

## Brexit, Populism, Nationalism

Challenge of the Future

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The Brexit process is today at a crucial stage. In the UK, it is polarising opinion and creating divisions across a number of fault lines in British society between generations, geographies of inequality, cosmopolitan liberals and more rural conservatives, communities divided by historical conflicts of religion or nationality. In the European Union, similar tensions are everywhere – at the time of writing in France, above all, with the gilets jaunes, in Andalusia with the reappearance of far-right politics in Spain, not to mention in Hungary with the Central European University forced out of Budapest. Societies are increasingly divided among themselves and against each other. This article considers the implications of Brexit for international cultural relations in Europe. It considers the case of Brexit, recognises that Brexit is a process, or a state of mind, rather than a single event, and that the future is still to be negotiated. It concludes by suggesting that we should aim to learn from Brexit – whatever happens will be shaped by the lessons we can apply to make a more positive future.

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### The view from 2017

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In 2017, the ifa-report “The Impact of Brexit on International Cultural Relations in the European Union” was published. The report focused on what could be said at the time about the potentially far-reaching consequences of Brexit for the UK and Europe in areas relevant to cultural relations. These included the likely economic and cultural impacts on the cultural and creative industries, mobility, higher education, education and the prospects for future cooperation in, and through, cultural relations.

The report identified concerns and what people saw as the risks of Brexit. Firstly, there was speculation that Brexit would have a negative effect on the UK's soft power. This was because Brexit would be bad for the UK's cultural and creative industries which, it was claimed, were a main driver of the UK's global attractiveness – the basis of 'soft power' – at a

time when the UK needed its soft power the most.

Perhaps more importantly, there was concern from both sides of the English Channel that Brexit would lead to a loss of mobility and therefore to the ability to collaborate strategically. This would erode the UK's science and innovation base and deprive the EU of one of its leading centres for research excellence. It would also, it was feared, have very negative impacts on labour supply in the creative industries, impoverish the arts and culture, and endanger exchange programmes such as Erasmus.

A specific risk to the practice of International Cultural Relations in the EU would be the potential loss of UK participation. It was recognised on all sides that the British Council was not only the largest and most capable cultural relations organisation in the EU, it also had the most extensive global networks. Losing so much capacity and experience just at the time when the EU was developing its strategic

approach to cultural relations in external relations would be a major negative.

The concerns of 2017 that Brexit would be bad both for the EU and the UK have not disappeared. Donald Tusk, speaking about his plans for the European Council meeting on 25 November to finalise and formalise the Brexit agreement signed on 14 November, summed up the view of many in the EU when he said: “Since the very beginning we have had no doubt that Brexit is a lose-lose situation and our negotiations are only about damage control.”<sup>1</sup>

The draft agreement consists, for now, of a 585-page draft Withdrawal Agreement<sup>2</sup> on the terms on which the UK will leave the UK, and a 7-page Outline of the Political Declaration Setting Out The Framework For The Future Relationship Between The European Union and the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup>.

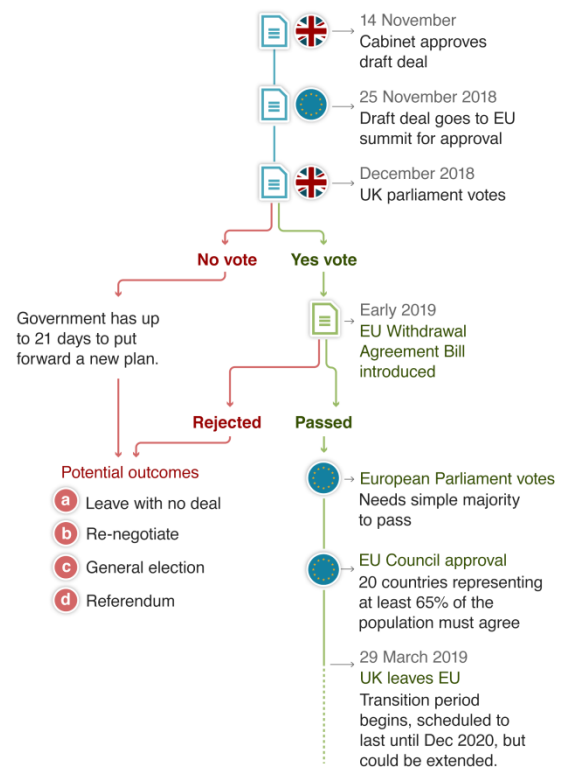
Do these documents address any of the concerns identified in the 2017 report? This paper considers where we are today in the Brexit process, discusses the wider context of populism and nationalism within which the process will take

place and assesses the prospects for something better than a “lose-lose” outcome.

