

Stuck in the Brexit Mud? The EU after the UK Election

Published on 21. June 2017 by [Teresa Pullano](#)

After the results of the British election on 8 June, a cloud of uncertainty hangs over the [Brexit negotiations set for 19 June](#). Almost three months already went by since Theresa May triggered art. 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. This formal act started the withdrawal procedure of the UK from the EU, which should be completed in two years, i.e. no later than April 2019. During these three months, no progress was made in the negotiations – and after the recent election, meant to increase Theresa May's majority, she now finds herself facing a 'hung' Parliament. To be able to continue to govern, the Tories depend on the support of the far-right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland. Not only is such a majority 'wafer-thin', as Jean Lambert wrote [on this blog](#), it is also questionable as the DUP is a party longing for the lost supremacy of the British Protestants over the Catholic Irish, reviving a sense of lost grandeur of the British Empire. They are, as Miller and Lewis call them in [Jacobinmag](#), 'May's Monsters'. No one can predict what will happen to the current UK Conservative government, how long it will last or even if the Conservatives will stay in power at all. The battle for leadership within the Tories is fierce; Boris Johnson is not only May's opponent in [BBC fiction](#), but in real life as well. At the moment it looks as if the political situation in the UK will remain chaotic for quite a long time. Thus, is Angela Merkel really wrong for urging the UK to stick to the Brexit time plan, as Grillo and Cappellini argue in their article for [OpenDemocracy](#)? Their argument is that Merkel's insistence on sticking to the Brexit timetable rather than delaying or postponing it is short sighted, since the outcome of the British election and the weakness of the British Parliament might be an opportunity for a merely nominal Brexit or even for a new referendum in case the government would in the end shift to the Labour Party.

I argue that Angela Merkel in particular and the EU in general are right in asking for not postponing the Brexit negotiations. And this is not because I think that a withdrawal of the UK from the EU would be beneficial to either the UK or the EU, but because the greatest danger the EU is facing in the current situation is to be 'stuck in the mud' of never ending Brexit negotiations. The process of EU integration cannot be held hostage by the current cumbersome dynamics of British politics. The 'mud' refers to a situation where no real political decision can be taken about the future of EU integration, which is much more dangerous for the EU than Brexit, if there will be one. Grillo and Cappellini's argument to delay Brexit negotiations rests on the argument that the UK needs to remain a close trading and political partner of the EU. Therefore, an agreement with the UK on staying in the single market would be better than pushing May in a corner and forcing her to somehow stick to her commitment of a hard Brexit and in this having to rely on the radical nationalism of the Democratic Unionist Party. For sure, this scenario would be disastrous for the UK, but would it be a disaster for the EU?

Of course, the UK's withdrawal from the EU would be a serious symptom of EU disintegration, and the position and role of the UK with respect to continental Europe would be extremely problematic outside of the EU. Nevertheless, Brexit, along with other recent political shocks, such as the rise of right wing parties in Western and Eastern European countries and the lines of fracture that have showed in European societies in light of the refugee crisis as well as the economic crisis, demonstrates an urgent need to rescue the European integration project from collapsing, a need for moving on with economic and political integration.

Delaying the Brexit negotiations, no matter what their outcome will be, means delaying the process of further economic and political integration for months, if not years.

It is this situation, the being stuck in the mud, which is the real tragedy for the EU at present. We cannot run the risk of having one Member State, the UK, preventing an already reluctant EU from taking the steps that are needed to solve the pressing economic and social problems that threaten its unity. If the EU does not engage in the process of tightening its economic and political unit, in a democratic way, it will not be able to give an answer to the growing economic inequalities or the migration crisis. These dimensions can only be solved at EU level. If the EU remains inert in a state of chronic indecision due to a hesitant Brexit, it will never be able to face up to its most pressing challenge, i.e. taking decisions on its political structure.

In the recent French legislative elections, Macron's new party did surprisingly well, but this is not a guarantee, per se, that the danger of the Front National is over. If structural problems at the European and at the national level are not solved, right-wing parties will not magically disappear, not from the French political scene nor elsewhere in Europe.

We cannot wait till the Tories, and to some extent also Labour, finally figure out how they see the UK's role and its engagement with the EU. We can only wish that they will take the right decision, that Corbyn's exceptional result and his anti-austerity agenda will converge with other progressive and anti-austerity forces in the EU. But the priority now is to call for a further process of 'politicisation' of the EU, for solving the dangerous shortcomings of the monetary Union and for opening up a real debate about the political identity of the EU.

In recent years, we have moved from a 'silent consensus' on EU affairs, a situation in which public opinion would not really engage with EU politics, to a situation in which clear-cut divisions have emerged and open discussions take place in national arenas and on EU level over EU affairs and decisions. Even though this has given more voice to Euroscepticism, it is a good development and, to some extent, a sign of a more mature political process, one in which citizens and national political actors feel the need to engage with EU politics, even at the price of dissent...