The EU Brexit Process: A Blueprint For Peace

1. Introduction

1.1 Thirty-Year Steps

Major events in Europe's recent history occurred roughly in thirty-year steps. Firstly, The Great War in 1914 [as well as Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising, and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917] was followed thirty years later by the Second World War. Then 1973 the UK, along with Ireland, joined Germany, France and other nations in the EEC's "Common Market", in what was to be a great project to ensure peace in Europe. Thirty years later, in 2004, ten mostly former Soviet states, following the demise of the USSR, joined the EU in its largest expansion to date, bringing its membership to twenty-seven.

1.2 What's The Next Step?

In the recent exuberance of 2004, anyone suggesting the EU's second largest economy, the UK, would soon leave the EU, would not have been taken seriously. Yet, in just fifteen years, halfway through the next 30-year step, not only has the UK left the EU, but the EU grapples with internal challenges to its identity. Not least of these is the EU's ability to deliver a unified response to covid; and the turbulence of populist governments. Externally, beyond the frontiers of the EU's single market, are immense issues that challenge the EU's security and existence.

1.3 Character is Destiny

One might be inclined to wonder, given the hubris of rapid post-war expansion, followed by the suddenness of Brexit, the increasing core challenges, and enormity of external threats, if the EU's demise might be approaching, and more rapidly than expected.   Yet is there an alternative? Might an opportunity exist at this very point in time that could transform Europe both internally and in its relations with its neighbours, especially Russia, Turkey and Afrca; one that is based on democracy, thrives on diversity and builds peace, creating a new, prosperous and enriched future for all?

2. Democratic Foundation

2.1 Cause and Effect

There are internal and external factors that threaten the European project. A key internal one is the lack of institutional transparency which is perceived to be a democratic deficit[1]. Democracy is claimed as one of the EU's core values[2] with its roots in the Europe of antiquity; yet the existing system denies

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[1] EUR-Lex, 'Democratic Deficit.' https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/democratic_deficit.html. Accessed 26 May 2021.
[2] Europa Component Library, 'The EU values.' https://ec.europa.eu/component-library/eu/about/eu-values/. Accessed 2 June 2021.

citizens the right to choose their legislators. This democratic deficit is perhaps most noticeable in the EU's executive, the European Commission, which comprises twenty-seven unelected individuals. The lack of democratic representation extends into the bureaucratic arm of the Commission, where c.32,000 EU civil servants design and enforce legislation, enacting policies and preparing the EU budget[3]; with the Parliament having no final say regarding the laws that govern EU citizens.

2.2 The Lisbon Treaty

Ireland's 2008 Lisbon referendum provides a striking example of this democratic deficit. A higher percentage of Irish voters [53.6%] rejected the Lisbon Treaty than British voters would later vote to leave the EU [52%]. The British government respected the British vote; but when Ireland rejected the Lisbon Treaty, the Irish government called another referendum.[4] The government claimed rejection of the treaty in the first referendum was largely due to a lack of understanding of the Treaty's contents, and that the referendum commission had failed to provide adequate information ahead of the vote. Yet to many it seemed a disregard for democracy with "wrong answer, vote again". The EU introduced protocols to the Treaty to address concerns and change voter opinion ahead of the second vote in October 2009. However, these are of limited value as the protocols are inferior in law to the Treaty, which remains intact. That Ireland's democratic rejection of the Treaty was not acceptable to the EU, and that the Irish government colluded with the Brussels by not accepting the will of the Irish people, intensifies the perception of the EU as fundamentally undemocratic.

One wonders if the referendum terms had been honoured, and it was returned "to the drawing board", as was meant to happen, might this have helped EU reform and thereby prevented Brexit? Did the EU, through its own fault, throw away an opportunity for change; and therefore, will the EU's failure to address its democratic deficit only result in its eventual demise? Or is an alternative, a blue print for change, possible?

2.3 The Brexit Process

The EU's democratic deficit is presented by some as a main driver of Brexit; whilst others claim Brexit is an outcome of ill-informed British nationalism. Such polar attitudes were also evident in Ireland's Lisbon referendum. These dynamics point to conflict between systems. Brexit is neither simply nor predominantly a unilateral dynamic. Several dynamics are at work locally, nationally, within the EU and beyond, all of which have effect. The interplay between these different systems fuels a process, the EU-Brexit process, which itself can be held to account if a sense of co-creation, co-responsibility and co-ownership is recognised. Acceptance that participation by all is legitimate opens the way for each side to look beyond the restrictive solidarity of their own stance, to co-operate, co-create and secure win-win outcomes.

