

**T**he unprecedented departure of a member state of the European Union has cast doubt to the prospects of an “ever-closer union.” During the campaign leading up to the Brexit referendum the potential disintegration of the EU was [widely entertained](#). And when a majority of the British electorate voted in favor of exit, there was speculation about a “domino effect.” Indeed, prominent far right leaders, such as Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands praised the result, [calling](#) for similar referenda to be held in their countries.

And yet, these existential threats failed to materialize, not only in the short-term but also for the entire duration of the four and a half years until the UK’s exit from and new relationship with the EU was finally agreed. On the whole, Brexit produced less discord than other major crises facing the EU. Think of the bitter divisions between “debtors” and “creditors” that surfaced during the euro crisis, or the tragic lack of solidarity vis-à-vis frontline states (and humanitarian migrants) during the migration emergency. Brexit, too, held plenty potential for conflict among the remaining member states as well as EU institutions, due to conflicting interests and divergent priorities.

*On the whole, Brexit produced less discord than other major crises facing the EU.*

A variety of tools were deployed to manage the effects of Brexit and to hold the EU polity together in the short, medium and long-term.

First, at the level of discourse, political leaders quickly and categorically reaffirmed the unity of the EU27. Declarations of “togetherness” became ubiquitous, such as the following statement-manifesto [published](#) by Donald Tusk, Martin Schulz and Mark Rutte on the day after the referendum:

“This is an unprecedented situation but we are united in our response. We will stand strong and uphold the EU’s core values of promoting peace and the well-being of its peoples. The Union of 27 Member States will continue. The Union is the framework of our common political

future. We are bound together by history, geography and common interests and will develop our cooperation on this basis. Together we will address our common challenges to generate growth, increase prosperity and ensure a safe and secure environment for our citizens.”

While such declarations are easy to dismiss as “cheap talk” they play an important role. After all, in a crisis characterized by high levels of uncertainty, elite discourse in the communicative sphere can act as a means of reasserting control over an ambiguous situation.

*At multiple points in time during the negotiations the EU demonstrated unity and solidarity, while the UK seemed beset by turmoil and deep divisions along ideological and territorial lines.*

A second and related aspect that deserves mention is the way the EU has conducted the negotiations. By sticking to the procedure outlined in the EU’s exit clause (Article 50), the EU was able to inhibit the UK from bilateralizing the negotiations, which would have been infinitely riskier and more divisive. Michel Barnier’s team handled the process with transparency and accountability, avoiding major gaffs. They made a point of remaining in contact with the member states and to include national parliaments. Theirs was a delicate balancing act between defending the integrity of the single market, demonstrating that exiting the Union was a costly and painful process, but avoiding being seen as unreasonable and vindictive. For the most part, the member states played along: even if there were underlying tensions, these were kept behind closed doors. At multiple points in time during the negotiations the EU demonstrated unity and solidarity, while the UK seemed beset by turmoil and deep divisions along ideological and territorial lines.

Third, Brexit gave rise to claims that a broader reckoning regarding the path of the EU in the future was overdue. **Social objectives especially came to the forefront, seen as an opportunity to re-legitimize the EU by pushing for a more “social Europe.”** For example, during the tough negotiations surrounding the amendment of the rules on intra-EU posting (a practice often criticized as a form of “social dumping”) the French president Emmanuel Macron [argued](#) that reform was necessary in order to tame Euroscepticism: “Part

of Britain's Brexit vote was down to the poor functioning of the single market on posted worker rules, and the rules we have on social rights" – he said at the time. Brexit became a cautionary tale for European leaders showcasing the necessity to cater to the needs and demands of the "left behind" – or else.

*As the UK has stepped onto a divergent path from the EU, every subsequent development will be interpreted through the prism of Brexit.*

Despite the successful aversion of major rifts since the referendum, however, one should not be overoptimistic. As the UK has stepped onto a divergent path from the EU, every subsequent development will be interpreted through the prism of Brexit: When the UK does worse than the EU, Brexit will be cast as a fatal mistake. But when the UK is doing better than the EU, this will be taken to demonstrate the virtues of withdrawal, shoring up Euroscepticism every single time.

The vaccination debacle, which brought the EU and the UK into conflict even before the ink on the new [trade and cooperation agreement](#) was dry is a case in point. By early 2021 the disparity between the UK and the EU in terms of the pace of vaccinations against COVID-19 had become evident. Brexiteers argued that the UK's faster vaccine rollout was thanks to Brexit. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [retorted](#) that "The vaccination programme in the UK has enjoyed a head start through compromising on 'safety and efficacy' safeguards."

A row [erupted](#) also over the AstraZeneca vaccine. As a response to the pharmaceutical company's warning that it was not going to be able to deliver the promised quantities on time to EU countries, the Commission announced a clampdown on vaccine exports, including from the Republic of Northern Ireland. This involved suspending the Northern Ireland protocol, which in turn led to outcry. Even though the Commission immediately backtracked the measure, the backlash was unavoidable, with a Die Zeit editorial [characterizing](#) it as an "own-goal" and "the best advertisement for Brexit." Media headlines such as "[Johnson Wins Vaccine Spat With E.U.](#)" and "[Brexit Britain's victory over the EU on Covid vaccination is not what it seems](#)" may provide contrasting assessments of who the "winner" and the "loser" is,

but relate the same narrative of antagonism.

Brexit is especially threatening for the fundamental legitimacy of the EU, because its institutional system is so weak

Framing Brexit as a zero-sum game, where any “loss” for the EU is a “victory” for the UK and vice versa offers immediate benefits to a set of political elites on both sides. As Anand Menon [remarks](#), “For some in the EU, securing wins over the UK will remain politically advantageous, as will the ability to highlight the negative impact of Brexit. Meanwhile, EU-bashing will allow Johnson to continue scoring political points with his own party and against his opponent Keir Starmer [...]”.

And yet, in the long-term, looking at developments through the prism of Brexit carries a destabilizing potential for both the UK and the EU. It is especially threatening for the fundamental legitimacy of the EU, because its institutional system is so weak: every mistake or misfortune, anchored in the contrasting example of the UK’s “success,” fosters dissatisfaction vis-à-vis not only a given policy (be it vaccine rollout or something else), but also the EU polity as a whole. At the same time, an identical argument can be levelled against Brexiteers and the Johnson government in particular. With Scotland already disgruntled that it has been “draged out” of the EU against its will, it could well further energize the Scottish independence movement at a moment when a [string of recent opinion polls suggests a small majority now supports Scotland becoming an independent country](#).

While the consequences of Brexit continue to be hard to predict, clearly, it remains a risk for both the EU and the UK.

*Photo credits Flickr CC: [Ungry Young Man](#)*