## The view today

Firstly, in terms of understanding where we are, it has to be said that Brexit is a complex and lengthy process which is best described in a diagram:

### Brexit: What could happen next



Source: BBC Political Research Unit

This process is being taken forward in a political climate which is not propitious to a successful, rational, negotiating process. The UK Government appears, for the moment, to have an agreed policy, but that consensus is very fragile. Five members of the UK Cabinet are reported to have profound disagreements with the draft Withdrawal Agreement, and there are 20-plus Conservative members of Parliament who have supported a motion of no-confidence in the Prime Minister. More may follow. The deal ap-

<sup>1</sup> Boffey, D. and Ranking, J. (2018): Summit to finalise Brexit deal to be held on 25 November, in: The Guardian, 15 November 2018, available online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/brexit-summit-finalise-deal-donald-tusk> [23/01/2019]

<sup>2</sup> Draft Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, as agreed at negotiators' level on 14 November 2018, available online:

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/draft-agreement-withdrawal-united-kingdom-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-european-union-and-european-atomic-energy-community-agreed-negotiators-level-14-november-2018\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/draft-agreement-withdrawal-united-kingdom-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-european-union-and-european-atomic-energy-community-agreed-negotiators-level-14-november-2018_en) [23/01/2019]

<sup>3</sup> Outline of the political declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as agreed at negotiators' level on 14 November 2018, available online:

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/outline-political-declaration-setting-out-framework-future-relationship-between-european-union-and-united-kingdom-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-agreed-negotiators-level-14-november-2018\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/outline-political-declaration-setting-out-framework-future-relationship-between-european-union-and-united-kingdom-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-agreed-negotiators-level-14-november-2018_en) [23/01/2019]

appears to have little or no support from other parties and appears to have united both leavers and remainers in the Brexit debate against it. The prospects of the Draft Agreement being passed by the UK Parliament in December therefore appear very slim. What happens after that is anyone's guess, but the outcome which concerns most people the most is outcome A, i.e. that the UK leaves the EU with no deal – although it has to be said that some “extreme” Brexiters – and 19% of the UK population - favour that option.

So, what has been agreed? In relation to the prospects for cultural relations, there are grounds for optimism.

### **Withdrawal Agreement**

The draft Agreement addresses some of the major concerns identified in 2017, notably in key areas of uncertainty relating to citizens' rights, the ability of people to work across borders, protection for funded programmes and budgets up to 2020, the protection of Intellectual Property Rights, data flows, and the ability for UK organisations (such as the British Council), representatives and experts to participate in EU meetings, and collaborate in foreign policy on a case by case basis.

It addresses these rights through explicit, legally-binding provisions. For example, the Preamble says that the rights of EU and UK citizens should be protected, and this is reflected in Title 2, Chapter 1 which deals with rights related to residence, especially in Articles 13, 24 and 15 which deal with residence rights, rights of exit and of entry, and rights of permanent residence. A similar approach is taken in relation to the other issues: Chapter 2 deals with the rights of workers, and the other areas mentioned are dealt with in similar ways. The important points are that the Withdrawal Agreement is legally binding and sets out the terms on which the UK

leaves the EU. It is also the case that while, at the time of writing, the Agreement was rejected by the UK Parliament, the provisions relevant to this study were accepted – hence the belief of the writer that there are grounds for vary cautious optimism.

It also confirms that the UK will commit to funding those currently in receipt of EU funds until 2020 and will make decisions on participation in specific EU programmes later, depending on the outcome of negotiations with the EU.

### **Political Declaration**

The political declaration sketches out the basis for future cooperation between the UK and the EU. It is inevitably a vague document, but it does leave the door open for future cultural relations and gives ground for cautious optimism. It commits both sides to working from a basis of shared values including respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic principles, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union, and support for effective multilateralism. It allows for the United Kingdom's participation in European Union programmes such as in science and innovation, culture and education, and development. It also sees “dialogue and exchanges in areas of shared interest, with the view to identifying opportunities to cooperate, share best practice and act together.” (Political Declaration)

### **Mobility**

The main area of anxiety (for International Cultural Relations) is that of mobility. The Withdrawal Agreement provides for arrangements on temporary entry and stay for people engaged in business in defined areas. It also includes visa-free travel for short-term visits. That would appear to be reassuring for those involved in the cultural and creative industries and in education,

but as the UK Government is committed to ending free movement by treating EU nationals, post-Brexit, in the same way as nationals from other countries, and is at the same time committed to reducing immigration, the implications remain unclear and people are still worried.