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[3] European Commission, 'Commission staff.' https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/organisational-structure/commission-staff_en. Accessed 26 May 2021.
[4] Simon Taylor et al., 'Irish reject Lisbon treaty.' *Politico,* 13 June 2008. https://www.politico.eu/article/irish-reject-lisbon-treaty/. Accessed 26 May 2021.

2.4 Bureaucratic Disconnect

Since Brexit, tensions are increasing as is the legislation and protocols surrounding Brexit. It is this seemingly endless EU bureaucracy which alienated many British voters in 2016, encouraging them to vote Leave. The EU is experienced by many to be a bureaucratic monster, lacking both transparency and democratic accountability, with is seemingly unnecessarily complicated institutional framework driven by Brussels disconnected from the people.

2.5 Identity & Security

There are deep flaws in a system on which hundreds of millions of people depend for their livelihood, security and way of life. Security in this sense has less to do with military power and defence strategy, and more with identity and sense of self as a European citizen, but also the freedoms afforded by EU membership, such as the free movement of people and the right to live and work in other member states. Brexit, climate catastrophe, the Covid-19 pandemic, the implications of mandatory vaccination and a vaccination passport system, are huge challenges which face the EU.

Most recently, the global pandemic has been the greatest crisis the EU has had to confront. Communication between member states appeared to vanish overnight as borders were closed; and, faced with a lack of clear guidance from Brussels, national governments turned their backs on the EU and prioritised the protection of their own citizens. The lack of a united response in the early days of the pandemic undermined many citizens' faith in the EU's ability to protect them when faced with an emergency. This has since recovered, with a recent Eurobarometer survey reporting that trust in the EU has reached its highest level in over a decade.[5] Yet questions remain about the EU's ability to react swiftly and withstand future threats.

For many people, at the heart of the EU Brexit process are questions about security and identity. How might the EU and UK respond that both creates security and permits diversity?

3. Understanding Ireland

3.1 The Border

After Ireland was partitioned in the 1920s, the Irish government later introduced customs posts along the 300-mile (500km) open land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic to protect the Republic's economy from UK imports. Later, as part of EU integration and the Irish Peace Process, the visible border was removed. Today, the importance of upholding the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and avoiding a "hard border" is emphasised. If customs posts were to return, this would likely be instigated by the Republic, at Brussel's request; although many claim the UK leaving the EU

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[5] Eurobarometer, 'Standard Eurobarometer 94 – Winter 2020–2021 – Public Opinion in the European Union.' Published May 2021. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355. Accessed 2 June 2021.

presents a threat to peace in Ireland if it resulted in a physical border infrastructure, as this might attract attack from Irish Republicans.

The EU-Brexit process is deeply divisive across Ireland, the UK, and EU; and nowhere is this more profoundly felt than in Northern Ireland. The border on the island of Ireland is not just a boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic, but also an international frontier between the UK and the EU with its single market; and has been the central issue on the agenda throughout the EU-Brexit negotiations. Therefore, the EU Brexit process, regardless of the final outcome, will offer much learning for the EU in how it relates to its international neighbours. Imagine the gain for humanity if the EU discovers a new way of relating that goes beyond the imposed limits of its frontier.

3.2 The Northern Ireland Protocol

To protect the EU's single market, the Northern Ireland Protocol was agreed. It considers Northern Ireland as different to the rest of the UK by treating it as part of the single market, but without elected representatives in Brussels. (England, Scotland and Wales left the EU single market on 31 December 2020). The EU has placed a customs border between Northern Ireland and Britain, and with the bureaucracy required by the EU Commission, it has all the associated delays, costs and limits in delivering goods.

That a UK government would agree to an internal customs border that treats one part of the UK as different to the rest is unacceptable to many. British loyalist unrest over this "Irish Sea border" further fuels concerns about a return to violence. Political tensions remain high. These include the resignation of Northern Ireland's unionist First Minister, Arlene Foster, in May 2021, and the EU's attempt to trigger Article 16[6] of the Northern Ireland Protocol in January with the ensuing backlash from politicians on both sides of the Irish border. Others perceive Brexit as undermining Northern Ireland's place in the UK and being used by Irish Republicans to advance their goal of a united Ireland. At the time of drafting the Belfast Agreement, it was not viewed as probable that one of the two states might leave the EU – and some might ask to what extent, if at all, can the Agreement be criticised for failing to legislate for an unforeseen situation?

