



SOLID Workshop, 14-15th December 2021, at LSE

The Crisis That Wasn't?

Brexit and Membership Crisis in the European Union

Responses to the outcome of the Brexit referendum on 23rd June, 2016, were understandably alarmist. There was talk of a likely 'domino effect' (e.g. then foreign minister of Austria Kurz), several high-ranking officials demanded resignation of the EU President (e.g. Czech foreign minister Zaoralek) and, as ever, Brexit provided an unmissable opportunity to spot a 'wake-up call' for more reform (e.g. the Dutch and the Swedish Prime Ministers, Rutte and Löfgren). A widely held view in academia was, as Sara Hobolt (2018: 243) put it, that "[t]he Brexit referendum has illustrated how the lack of public support for the EU can challenge the very foundations of the European project."

In this workshop, we will discuss why the fundamental challenge that Brexit represented did not materialise. In our research project SOLID, we consider this a puzzle because the challenge was and is real. The EU has not profoundly changed due to Brexit. Euroscepticism and populist challenger parties remain a presence in many member states, despite their ups and downs. The open defiance of judicial checks and balances on democracy in Hungary and Poland raise the prospect of (partial) exit within the European Union.

Contributors are invited to question our point of departure and argue that it was always unlikely that the EU would have a membership crisis in the aftermath of the UK referendum. Or, on the contrary, that Brexit is a lingering crisis that can still erupt and tear the union apart. Our own take is that the EU is a polity with fragile foundations, notably in the guise of ill-defined borders, weak political participation channels that would send clear warning signals up to the EU level and, compared to national welfare states, limited means to directly ensure the loyalty of its citizens. But the Brexit negotiations also demonstrated that the EU has sufficient political resources to forge a consensus among 27 member states with very different perspectives on the UK's departure and to externalise the potential for conflict around the Irish border. This theoretical perspective in the tradition of Stein Rokkan and Albert Hirschman (Bartolini 2005) distinguishes our line of inquiry from perspectives that, for instance, would stress Britain's role as a traditional 'awkward partner' without which the EU is in any case better off or one that would see the significance of Brexit as part of a more general rise in identity politics that could still 'open the floodgates'.

We envisage 1.5 days for our workshop, starting on Tuesday, 14th December, in the morning and ending after lunch on Wednesday, the 15th. We hope for an in-person event but have a back-up plan for a hybrid format.

The programme is dedicated to three overarching questions.

1. Was Brexit an EU crisis that wasn't?

In this session, we would like to discuss different interpretations of Brexit and what it means for European integration generally. This includes contributions that see an EU crisis in the UK's departure as highly contingent still.

2. Why did the predicted membership crisis not materialise?

Here contributors are invited to present partial or full explanations. For instance, by answering question such as: how have similar processes of politicisation of EU membership been contained elsewhere? Or why have parties in mainland Europe not taken recourse to in/out referenda when challenged by a Eurosceptic fringe? Or how has the EU-27 strategy of negotiations managed to hold the union together?

3. What are the conceivable scenarios for the EU's relationship with 'awkward partners'?

In this final session, we take stock of the EU's evolving relationship with the UK since departure. We would also be interested in contributions about emerging conflict lines with other member states, most prominently with Hungary and Poland over the rule of law.

The planned outcome of the workshop is a special issue, to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal at a time that we should discuss in the wrap-up session at the end.

Timetable

Tuesday, 14th December, 9:00 – 17:00 GMT

Section 1: **Was Brexit an EU crisis that wasn't?**

9:00-9:30 GMT

Welcome and round of introduction

Waltraud Schelkle

9:30-11:30 GMT

How did the Brexit negotiations avoid politicisation of European integration?

Argyrios Altiparmakis, Joseph Ganderson, Anna Kyriazi, Joan Mirò

The EU's externalisation of a membership crisis and the peripheralisation of the UK

Kate Alexander-Shaw and Waltraud Schelkle

The Brexit crisis: political attack, postfunctionalist negotiations and external rebordering

Frank Schimmelfennig

Discussant: Brigid Laffan

11:30-13:00 Break

Section 2: **Why did the predicted membership crisis not materialise?**

13:00-15:00 GMT

Braking and Exiting: Referendum Games, European Integration and the Evolution of British Euroscepticism

Anna Kyriazi, Joseph Ganderson

Why has the Euroscepticism of the Tory Party not spread among mainstream parties in the EU?