### What next?

The draft Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration are inevitably based on a compromise which does not please the ultras of either the political right or left, leave or remain. It is not a given that they will be agreed. If they are not agreed, then we are in truly unknown territory. As any renegotiation seems very unlikely, and apart from a few extreme Brexiters there is no political support for no-deal, the main possibilities seem to be either a UK general election which, if held today, would probably result in a victory for the Labour party, or a second referendum – the so-called “Peoples' Vote” on the terms of the draft agreements. The Brexit process has opened up political, social, cultural and constitutional divisions in the UK, and is forcing the country to think about itself in a way it has not done before – there is no playbook for Brexit. These divisions are highly acrimonious, dividing politics, families, communities and civil society. They are leading to claims that Brexit is at the forefront of nationalism, populism and even risks tearing the UK apart.

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## Brexit, populism and nationalism

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Since the Danes rejected the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, referendums on European integration have often had elite-defying consequences. Yet the Brexit referendum is arguable the most significant in the EU's history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hobolt, S. (2016): The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:9, 1259-1277, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785

These risks seem more apparent today than in 2017. The report<sup>5</sup> noted that the referendum campaign was controversial, containing elements of “fake news” and “forms of voter manipulation which were linked to new forms of influence through social media and online political advertising.” I shall give an update on social media below.

The report did not however, engage with the wider context of Brexit – which seems darker and more alarming today than it was then. The leading commentator Fintan O'Toole recently described Brexit as a “paranoid fantasy”<sup>6</sup>, in which “in the dark imagination of English reactionaries, Britain is always a defeated nation – and the EU is the imaginary invader”, and Lee Bryant in a Twitter feed<sup>7</sup> on 16 November proposed similarities between the way the British media – in particular the BBC – has covered Brexit to how events unfolded before the collapse of the former Yugoslavia.

The populist and nationalist forces that led to Brexit are a global phenomenon. As Matthew Goodwin<sup>8</sup> says in his recent book:

“Across the West, there is a rising tide of people who feel excluded, alienated from mainstream politics, and increasingly hostile towards minorities, immigrants and neo-liberal economics. Many of these voters are turning to national populist movements, which have begun to change the face of Western liberal democracy, from the United States to France, Austria to the UK.”

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<sup>5</sup> Hobolt, S. (2016): The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23:9, 1259-1277, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785

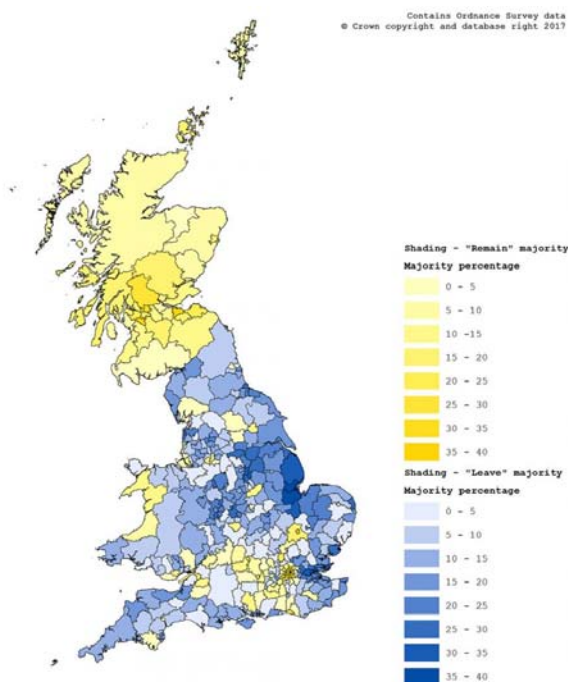
<sup>6</sup> O'Toole, F. (2018): The paranoid fantasy behind Brexit, in: *The Guardian*, 16 November 2018, available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/nov/16/brexit-paranoid-fantasy-fintan-otoole> [21/01/2019]