Calls to abandon the Protocol are growing louder. Yet, Dr Von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, insisted on 24 May that 'there is no alternative' to the Northern Ireland Protocol; that it is 'the only possible solution to ensure peace and stability in Northern Ireland while protecting the integrity of the European Union's single market.'[7] To many, this statement demonstrates resolute leadership.

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[6] Article 16 enables one of the parties to take unilateral action in cases where the application of the Protocol gives rise to 'serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist, or to diversion of trade'. Clare Rice, 'Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol.' *UK in a Changing Europe*, 8 Feb. 2021. https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/article-16-of-the-northern-ireland-protocol/. Accessed 2 June 2021.
[7] BBC News, 'NI Protocol: Brussels 'must use common sense', says UK.' 25 May 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-57238226. Accessed 26 May 2021. Dr Von der Leyen's full

Yet to others it signifies a failure in leadership. Obviously, a different approach is needed; an approach that goes beyond the limits imposed by borders.

4. A Blueprint for Peace

4.1 An Alternative Approach

Is an alternative approach even possible; one that is not perceived to threaten Northern Ireland's place in the UK; one that respects the EU's single market, and brings benefits beyond those currently envisaged? Does the EU Brexit process offer a blueprint for democracy, co-operation, and peace beyond borders on a scale much larger than the Irish context? Can our understanding of borders be fundamentally transformed?

4.2 Trust and The Freedom to Choose

The EU and UK are based on the principles of open, liberal democracy that depend on the willing engagement of citizens in society and necessary functions of the State. This is based on freedom of choice, the presumption of innocence, trust and allows for appropriate accountability. Whilst many EU countries have relatively recently embraced democracy, the encouragement of willing participation in society is essential, not least to help prevent reversion to non-democratic control, but also the continued development of society.

The EU Brexit process should draw on the values of freedom of choice, the presumption of innocence, trust and appropriate accountability to not only protect but grow the single market. The UK and EU could view the border as an opportunity for co-operation, not competition, and operate a system of self-declaration, with appropriate monitoring. This would enable producers and customers to choose the extent to which they want to engage with the EU single market or the UK market. For example: A dairy farmer in Co. Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, UK could contract under law to uphold EU standards for milk production. This would grant access to the EU single market, such as an EU cheese producer across the border in Cavan in the Republic. This Cavan / EU cheese producer could then contract under law to meet UK industry requirements, and thus can sell cheese into the UK. A third farmer in Co. Armagh, UK, who does not want access to the EU single market, sells their exports only within the UK and has the freedom to choose with which markets it wants to engage.

Producers and customers could comply with self-declaration systems in much the same way as existing systems for income tax and VAT. This can be monitored and enforced through spot checks where UK and EU officials could inspect production in the respective jurisdictions. This model offers but one solution to the impasse surrounding the NI Protocol. Thus, the border in Ireland could become an invitation to co-operation, respect for diversity, and zone for economic growth; and the principles on

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statement is on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rz-8IHjobKs&ab_channel=EUDebates%7Ceudebates.tv.

which a successful, inclusive EU Brexit process will succeed can be applied across the EU's other international frontiers.

5. Brexit: An Opportunity For All

5.1 A Broader Context

Boundaries where systems interact can often be a place of friction or conflict, where each system does its best to defend and maintain its identity. It need not however be a place just for conflict but presents opportunities for innovation and can become a place for creativity. Just as the 17th century Williamite and Jacobite conflict in Ireland had a strong European dynamic, so too does the EU Brexit process. The outworking of the EU Brexit process on the island of Ireland indicates how Europe, as a whole, relates to others. As the challenges unfold, the EU Brexit process presents an *opportunity* for all of Europe. There is a broader, less provincial context of the process that can shape relationships between London and Brussels; the EU members State; between the EU, and the totality of Europe, and its neighbours, Russia, Turkey, and Africa.

Learning from and building on an EU Brexit process that embraces respect for diversity, democracy, trust and accountability as a way forward for Europe can be realised. But before that, an understanding of several external factors which threaten the EU's viability will be helpful. Three areas of significant threat are Russia, Turkey and Africa.