Argyrios Altiparmakis, Anna Kyriazi

Why have extreme-right parties not jumped on a bandwagon of Euroscepticism and exit threats?

Joan Mirò, Argyrios Altiparmakis, Chendi Wang

Discussant: Giorgio Malet

15:00-15:30 Break

Section 3:

What are the conceivable scenarios for the EU's relationship with 'awkward partners'?

15:30 - 17:00 GMT

How likely are Brexit contagion or deterrence effects in EU27 public opinion?

Joseph Ganderson

Recalibrating the costs of non-cooperation: How Brexit affects preferences towards European integration in non-member states

Giorgio Malet and Stefanie Walter

Discussant: Sara Hobolt

Wednesday, 15th December, 9.00-12:30

Chair: Joseph Ganderson

9:00 – 10:30 GMT

The Meaning of Membership: Polity Preferences among European Publics in the Shadow of Brexit
Zbigniew Truchlewski, Anna Kyriazi, Joseph Ganderson

EU response to rule of law defiance and partial exit(s)
Carlos Closa

Discussant: Licia Cianetti

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45-12:15 GMT

How emotions shape attitudes towards the legitimacy of the Brexit referendum
Sara Hobolt

Why the EU cannot take comfort from the Brexit crisis that wasn't
Kate Alexander Shaw

Discussant: Chris Bickerton

12:15 – 12:30

Wrapping up and next steps

Abstracts

How did the Brexit negotiations avoid politicisation of European integration?

Argyris Altiparmakis (EUI), Anna Kyriazi (UniMi), Joan Miró (UniMi), Joe Ganderson (LSE)

One of the surprising features of the Brexit saga has been the united front that the EU27 have presented to the UK government during the negotiations over the terms of exit and future relationship. The British vote to leave the EU came at the end of a decade when the latter faced multiple overlapping political and economic crises leading to rising levels of Euroscepticism and revealing deep cleavages between and within member states. What made this 'membership crisis' different? Why didn't the British government's divide-and-conquer strategy yield any meaningful concessions? This paper updates the literature on the Brexit negotiations by referencing a new dataset of 2831 coded policy actions occurring at the EU level and in France, Spain, Germany and Ireland throughout the negotiations. Overall, we find consistently low levels of politicisation and no meaningful challenges to the Commission's authority emanating from these key member states. The terms of the Article 50 process helped to secure a strong hand for the EU's executive and European and national leaders, even in Ireland, never appeared to be seriously threatened by the Brexit process.

The EU's externalisation of a membership crisis and the peripheralisation of Great Britain

Kate Alexander-Shaw and Waltraud Schelkle

Five years after the 2016 referendum, it is safe to say that Brexit, this unprecedented incident of EU disintegration, did not lead to a membership crisis in the union. It is informative for our theories of European integration to understand why. This contribution recalls first the most plausible, theoretically sound reasons why we should have expected it, including the one with which the SOLID project started. It rested on the vulnerability that Article 50 had created by allowing Euroskeptical forces to threaten with disintegration. In the main part, we provide an explanation that emphasizes the agency of the EU Commission and the European Council: rather than simply and surprisingly not happening, the membership crisis was prevented from happening. This strategy is partly attributable to the advantages of a learning technocracy with limited responsiveness to populist pressures. In substance, the EU turned a fuzzy borders regime to its advantage by providing a bespoke border arrangement to Northern Ireland, which effectively split the UK in terms of its integrity as a single market. Not only did this make Great Britain an economic periphery of the union, notably in terms of border control on migration and asymmetric import-export border management. The EU also managed to externalise the conflict over membership that has become a divisive domestic issue by alienating the unionist parties in Northern Ireland and keeping alive demands for independence in Scotland. We conclude by drawing the lessons for our theoretical understanding of the experimental EU polity.