<sup>7</sup> Bryant, L. (2018). Twitterfeed from 16 November 2018, available online: <https://twitter.com/leebryant> [20/02/2019]

<sup>8</sup> Eatwell, R. and Goodwin, M. (2018): *National Populism. The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. Pelican Books

It should also be said that this is not just a matter of right-wing politics. A sense of exclusion from mainstream politics can take many forms and Goodwin notes that an assortment of radical left or green parties have also made notable gains. The losers have been traditional social democrats, centrists and the moderate left. Populism is not a monopoly of the right, nor are nationalists all the same. If Goodwin's thesis is right, these developments are having, and will continue to have, a profound effect on the shape and practice of international cultural relations for years to come.

At the UK level, however, a map of the referendum results shows that a number of populist and nationalist factors were at play in Brexit (leave areas are blue, remain areas, yellow)<sup>9</sup>:



It is clear from the map that the Brexit vote was complicated by a range of factors. While early

<sup>9</sup> Green, C. (2017): Mapping the Brexit vote, available online: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/oxford-and-brexit/brexit-analysis/mapping-brexit-vote> [20/02/2019]

commentators argued that Brexit was driven by populism and (English) nationalism, the picture is undoubtedly more complex.

The geography reveals that older and deeper forces are at play than simple populism. Rather than looking at leave-voting areas, it is also revealing to look at the remain-voting areas of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and London which, despite their economic, cultural and historical differences, all voted to remain in the EU (55.8%, 62% and 59.9% respectively).

The troubled history of Northern Ireland with its very specific history of sectarianism and nationalism has turned out – unexpectedly for the Brexiters – to be the main obstacle to achieving the Brexit that they wanted. The issue of the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has the potential both to wreck the draft Brexit agreement and to re-awaken violent divisions. Neither side wants conflict, so they are forced into a compromise (the so-called “back-stop”) which (without going into details) cannot please both of the opposing and exceedingly stubborn sectarian communities in Northern Ireland. Nor can it please Brexiters who are wholly committed to Northern Ireland remaining unambiguously in the United Kingdom.

As if this was not complex enough, the situation in Northern Ireland is affecting Scotland as Scottish nationalists object to Northern Ireland possibly having a status that is closer to the EU than is possible for Scotland and therefore in their view gives economic advantages to Northern Ireland. If Northern Ireland can be a special case, then why not Scotland? Nationalist politicians are already signalling that this issue could even lead to a second independence referendum in Scotland. While the Northern Irish issue clearly has some elements of both nationalism and populism, it is not in the normal sense of exclu-

sion from politics, hostility to minorities, or to globalisation.

Neither does the culture of nationalism in Scotland fit the stereotype of nationalism as a right-wing or populist force. Rather it is rooted in a cultural tradition of civic nationalism which has a long history and its own distinctive features – albeit one which exists in opposition to the UK. Alex Law<sup>10</sup> describes:

“... a charismatic Scottish we-ideal (which) claims for itself the peaceful, humanist and egalitarian virtues of civic nationalism in contrast to the perfidious Machiavellianism at the heart of UK state power.”

Scottish nationalism's civic nature gives it exemplary force – a form of soft power – elsewhere in Europe, which can encourage centrifugal forces in other places, for example in Catalonia.

Then there is London, which is consistently identified as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, and by Saskia Sassen<sup>11</sup> as one of only three truly global cities in the sense of its economic significance and transnational networks. London is also of course, the capital city, the financial centre and the most diverse and multicultural population centre in Europe. While London contained within itself large differences in attitudes to Brexit, London also contained the UK's most diverse multicultural populations who were the most positive remain-voters. Clearly the presence of immigrants does not, by itself, generate either populism or a rejection of the EU.

So, the reasons why people voted the way they did varied from place to place, reflecting different and specific histories, cultures and con-

texts. Brexit cannot simply be explained by “populism” or “nationalism” alone. Twitter analysis by the London School of Economics<sup>12</sup> offers some insight. While there certainly were correlations between austerity and nationalism in the Brexit vote, in Goodwin's sense, there were few signs of a general rise in populism. Instead, populist sentiment was overwhelmingly concentrated in a few areas:

“... all 72 constituencies with overwhelming support for Leave (65 per cent voting to leave, or higher) presented predominantly nationalist sentiments. Conversely, only 17 of these constituencies had a Twitter debate predominantly defined by populist sentiments, with 55 of them being classified as concerned with the economic outlook. These were regions in which Brexit was wholeheartedly embraced – and yet populist sentiments were not predominant in these regions on Twitter.”

