What the British referendum means for Europe: a call for more flexibility in the EU

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With a week to go until the EU referendum in the UK the polls are predicting a very close result, the question of in or out remains totally unpredictable. Nevertheless, regardless of the outcome we can already draw three important lessons from this major political battle over Europe that was fought in the past few months and years, and in particular from the success of the Leave camp in it. The referendum campaign has caused serious distress and discomfort with pro-European ideas and values and raised serious questions about the overall direction of the EU. Even if British voters decide to remain in the EU, the reaction cannot be to push for more integration but rather to question and rethink the modus operandi in Europe.

The first lesson is that the Leave campaign successfully exploited the deep divide between political elites and voters who feel increasingly disconnected from politics. Brexiter successfully framed the withdrawal from the EU as a means to sanction the establishment and to restore Britain’s democracy and sovereignty. It was not just a popular political manoeuvre but also posed a huge challenge to the remain-side. Traditional means to address the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ of the EU, such as enhancing the influence of the European Parliament, have not resonated with the public, neither in the UK nor elsewhere on the continent. The EU is still perceived as an undemocratic and detached spacecraft where ‘bureaucrats’ negotiate and conclude deals behind closed doors. This alien status of EU institutions has not just provided the right with a plausible argument in favour of more ‘self-importance’ where one gives primacy to Britain’s self-interests and national idiosyncrasies. It also explains in parts why the Labour leadership hesitated for so long to clearly commit to Europe, a commitment which came too late in the campaign and left the public confused.

The second lesson is that the Leave campaign offered a concrete solution to those who feel left behind from increasing competition in the global economy: a reduction in immigration and, in particular, the end to EU free movement. The potentially toxic nature of this message – originally introduced by UKIP leader Nigel Farage but later relayed by more moderate voice – was largely mitigated by the idea of a points-based immigration system, like in Australia or Canada. The slogan ‘take back control’ proved to be very efficient while the Remain camp’s facts and figures on the economic benefits of European immigration could only meet a wall of scepticism. The Leave side drew a clear line under the threat of an ever larger EU, with possible new entrants such as Turkey or Macedonia. They also managed to convince a large proportion of the public that fully controlling the
borders would be a way to protect the UK from socio-economic divergences in the Euro area, a powerful driver behind young Europeans seeking their fortunes in the UK.

The third lesson is that the British referendum highlights the unifying and vertical character (“top down”) of Europe at a time when individuals and nation states are demanding more flexibility and power from below (“bottom up”). The referendum captured the zeitgeist in so far as the solution to economic and political insecurity cannot be a monolithic construction but a political system that better expresses differences, innovation and experiments. That is why leading Leave figures managed to portray those who support the EU in its current form as out-of-touch. Simply spoken, they ambushed David Cameron with his own words: Europe must have the “the flexibility of a network, not the rigidity of a bloc”.

Certainly, in case of ‘Brexit’, the odds are that the promises of the Leave camp will be difficult to hold. As is the case with Switzerland and Norway, Britain will realise that her interests require an equally close, and definitely more complicated, relationship with the EU. Unless they consent to years of economic decline and profound social changes, the newly gained democratic sovereignty will prove largely illusory. However, we should not underestimate the attraction of anti-EU arguments at either end of the political spectrum. Radical political forces in Europe, such as Podemos, the AfD or Front national, are already knocking on Brussel’s doors demanding either a return of sovereignty to national parliaments or a radically distinct type of EU policies.

Indeed, low trust in the EU goes far beyond the British case. Recent data from the Pew Research Center shows that only 38% of French, 47% of Spaniards and 50% of Germans have a favourable opinion of the EU, whereas these figures reached up to 70% ten years ago. The success of anti-European forces was dramatically put to the forefront with the presidential election in Austria and the Dutch rejection of the EU-Ukraine association agreement. This political situation requires a response that cannot boil down to a new leap of integration. Talks of a new treaty, two-speed Europe or yet another European grand plan would be political mistakes.

Politicians in Europe have probably not sufficiently explained the consequences of creating a single market, a common currency and common borders. A strong reply to anti-Europeans would require to explain more rigorously why national sovereignty today can only be exercised within the limits of other national legitimacies. In this sense the crisis in the Eurozone was a useful political exercise. It would, however, be in the German interest – if they are committed to European values – to better take the interests of Southern European countries into account and recognise their legitimate concerns.
Moreover, giving member states more flexibility has become an imperative in order to safeguard the unity and stability of the EU. The refugee distribution scheme proposed in the Schengen area should not be imposed on member states under threats of financial penalties. Perhaps it is time to accept that all countries cannot be forced to walk the same pace and to propose new projects based on incentives rather than penalties. While maintaining an institutional structure at twenty-seven or twenty-eight, small groups of countries should be allowed to engage in open cooperation and joint projects.

Finally, Europe can only regain legitimacy by demonstrating its ability to act on issues representing popular concerns. The Agreement negotiated by Angela Merkel with Turkey on managing the migration crisis illustrates this. The content of the agreement and its negative effects can be criticised, but its immediate and concrete impact cannot be denied, namely the drying up the flow of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea. The initiative took shape outside the traditional Community framework and is funded in parts by member states, thus showing that pragmatism and creativity pays off.

The possibility of a Brexit therefore offers an opportunity for an important debate for Europe. Only by addressing popular concerns head-on, not by ignoring them, will European leaders ‘take back control’.