The Brexit crisis: political attack, postfunctionalist negotiations and external rebordering

Frank Schimmelfennig (ETH Zurich)

Brexit is a case of the 'attack' type of integration crisis. Whereas in 'failures' such as the euro or migration crises, the integrated policy threatens to stop working according to its agreed objectives and procedures because of poor policy design or unexpected shocks, attacks result from political actors taking determinate action aimed at reducing the level and scope of integration. Whereas failure is an unintended result of policy malfunction, attacks are intentional acts against functioning policies. The paper starts from the assumption that attacks and failures produce different crisis processes and outcomes – and that they are best explained by different theoretical approaches: functionalism in the case of failures and postfunctionalism in the case of attacks. In line with postfunctionalist expectations, attacks result endogenously from perceived threats to national community and the domestic politicization of integration. The coming to power of Eurosceptic governments and negative referendums on European integration are the usual triggers of integration crises. Moreover, attacks are most likely to originate in community-relevant policies and nationalist societies. The origins of the Brexit crisis match these theoretical expectations. In the postfunctionalist attack scenario, crisis decision-making is characterized by politicized and polarizing two-level negotiations, motivated by ideological differences as well as concerns about identity and self-determination. Negotiations feature the defence and hardening of ideological principles and group identities rather than the pragmatic search for functional efficiency and policy benefits mediated by asymmetrical bargaining power. Again, the Brexit negotiations fit the postfunctionalist scenario. On the UK side, faced with superior EU bargaining power during the withdrawal process and fearing the adverse consequences of 'no deal', the May government made major concessions to the EU and was willing to moderate its demands for a hard Brexit in the process. Yet, the ideological hardliners in her party blocked an economically rational softer Brexit in the end and forced her to resign. In the negotiations on the trade and cooperation agreement, the Johnson government consistently prioritized regaining national sovereignty over preserving market access. On the EU side, the Brexit threat triggered concerns about the integrity of the single market and a domino effect, which hardened its positions regarding market access for non-members and its bargaining stance towards the UK. In the end, the Brexit negotiations not only led to the only formal disintegration outcome in all of the EU's recent crises, but also to an extremely hard and economically inefficient version of exit. At the same time, however, it triggered a rallying effect among the members and societies of the EU and a sharper definition of the EU's borders. In other words, Brexit has produced a major external rebordering of the EU with significance beyond the UK.

Braking and Exiting: Referendum Games, European Integration and the Evolution of British Euroscepticism

Anna Kyriazi (UniMi), Joe Ganderson (LSE)

This paper traces calls for referendums on the terms of the UK's membership in the EU, beginning in the early 2000s and ending with Cameron's pledge to hold an in/out referendum in 2013. Expanding on existing explanations that focus exclusively on domestic developments, we cast this as a result of the interplay between two parallel processes: long-standing myopic 'referendum games played by the British political class (using strategic referendum pledges to manage party competition) collided with a modal shift in EU integration (from "integration through Treaty" to "integration through crisis") to substantially reduce the Conservative party's discretion to continue the game. Drawing on the novel EUParlspeech dataset, which contains all mentions of Europe and the European Union in the House of Commons, we find that the Euro crisis was central in resolving the British referendum games, given its timing and the ensuing policy responses, i.e., the increased centralization in the EU architecture of economic governance. We argue that securing popular consent for integration without enabling opportunistic behaviour of political elites is a delicate balancing act for the maintenance of the EU polity.

Why has the Euroscepticism of the Tory Party not spread among mainstream parties in the EU?

Argyrios Altiparmakis (EUI), Anna Kyriazi (UniMi)

The aim of this paper is to examine the British peculiarity of a mainstream party being partially and, eventually, overwhelmingly Eurosceptic. Unlike most centre-right parties in Europe, for which their pro-European attitude is a fundamental pillar of their policy, the Tory party was relatively unique in becoming more and more hostile towards the EU. In this chapter, we first of all want to examine whether this was the case, i.e. if this Euroscepticism was a British exception or whether there were other sceptical mainstream parties and how their scepticism evolved compared to the Tories. We aim to use our electoral data in order to track the share and trends of Euroscepticism among centre-right mostly, and far-right parties secondarily, and attempt to locate whether there was a critical juncture at which the Tory party's Euroscepticism became more profound and widespread in their electoral campaigns and how salient the issue was compared to their European peers. Concurrently, we want to examine the hypothesis that the Euroscepticism of the Tories is a product of the pressure from UKIP, by studying how salient the Euroscepticism of far-right parties was in other European countries and how that affected the mainstream parties too, in terms of approaching the issue and their position on it.