5.2 Russia

As Europe's largest neighbour, Russian influence on the continent ought not be underestimated. Many of the Baltic states, which joined the EU in 2004, maintain strong ties to Russia, whose leader, Vladimir Putin, harbours geopolitical ambitions reminiscent of the USSR. As with the German population of Sudetenland during the Third Reich, a context could develop that causes one or more of these EU states to identify more closely with Russia; and Putin could similarly see it as politically expedient to establish a controlling presence in an EU member state. If this seems far-fetched, remember that Putin, who has suppressed political opposition and introduced legislation enabling him to remain in power until 2036, recently took over Crimea with almost no opposition. If this happens to an EU Eastern European state, which some might view as inevitable, and as with Sudetenland, with the support of the population, what might be the effect on the EU? Would, even could, the EU respond militarily? Would NATO and the US engage? Is an EU army, or a World War 2 concept of Fortress Europe any use?

The EU has often been slow to take decisive action against Putin, as demonstrated by its belated and ineffective response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Its 'soft' policy of sanctions didn't prevent Putin from taking further aggressive steps and violating multiple international treaties.[8] However, Brussels

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[8] Katya Kruk, 'The Crimean Factor: How the European Union Reacted to Russia's Annexation of Crimea.' *Warsaw Institute,* 7 May 2019. https://warsawinstitute.org/crimean-factor-european-union-reacted-russias-annexation-crimea/. Accessed 2 June 2021.

would be obliged to act swiftly if one of its own member states were annexed, a notion which is not inconceivable given the number of ethnic Russians living in Eastern Europe.

History often demonstrates behavioural patterns that require systemic intervention. Rather than resorting to military action, might Europe anticipate such scenarios and identify win-win action that builds build strong co-operative relations with Russia and the neighbouring states; investing in their social, cultural, economic diversity to help dissolve the prospect of any ethnic justification for aggressive engagement by Russia? In this way, just as in Ireland, the boundary between the EU and Russia can become an invitation, rather than a barrier; a resource rather than a liability; a bridge for co-operation, instead of totem of division.

5.3 Turkey

The second boundary which challenges the EU's cultural cohesion is with Turkey and its long-awaited accession to the Union. With a population of over 80 million (of which 99% are Muslim),[9] Turkey is a very important accession candidate; but there exists a significant values gap between its Islamic culture and Europe's generally liberal, Christian democracy. Turkey's accession to the EU and consequent influx of migrants will inevitably pose challenges for the EU's social and judicial policies. Furthermore, the recent deterioration of the rule of law in Turkey has seen its accession process frozen. Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been in power for almost 19 years and has changed his country from an emerging democracy to an aspiring authoritarian regime.[10] Of particular concern is the lack of an independent judiciary, repeated human rights violations and Turkey's hostile foreign policy, particularly towards Greece and Cyprus.[11] EU concerns over Turkey's violation of fundamental human rights brought relations between Ankara and Brussels to an all-time low.[12] The value system and policies of the Erdoğan regime are a major stumbling block to the EU. Furthermore, the flow of Turkish migrants continues, which the EU struggles to regulate. How can the EU respond to these challenges?

Once again, instead of viewing the border as a barrier, why not make it a focal point for development and cooperation? Could the EU and EU-based businesses develop trade partnerships inside Turkey that contractually require Turkish businesses to operate to EU standards in order to access EU markets, especially with regard to workers' living and social conditions and industry HR standards? Might this proactive approach of conditional investment in Turkey enlarge the EU's engagement beyond its

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[9] Eurydice, 'Turkey. Population: Demographic Situation, Languages and Religions.' https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-103_en. Accessed 26 May 2021.

[10] Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University. 'On a Precipice: Turkey's Unraveling Rule of Law.' https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/turkey-timeline/. Accessed 2 June 2021.

[11] European Parliament, 'EU-Turkey relations are at a historic low point, say MEPs.' Press Release, 19 May 2021. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04118/eu-turkey-relations-are-at-a-historic-low-point-say-meps. Accessed 2 June 2021.

[12] European Parliament, 'EU-Turkey relations are at a historic low point, say MEPs.' Press Release, 19 May 2021. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04118/eu-turkey-relations-are-at-a-historic-low-point-say-meps. Accessed 2 June 2021.

borders, helping to improve the quality of life within Turkey and bridging the cultural gap in advance of Turkey's accession to the EU? If it fails to do so, and the accession of Turkey proceeds, the EU may see its own political, economic and social cohesion critically undermined.

