

The result of the UK Leave/Remain referendum requires a serious and articulated analysis of an event which, for the first time, is bound to lead a long time member state out of the European Union. The following brief considerations are just the beginning of such an analysis, and will hopefully stimulate a broader debate.

It is not the economy, stupid!

While the economic side of the popular discontent behind the Leave vote was obviously important, the electorate's response was not framed in economic but in political terms (independence, return to sovereignty, closing of the borders, flag, etc.). Against this position the "economic rationalists" (and the fewer cosmopolitans) were defeated. Identitarians won.

National sovereignty is still, at least for large strata of the population, something that we know and think we have control upon. European sovereignty is to some extent unknown and in any case beyond our control.

The defenders of the status quo (Remain) had framed their position essentially in economic terms (the risks of being out, the advantages of being in) and did not provide any convincing political response that would take into serious consideration the popular request for more "control" as a response to current problems. The Remainers learnt the hard way that politics dominated the referendum.

It is not (only) about the UK

The decision of a big and important member to leave the EU is something that does not concern only that country—among other things raising a number of questions on the exit negotiations. It is a shattering negative vote against the Union from inside. After a long series of positive outside "votes" for the Union (i.e. all the new accessions of the last two decades, and the pending applications), this is an important reversal that inevitably must open a soul searching debate in the EU. Will the Union be able to keep its members in the future, or is the

UK just the first of a series of exits?

The representation gap continues to hit

A lot of people (with their problems) do not feel well represented in the EU and, in spite of the fact that their trust in national institution is also low, they are more ready to turn “national” when the game gets tough and when asked directly about their preferences on European vs. national sovereignty. National sovereignty is still, at least for large strata of the population, something that we know and think we have control upon. European sovereignty is to some extent unknown and in any case beyond our control. Surveys seem systematically to underestimate this aspect. We might ask, provocatively, if this is because they are prepared by cosmopolitan rationalists.

The political architecture of the EU is inadequate

The circuits of representation, accountability and leadership selection are still essentially national, while the European circuit (European elections-European Parliament-European Commission) is still weak and politically undermobilized (even if it does exist from the formal institutional point of view). The consequence of this is a double accountability/representation deficit: a) national governments are popularly accountable but their decision-making ability is seriously limited by the EU architecture, and they have therefore difficulties in answering the demands of the voters. b) European institutions decide over increasingly important matters for all the people, but are, *de facto*, not accountable through Europe-wide democratic processes. The consequence is that popular dissatisfaction turns either against national governments (as the success of anti-establishment parties in national elections demonstrate), or against Europe itself in the only possible way, that is referendum support for total or partial exit.

The road to safety for the EU is very narrow

To counter the fears and nationalizing drives of the common people there is at this moment no serious political offer in terms of Europe-wide parties, policy programmes, or leaders. No one is today standing clearly for European common interests and ideals—with the exception perhaps of the head of the ECB, a technocratic figure! There are only (weak) national defensive positions of mainstream parties trying to face at home their domestic challengers, and at the European level the traditional consociational politics of national

leaders—unendingly negotiating in the European Council to find a low minimum common denominator. This is an easy fight for the Boris Johnsons, Marine Le Pens, Geert Wilders, Matteo Salvini of the continent! More of the same (with perhaps limited corrections to the Juncker plan and some more budgetary flexibility) against the “brave new/old world” of identities, sovereignties, closed borders, fight against the big bankers.

Is there anywhere a national leader who is daring enough to behave like a European leader and stand for Europe instead of standing only for his/her country?

There must be someone fighting for Europe or the battle will be lost very quickly. Are the (phantom) European parties (EPP, Socialists, Liberals, Greens) willing and able to raise their head and propose Europe-wide policy platforms? Is there anywhere a national leader who is daring enough to behave like a European leader and stand for Europe instead of standing only for his/her country? Is there a movement of opinion expounding the good reasons and the sentiments for a better Union? Can such a movement become so large to make a difference? Will the European Parliament make itself felt, for instance with a true political debate, and resolutions binding the current Commission and challenging the Council? Unless there is one or more of these responses the chances that the EU is doomed seem very large.

Photo Credits CC: [StephenRMelling](#)