Why have extreme-right parties not jumped on a bandwagon of Euroscepticism and exit threats?

Joan Mirò (UniMi), Argyrios Altiparmakis (EUI), Chendy Wang (EUI)

Brexit was perceived as a Pandora's Box moment initially by European actors, as they feared it would embolden other Eurosceptics and potentially lead them to pursue and achieve further country exits, utilizing Brexit as a paradigm to be followed. However, four years since the British vote, this has not materialized as other prominent European far-right parties have neither tilted more towards Euroscepticism nor have been inclined to incorporate Brexit into their narrative. Our main research question therefore is to uncover the degree to which they tried to exploit the issue and if not, why they have been reluctant to do so. Using our electoral data and social media analysis, we want to explore who, among far-right actors, invoked Brexit, their reactions to Brexit and how that evolved over time. Did far-right actors react to the trials and tribulations of the Brexit negotiation or remain distant from the issue? One of our tentative hypotheses is that other Eurosceptic actors were cautious, awaiting to see the actual Brexit outcomes before they sounded the trumpets in their own country. Another hypothesis is that the backlash to Brexit has rendered them less

willing to take up the issue of EU-exit in their own countries, with public opinion swinging away from anti-European stances. We aim therefore to do two things in this paper, first examining the degree to which various far-right parties (FN? Lega? others?) invoke Brexit either positively or negatively, using social media and COSA data, and then adjudicate on the reasons for each party's stance, based on their statements in the press and social media.

How likely are Brexit contagion or deterrence effects in EU27 public opinion?

Joe Ganderson (LSE)

Despite predictions of a domino or destabilising effect, measures of EU27 public opinion on the European Union in the wake of Brexit generally appear to have shown a stable-to-positive trend. However, existing snapshots are tentative and prone to intervening factors and volatility, typically being conducted during acrimonious exit negotiations, which remain ongoing even at the time of writing. This paper reviews the nascent literature on linkages between Brexit, public opinion and future European integration and disintegration before laying out a research agenda that examines how Brexit – and the increased detachment of the UK from the EU in policy terms that is likely to follow – might influence this interplay going forward. Building on insights from the state of the art in this niche study area, the paper sketches out how policy entrepreneurs might narrate Brexit, creating an emergent ‘polity competition’ stoked to varying degree by different British and European pro- and anti-EU leaders.

Recalibrating the costs of non-cooperation: How Brexit affects preferences towards European integration in non-member states

Giorgio Malet and Stefanie Walter (University of Zürich)

Mass domestic opposition increasingly challenges actors and institutions of the European Union. While scholars have analyzed the consequences of public contestation on cooperation among member states, less attention has been paid to its effects on cooperation with non-EU members. Yet, after the UK's withdrawal, the risk of encouraging further exits has reduced the scope of differentiated integration for countries outside the EU. How do these changes in the bargaining space affect public support for international cooperation in non-EU countries? To answer this question, we exploit that voters in Switzerland have been faced with two EU-related policy proposals, one of which would considerably deepen relations with the EU, whereas the other would significantly lower levels of Swiss-EU cooperation. Drawing on a panel survey fielded between November 2019 and February 2021 and an embedded survey experiment, this paper shows how the ups and downs of the Brexit process altered the expected consequences of non-cooperative referendum outcomes, and in turn Swiss vote intentions in EU referendums. Our findings show how the withdrawal of individual countries from international organizations change public expectations about the costs of non-cooperation, and highlight the influence of the geopolitical context on support for international cooperation.

The Meaning of Membership: EU Boundaries, Authority and Values in the Shadow of Brexit

Anna Kyriazi, Joe Ganderson, Zbigniew Truchlewski

Many commentators feared a spillover from Brexit into the remaining EU member states. While we have not seen a domino effect, it remains too early to rule this possibility out completely. Even if rumors of “Polexit” and “Hungarexit” pop up here and there, we do not know yet whether a second country will leave the union and whether Brexit will exert a contagion effect, sparking a wider disintegrative membership crisis for the EU. What we do know however, is that together with Article 50, Brexit has disproven the permanence of EU boundaries and the forward direction of integration. Put succinctly,

