "Dear Brits, we envy you" sums up the mood in the continent, while almost two-thirds of British respondents (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-12/-hostile-eu-s-vaccine-spat-with-u-k-boosts-support-for-brexit?sref=u1qyM5yV>) credit the success to Brexit.

So far, the UK's decision to leave the Single Market and Customs Union has mainly produced losers. But this cannot be said for Johnson – his association with the hard Brexit brand has served him well. If he were to continue as party leader and prime minister, winning a second term on the back of the consolidation of Brexit, his success might spark other Eurosceptic leaders' interests. The return of the domino effect could loom large once again.

Nevertheless, Johnson's political success rests on shaky foundations. The full effects of Brexit have not yet entered the British public's conscience, as the pandemic serves as a distraction and delays its impact on everyday lives (e.g. travel). A change of mood that results in Johnson and his party being booted out of power would seal the fate of Brexit being branded a 'bad idea'. Perhaps even more crucially, should he fail to manage the aftershocks of his sovereignty-first, hard Brexit, polarisation could see the departure of Scotland and the reunification of Ireland. The break-up of the UK would likely bury Johnson's political career as well as cement Brexit's fate as a failed project.

If, however, Brexit is perceived in a few years as having served the UK (and those who

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came to power in its wake) economically and politically well, it might embolden Eurosceptic demands for 'less Brussels'. It could eventually lead to changing majorities in the European Parliament and/or the election of a Eurosceptic head of state in an important member state (e.g. France). While these developments would not necessarily lead to further disintegration of the EU, they could paralyse its decision-making processes and damage its capacity to act. Many member states could demand 'less Europe' and specific concessions in return for staying put.

Renewed fears of a domino effect would bleed into EU-UK relations

The return of the Brexit domino effect would inevitably bleed into the overall EU-UK relationship and decrease the prospects of improving the TCA over time. The deal foresees a review every five years. They may occur in a highly politicised context: the next UK general election and European Parliament election is most likely to occur in the year before the first review. If the Conservative Party wins the general election by reviving old Brexit battle lines successfully, the continent's Eurosceptic parties could jump back on the Brexit bandwagon in time for the European Parliament election. In which case, the EU would have little appetite to improve TCA conditions – rather the contrary. The current arrangements could collapse, reviving the spectre of the no-deal Brexit.

Membership must matter

Going forward, the EU should pay attention to how the perception of Brexit evolves. It should also ensure a united approach towards the UK and solidarity with those member states that are most affected by Brexit's economic and political repercussions.

The lessons from the Michel Barnier era should be brought into this new, post-Brexit phase: ensure a clear mandate for the new UKS, transparency, and the continuous coordination of and consultation with the EU member states and institutions. This will also help the new EU-UK arrangements from getting swept up in other issues inadvertently, as has been the case with the supply of COVID-19 vaccines, or Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Even if Brexit is no longer an EU priority, the management of EU-UK relations should stay on message, sending a clear signal to the UK and EU27 that EU membership matters and that the evolving relationship will maintain a balance between rights and obligations.

More broadly, the belief that EU membership counts will only stick if the Union can prove that it can deal with global trends and transformations that cannot be addressed at the national level effectively. This would be the best defence against a Eurosceptic challenge. However, if the EU does not demonstrate that it is the best answer to these things, the Eurosceptic challenge might well return stronger than ever.

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Jannike Wachowiak is a Policy Analyst in the Europe's Political Economy programme.

Fabian Zuleeg is Chief Executive of the EPC.

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