The evidence<sup>13</sup> (August 2018) shows that “leave” voters were, as individuals, associated with: older age, white ethnicity, low educational attainment, infrequent use of smartphones and the internet, receiving social security benefits, and had poor health and low life satisfaction. These results coincided with corresponding patterns at the aggregate level of voting areas. In other words, the places where leave sentiment was strongest exhibited many of the characteristics identified for individuals and suggested by Goodwin. In other words, they tended to be “left behind” peripheral places.

<sup>10</sup> Law, A. (2017): The narcissism of national solipsism: civic nationalism and sub-state formation processes in Scotland, available online: <https://rke.abertay.ac.uk/en/publications/the-narcissism-of-national-solipsism-civic-nationalism-and-sub-st> [20/02/2019]

<sup>11</sup> Sassen, S. (2002): *The Global City* New York, London, Tokyo, Princeton University Press, available online: <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/6943.html> [20/02/2019]

<sup>12</sup> Bastos, M. and Mercea, D. (2018): Brexit tweets suggest nationalism and austerity – rather than populism – motivated voters, available online: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/09/13/brexit-tweets-suggest-nationalism-and-austerity-rather-than-populism-motivated-voters/> [20/02/2019]

<sup>13</sup> Alabrese, F. et al. (2018): Who Voted for Brexit? Individual and Regional Data Combined, available online: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/dnovy/brexit\\_abfn.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/dnovy/brexit_abfn.pdf) [20/02/2019]

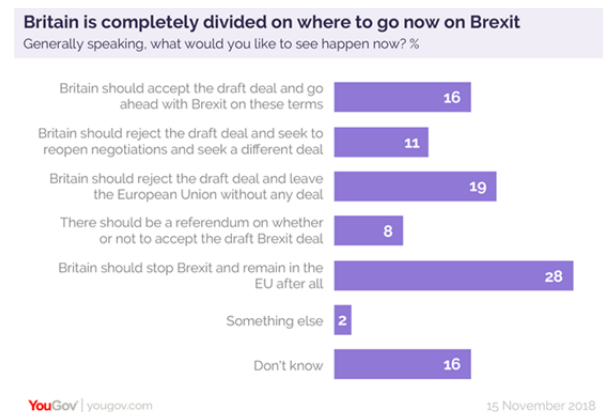
## The media

In relation to social media, in 2017, there was considerable concern about the impact of Russian cyber-attacks on the referendum. Clearly, if the referendum was compromised by outside interference, its results could potentially be discounted. However, evidence from recent studies by the Oxford Internet Institute<sup>14</sup> found that in fact, Russian influence on the result was minimal. If one looks for sinister forces at work, it may be more fruitful to look at the domestic issue of the financing of the Leave campaign which broke electoral law<sup>15</sup> and was mostly funded by five of the UK's richest businessmen<sup>16</sup>.

The salience of the role of the UK media can also be questioned. The traditional view among academic media analysts is that that media reinforce pre-existing attitudes, i.e. people consume the media that agree with them, but this may have been challenged by Brexit. A significant recent study<sup>17</sup> suggests that the media did help to create attitudinal uncertainty and that this influence helped to shape the outcome.

Things may be changing, however. The Daily Mail, described by the Guardian – a pro-remain newspaper - as “propagandists for Brexit”<sup>18</sup> recently changed its profoundly Euro-hostile edi-

tor, and with him its whole coverage of Brexit, adopting a far less radical approach. This may reflect changes in attitudes among readers. As reported by YouGov<sup>19</sup> on 15 November 2018, while public opinion is hopelessly divided over Brexit, the most popular single option is now remain:



However, around one fifth of the UK population do favour “crashing out” of the EU with no deal.

European media, on the other hand, followed the Brexit debate closely, but most journalists displayed a lack of concern about the impact of Brexit upon their own country's national interests. A study<sup>20</sup>, conducted by Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism between September 2017 and March 2018, concluded that Europe's media saw their role as “bringing facts to the conversation and also keeping separatist tendencies at bay”.