European integration is no longer a one-way street. Using a new SOLID survey fielded in Summer 2021, we hypothesize that EU citizens who see Brexit as a positive thing for the UK are more likely to agree with the following three statements: that EU **boundaries** should be fluid, not rigid (E.g. by preferring that EU exit be made easier); that sharing core **values** is less important and negotiable (e.g. all member states need not share the same democratic values); and that member states should be subject to weaker central **authority** (i.e. the EU should not sanction countries that break common rules and regulations). We explore country heterogeneity in this survey, hypothesizing that a new, historically and geographically-informed cleavage is emerging. Citizens in Western countries will be less compromising on rigid boundaries, strong central authority and shared values, while citizens in Central European countries see a plurality of values being possible and oppose punitive central authority (as exemplified by Hungarian and Polish challenges to the rule of law) but oppose fluid boundaries. While the emulation of Brexit in another member state appears distant at present, this research sheds new light on how attitudes towards this historic process might shape the future meaning of EU membership.

EU response to rule of law defiance and partial exist(s)

Carlos Closa (IPP-CSIC/STG-EUI)

In a 1992 seminal work, Joseph Weiler fleshed out the notion of supranationalism around several features, being a crucial one the closure of “selective exit”, i.e. the selective derogation or nonapplication of EU law by member states. Acceptance of full *acquis* of EU norms did not only imply an intrinsic obligation to comply but also the implicit acceptance of EU norms. Since 2010 and 2017 respectively, Hungarian and Polish governments have embarked on a programme of backsliding their liberal democratic regimes that has unavoidably led to a clash with EU norms and values. Those governments have adopted a defiant attitude towards EU institutions (mainly, the EU Commission and the CJEU) questioning their authority and challenging their decisions. The denial of the primacy of EU law by the Polish Constitutional Court is the last episode in this ongoing confrontation. Whilst in the past non-compliance has been associated with lack of administrative capacities or political costs of specific measures, rule of law non-compliance follows an objective of selective disapplication of EU norms seeking “partial exists” from membership commitments. Given the existential threat to the EU supranational order that partial exists pose, this paper examines the responses of EU institutions seeking to obtain compliance and enforce obligations.

How emotions shape attitudes towards the legitimacy of the Brexit referendums

Sara Hobolt (LSE)

Emotions are an integral part of electoral campaigns and powerful determinants of individuals’ political beliefs and actions. Yet, we know little about the consequences of emotions for people’s perceptions of the democratic processes. In this study, we examine the impact of emotional responses on the perceptions of the fairness democratic process. Specifically, we argue that people who feel angry are less likely to display ‘losers’ consent’, i.e. they are more unwilling to accept a democratic outcome where they are on the losing side. In contrast, people who feel happy are more likely to accept the outcome of a democratic process as legitimate. We examine in the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. Our empirical evidence combines an observational study, showing that those who felt angry about the electoral outcomes are also less likely to accept the legitimacy of the democratic process, with an experiment embedded in a nationally-representative survey. In the experiment, we induce specific emotional responses (anger and happiness) to examine the causal effect on losers’ consent, and this provides further supportive evidence that anger can trigger a loss of faith in the democratic process.

These findings have important implications for the study of democratic resilience, since they suggest that (losing) politicians may be able to influence people's emotional responses and thereby undermine their faith in the legitimacy of the democratic process.

Why the EU cannot take comfort from the Brexit crisis that wasn't

Kate Alexander Shaw (LSE)

This paper considers the implications of the UK's Brexit referendum, drawing on new survey data to suggest that while the categories of Leave and Remain are now losing their salience, the underlying divisions they represented are likely to endure. There is evidence of a secular realignment in voter preferences around three new dimensions: intergenerational, regional and educational, each of which has become more strongly predictive of political attitudes than conventional measures of socio-economic class. Taken together, these realignments indicate the presence of a macro cleavage between cosmopolitan and communitarian conceptions of British and European identity, of which Brexit is just one consequence. This macro cleavage is not unique to the UK, and to the extent that it reflects ongoing shifts in the political structuring of the European polity, it has the potential to erupt elsewhere. The paper considers the prospects for such eruptions and the extent to which the British experience of this cleavage, in which communitarian discontentment was mobilised as euroscepticism, is generalisable.