

BREXIT REVIEWED: PROCESS, CONSEQUENCES, AND SCENARIOS

Pier Domenico Tortola and Dora Vrhoci



ABSTRACT

This public conference on Brexit was held at the University of Groningen on 11 April 2019, as part of a two-day meeting of the EU IDEA project consortium. The main topics addressed were the potential ramifications of Brexit in light of the extension granted to the May government until end of October 2019, the connection between Brexit and democracy, including the democratic paradox, as well as the implications of Brexit for Central European countries. Keynote speakers were Pier Domenico Tortola, University of Groningen, Larissa Brunner, European Policy Centre in Brussels, Lars Rensmann, University of Groningen, and Petr Kratochvíl, Institute of International Relations in Prague.

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INTRODUCTION

The public event “Brexit Reviewed: Processes, Consequences, and Scenarios” took place on 11 April 2019 in the Senaatszaal of the University of Groningen Academy Building.

Pier Domenico Tortola, University of Groningen, opened the event with a short introduction. The aim of the event was to engage the audience – comprising students, university staff and guests – and the speakers in a discussion on Brexit, its recent deadline extension and the many questions this process presents, from different angles.

BREXIT - NO END IN SIGHT?

Larissa Brunner, European Policy Centre in Brussels, opened her presentation with a brief discussion of the ramifications of Brexit with a view of the forthcoming European Parliament elections. Brunner noted that the recent extension granted to the May government opens up questions as to what this additional time will be used for and whether it will, in the first place, be enough for the UK to reach a clear decision about the terms of exiting the EU. In her opinion there is no guarantee that the extension will bring a positive solution.

Brunner then introduced a few hypothetical solutions for Brexit. One is a new general election, from which, however, the Conservatives and smaller parties would not really benefit. Another solution could be a new referendum, but Brunner noted that it is unclear where the majority for that would come from. Another issue, in this scenario, would be the question of what to include on the ballot.

Brunner noted that many promises of economic benefits coming from the Brexit proponents and implementers have recently been exposed as lies. Among them, for example, there is Theresa May’s opposition to the idea of staying in a customs union with the EU. Further discussing the situation in the UK Parliament, Brunner suggested that a compromise between the Tories and Labour about the

issue of Brexit will be very hard to reach. The EU, on the other hand, is willing to go quite far to avoid a 'no-deal' scenario.

Brunner concluded that Brexit would bring more instability to the EU regardless of the short-term outcome (e.g., a no-deal option, a deal or cancelling Brexit). She ended with the remark that the EU needs, in any case, to be prepared for further instability, and that it is currently not advisable for the EU to use too much of its political capital and energies on Brexit, searching for an optimal model that would work for both the UK and EU.



BREXIT FROM EUROPE: A DEMOCRATIC PARADOX?

The second speaker, Lars Rensmann, University of Groningen, discussed the Brexit issue from a different angle, connecting it to the role of democracy and the democratic paradox. Rensmann started with a short introduction on the current political atmosphere of 'Brexit fatigue' which marks ongoing negotiations between the EU and the UK, the tiresome duration of the process, as well as Brexit's continuous presence in global media.

He briefly introduced the many meanings that were mobilized for the idea of Brexit in the UK, and that are still dominant elements of the UK's discourse of Brexit: fantasies of empire, xenophobic fantasies, the belief in the nation state, the vision of Brexit as 'national liberation' and folk tales of Brussels as the UK's 'negative other'.

In his view, democracy has been a strong claim on the Brexit side, according to which Britain is reclaiming democracy, and Brexit is seen as a grassroots act where people had the opportunity to speak. The idea of the democratic paradox, which Rensmann applies to Brexit, suggests that, if the majority is deciding, the majority can simultaneously create tyrannies. On the other side of the spectrum is the idea of a deliberative democracy, where participation is key for strengthening democracy.

Rensmann also addressed the issue of Brexit from the lens of democratic input, according to which a referendum can be seen as a legitimate means of raising a democratic voice and publicity. He concluded by suggesting that a democratic solution for Brexit could be to push for a second referendum. In his view, the first Brexit referendum never truly expressed the will of the people.

BREXIT AND CENTRAL EUROPE: THE REVERSAL OF ALLIANCES

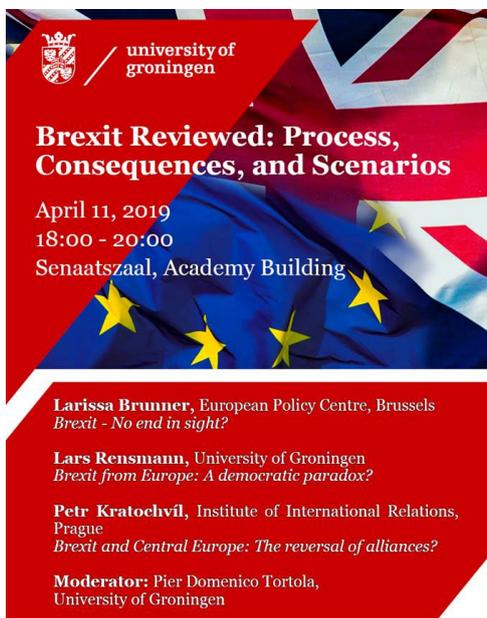
The final speaker, Petr Kratochvíl, Institute of International Relations in Prague, focused on the implications of Brexit for Central European countries. He identified deep similarities in the way the EU is perceived by Central European members of the EU and by the UK: both perceive it primarily in utilitarian terms, which can be summarized by the idea that "it's good to be in the EU because it pays off". The Baltic countries, on the other hand, offer a different perspective, articulated in terms of searching for security, although they are still very much guided by utilitarian thinking.

At the same time, Britain was often perceived by Central European members as a 'role-model', because it was seen as 'fighting' against technocratic Brussels, and the socialist continent. The British, he noted, always feared this tendency of European countries to create a mythical 'ever-closer union' that could rival their country's own economic capacities.

With Brexit, however, Britain is seen in a more hostile manner by Central European countries, among other things because they will become relatively richer, statistically speaking, as a result of Brexit, thus losing some EU funds. Another tendency that he observed developing in tandem with Brexit, and with which he concluded, is the polarization of the EU between 'the core' and 'the margin', with countries such as Slovakia now claiming that they belong to the core.

Some of the topics that emerged from the debate include:

- The influence of Brexit on Scotland, and its future relationship with the EU;
- The relationship between the Brexit process and the meaning of democracy, especially in light of the referendum as a decision-making procedure;
- The influence of Eastern European migration to the UK on Central and Eastern European countries' stance towards Brexit, and the more general issue of the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the rest of the EU;
- Scenarios of a second referendum and whether this is really a solution for the current impasse of the British political leadership;
- The dominance that Brexit has on the British political agenda, and the resulting neglect of other important issues. In connection to this, also the scapegoating of the EU for many problems in the British society and economy that are for the most part domestically generated.



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April 11, 2019
18:00 - 20:00
Senaatszaal, Academy Building

Larissa Brunner, European Policy Centre, Brussels
Brexit - No end in sight?

Lars Rensmann, University of Groningen
Brexit from Europe: A democratic paradox?

Petr Kratochvíl, Institute of International Relations,
Prague
Brexit and Central Europe: The reversal of alliances?

Moderator: Pier Domenico Tortola,
University of Groningen