5.4 Africa

With its young and rapidly growing population, set to double by 2050[13], Africa is the third area that could pose a threat to the EU's stability. Europe has already seen many migrants and refugees arriving from across Africa. This is set to increase on a vast scale with the continent's rapid population growth, environmental change, and likely political upheaval. Will the current trickle of refugees crossing the Mediterranean become a tsunami? What hope has the EU of responding effectively to this looming crisis, given how it fails to respond adequately at present?

As population grow, so too do economies, and the importance of investing in Africa is recognised.[14] Indeed, Africa is the most rapidly urbanising region in the world.[15] Compared with China, which is Africa's biggest trade partner and has invested greatly in infrastructure and mining projects,[16] Europe has so far failed to develop closer relations with the region. Undertaking a collaborative approach with African governments and enterprises, with a focus on investment in the continent as opposed to extraction from it, is essential in order to enable the EU to assist Africa respond adequately to the domestic challenges it faces and to stem the swelling flow of refugees to the European continent.

By reaching beyond boundaries and borders, by building trust, freedom of choice and accountability, by participating in and investing in Africa's development, Europe has an opportunity to help make Africa thrive and embrace the values of democracy, essential to the long-term benefit of society.

6. So whither Europe?

The destruction of peace in Ireland; Russian annexation of an EU member state; social conflict with Turkey' accession to the EU; and a tsunami of refugees from Africa: Is this the EU's destiny over the next 30 years? Will the EU pass into oblivion under such challenges? By 2050 will our grandchildren ask: "Do you remember the European Union?" Or could the EU Brexit Process could become a blueprint for peace across and beyond Europe.

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[13] The Economist, 'Africa's population will double by 2050.' 26 March 2020.
https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africas-population-will-double-by-2050. Accessed 26 May 2021.
[14] Tarek Sultan Al Essa, '6 reasons to invest in Africa.' *World Economic Forum*, 6 May 2016.
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/6-reasons-to-invest-in-africa/. Accessed 26 May 2021.
[15] OECD, 'Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020.' Published 7 February 2020.
https://www.oecd.org/publications/africa-s-urbanisation-dynamics-2020-b6bccb81-en.htm. Accessed 2 June 2021.
[16] Wade Shepard, 'What China Is Really Up To In Africa.' *Forbes,* 3 October 2019.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=1a652bdf5930. Accessed 26 May 2021.

The prospect of conflict, yet again, in Europe, is real, as recognised by French military which is currently preparing for high intensity in France conflict by 2035. What might the next thirty-year step bring? Or are we already halfway? What does the EU Brexit process offer us? If Europe's leaders adopt an inflexible, unimaginative attitude, like the President of the European Commission, when they encounter the larger existential threats outlined above, then is it unreasonable to anticipate the EU's demise?

Yet, conflict need not be inevitable. Consider Ireland. The conflict between the northern part of Ireland and the rest of the island is evident through the millennia; yet over the past two decades, the Belfast Agreement, which greatest strength is the immense democratic support of the people of Ireland, has played a vital role in securing peace, building a new society, and ensuring cross-border co-operation. In its status as an international treaty, it is imperative that it be upheld; and today, it functions as a blueprint for peace for conflict zones around the world. Similarly, the EU Brexit Process could yet become a blueprint for strategies that build peace across and beyond Europe.

What of the supposed ill-informed British nationalism, the Irish people's rejection of a hard border and the EU Brexit process? What opportunities does this present Europe as a model for progress beyond frontiers?

If all parties, Brussels, London, Dublin, Stormont, and local politicians and leaders on the island of Ireland, commit to actually making the EU Brexit process work for the benefit of all, grounded firmly on the principles of democracy, i.e. accountability, and subsidiarity, and respect for difference, it can provide "a blueprint for peace and prosperity" to help address the more challenging European contexts by transforming how the broader Europe, one that includes the UK and other non-EU countries, the Europe envisioned by 6th century Irish scholar, St Columbanus, responds to the immense challenges with its neighbours, Russia, Turkey and Africa.

A hard border in Ireland is not wanted nor needed by anyone of political substance, even Brussels! Such borders are a statement of political, social and economic failure. If EU strategy moves beyond the limitations of a rigid Fortress Europe and seizes the opportunity to more fully embrace democratic values beyond its borders, affording people the freedom to choose, then the EU Brexit process becomes a resource for transformation, not conflict. It can secure among a vast array of culturally distinct groups reconciliation, cooperation and solidarity, paving a new way forward for a broader Europe, and beyond, than envisaged thus far.

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