<sup>14</sup> Narayanan, V. (2017): Russia and Brexit, available online: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/blog/russia-and-brexit/> [20/02/2019]

<sup>15</sup> Financial Times: Vote Leave broke campaign spending rules, says Electoral Commission, available online: <https://www.ft.com/content/9bb7e9fc-7f57-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d> [20/02/2019]

<sup>16</sup> Mortimer, C. (2017): Brexit campaign was largely funded by five of UK's richest businessmen, in: The Independent, 24 April 2017, available online:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-leave-eu-campaign-arron-banks-jeremy-hosking-five-uk-richest-businessmen-peter-hargreaves-a7699046.html> [20/02/2019]

<sup>17</sup> Gavin, N. (2018): media definitely do matter: Brexit, immigration, climate change and beyond, The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 20:4, 827-845, DOI: 10.1177/1369148118799260

<sup>18</sup> The Guardian. (2018): The Guardian view on the Daily Mail and Brexit: a very public shift, 23 October 2018, available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/23/the-guardian-view-on-the-daily-mail-and-brexit-a-very-public-shift> [20/02/2019]

<sup>19</sup> Smith, M. (2018): 7 things we've learned about public opinion on the Brexit deal, available online:

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<sup>20</sup> University of Oxford. (2018): How Europe's media covered Brexit, available online: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2018-07-02-how-europe%E2%80%99s-media-covered-brexit> [20/02/2019]

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## So, where next for International Cultural Relations in Europe?

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The future of the UK (unexpectedly still the world number 1 soft power in 2018<sup>21</sup>) hinges firstly on addressing the concerns highlighted by Brexit, and secondly, on maintaining good relationships with the EU, whatever the outcome of the process.

The future of the EU, however, hinges more than ever on citizens' support for the European integration project. A very recent report<sup>22</sup> for the US Congress identified a long list of challenges facing the EU. Brexit was top of the list.

The challenge for both UK and European leaders is to find a way of addressing the concerns of the many citizens who have not felt the economic benefits of free trade and globalisation, and who feel that their distinct national identity and culture is under threat from immigration and European integration. This is not helped by populist discourse. Simplistic, divisive and often lacking in factual veracity, it is attracting an ever-larger share of the European electorate.

In terms of Brexit, however, all is still to play for and will be decided in the course of the detailed negotiations on the future relationship between the EU and the UK. Assuming that the draft deal is passed by the UK Parliament, the door is open for future cooperation through culture, education and innovation. The UK can potentially remain in EU programmes and life can go on more or less as before Brexit, including the

collaboration of the British Council and other UK organisations in the EU's strategic approach to culture in external relations. This would take serious, hard negotiation, and some time, but it is possible. With no deal, however, it is hard to see what can be done in the short term except for damage limitation.

The strenuous efforts that will be needed both in the UK and in Europe to address grievances from populations who feel let down by their political leaders will be much harder. As Sara Hobolt says:

“Across Europe we find divisions between the so-called winners of globalisation and those who feel left behind. While the former tend to embrace European integration and multiculturalism, the latter feel threatened by the changes that globalisation and European integration have brought about. Such divisions have been successfully mobilised by populist parties across Europe, especially on the right, who give a voice to the fears of 'ordinary, decent people' in opposition to a political establishment that has often failed to listen. We see this expressed not only in referendums, but also in the electoral successes of populist Eurosceptic parties.”

The turn towards nationalism and populism are not confined to Europe and others are exploring new approaches. South Korea's experiments with a consultative approach involving civil society in discussing foreign policy are one notable example of addressing such tensions in a context where they face the task of developing effective external relationships at times of internal division. Partly inspired by Frank-Walter Steinmeier's 2014 foreign policy review, with its emphasis on consultation, they believe that in an interdependent world, it is necessary to start international cultural relations at home.

In other words, we may need to learn from Brexit and change the way in which International

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<sup>21</sup> McClory, J. (2018): The soft power 30. A global ranking of soft power, available online: <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2018.pdf> [20/02/2019]

<sup>22</sup> Congressional Research Service. (2018): The European Union: Ongoing Challenges and Future Prospects, available online: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44249.pdf> [20/02/2019]



Cultural Relations are conceived to recognise the reality of increasingly divided societies where populism and nationalism are here to stay.

On the one hand, some can benefit from globalisation (or EU membership). Others, for a range of reasons, cannot. These internal divisions are reflected in international relations and pose a particular challenge for the EU when they lead to a Member State wishing to diverge from the EU's core values, or even to leave the EU altogether. Put simply, international cultural relations need to start locally to be effective globally.

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