

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Brexit: A Tipping Point towards New Tribalism

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When the dust settles, those left to contemplate how the post-Cold War world order unravelled will dedicate a special chapter to the involution of the United Kingdom from leader and partner to petty European state. We live in a world where authoritarian regimes control the future of many around the world, and where even members of the European Union now consider moving towards authoritarian forms of power control in relation to the courts, mass media, refugees and sexual minorities. My piece contemplates possible legacies of the Brexit process for post-communist countries such as Poland, Hungary and Romania, which to me are framed more by long-term indifference than closeness. In addition to my scholarly expertise in Eastern European history, the observations below are informed by my personal experience of living in Romania until 1985 and in the UK from 1989 to 1990. I have returned to Romania very frequently since then and lived there for extended periods of time in the 1990s and 2000s and have also often travelled back to the UK for short periods of time.

In the nineteenth century, when ethnic groups living under colonial or imperial regimes of one kind or another in Europe started to envision the possibility of controlling their own futures as national states, the UK was not their model. Napoleon's sweeping military victories against the old empires and his populist embrace of nationalism resonated with many among the thin layer of Romantic nationalists in Poland, Romania and Greece. Some in Hungary looked towards the United States as a possible benefactor, while Greece was the only Balkan state to keep its gaze and great power lobbying firmly focused on the UK and its rich and famous Philhellenes.

Over the twentieth century these attitudes changed. Romania's doubling in size after the First World War at the expense of Hungary followed the intense lobbying activities of the Romanian Queen, Queen Victoria's granddaughter. Marie's close familial relationships with other European monarchs and especially her English cousin, George V, helped seal the deal. The Romanian attitude towards British interests in Europe was radically altered after this success, especially given the problems encountered at Versailles in relation to Romania's favourite great power, France.

The Polish attitude in relation to France and the UK likewise shifted, especially during the Second World War. Neville Chamberlain's performance at Munich in May 1938 was nothing short of disastrous for the Polish state, whose leadership and population had hoped the Western allies and the UK in particular would stand up to Hitler in order to guarantee their own integrity. Many lost faith in the ability of the British after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. But during the Second World War Winston Churchill's leadership revived hope of British support among the Polish underground (the Home Army), while the Jewish population grasped at every possible intervention by the Allies to be saved from the Nazi occupied territories. The British provided relief for some of the populations targeted by the racist policies of the Nazi regime.

When after 1945 the United States emerged as the clear leader of the capitalist side of the Cold War, many in Eastern Europe who saw communism as a form of foreign occupation shifted their lobbying and pleas for support against the Soviet Union towards Washington. But the British presence in Eastern Europe was always an important element in the game of chess between the two superpowers. In Yugoslavia, closer ties between Josif Broz Tito and the UK enabled the renegade communist leader to get away with standing up to the Soviet Union. Direct financial

assistance from the UK and trade relations that generated a positive balance for Yugoslavia went a long way towards fulfilling Tito's ambitions to paint himself the leader of the nonaligned movement. In other parts of the communist bloc, cultural diplomacy in the form of British television, theatre and literature, as well as British Councils located in Eastern European capitals, provided a lifeline for societies with little access to information that was not deformed by communist censorship. Though the impact of such activities was generally limited to a stratum of highly educated people, British cultural diplomacy helped maintain hope in the possibility of a Europe without an iron curtain. Even though we dreamt of American jeans and danced to Michael Jackson, my generation learned the Queen's English by watching British productions of Shakespeare.

When 1990 rolled around, with the communist bloc collapsing and the EU starting to take shape, many in Eastern Europe began to look towards the UK as the natural leader that would enable these states find a path towards European integration. France had a socialist president, not exactly the flavour of political regime favoured in Eastern Europe at that time, and Germany was to many (especially the Poles) still a dangerous foe. Most young people began to learn English instead of French or German as the preferred language in which to study and work abroad. Globalisation was starting to flourish. It was a great moment for the United States and its special friend, the UK, in terms of the hope and faith many young people placed in the power of their regimes to welcome Eastern Europe into the family of democratic states. Graduate students from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria started to flood into the prestigious educational and research programmes in the UK, from Oxford to Edinburgh.

Then, in the mid-1990s, the dynamic began to shift. Some of these countries became part of the EU and NATO and started to engage with their British co-members not as beneficiaries of great power munificence, but rather as colleagues. In negotiating accession to these two multi-national institutions from the mid-1990s until 2007, Eastern European candidates learned to differentiate between core leaders (the US for NATO and Germany for the EU) and the rest. The UK's questioning of EU institutions during the early struggles over ratifying the Maastricht Treaty was a lesson not lost on the eager applicants from Eastern Europe. Could they build strong relations and trust with a member of the EU that was so divided internally about the benefits of such membership? Then there were several scandals, such as the one involving British magnate Robert Maxwell's shady deals with Eastern European communist dictators, like Teodor Zhivkov of Bulgaria and Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania. When details of these connections with the British business world and media were revealed in the 1990s, some people in Eastern Europe started to view the UK with more suspicion than hope. In relations with NATO the United States was the clear leader Eastern European applicants needed to listen to. The United Kingdom's role became tied more to the way in which the 'special friendship' between the United States and the UK would play out in supporting Eastern Europe's applicants. In short, a more transactional attitude was developing among Eastern European states in relation to the UK. Fewer leaders were courting British support.

One exception should be mentioned. When Prince Charles took a shining to the German villages in Transylvania after a first visit in 1998, the Romanian government paid attention and was quite happy to turn this into a valuable piece of international propaganda for tourism and investment in the country. After setting up the Prince of Wales Foundation in Romania in 2015, Charles has made regular visits to the country, meeting with officials at the highest level, including President Klaus Iohannis, and giving many interviews in the Romanian press. As a result, he has become a symbol of the respect and admiration that those coming from one of the oldest and most advanced cultures in Europe can extend a lesser power like Romania.

Starting in the 2000s the new NATO members from Eastern Europe were being asked to provide direct support and, when the Iraq and Afghanistan wars started, troops for the international alliance fighting there. But the request was on behalf of US strategic and security interests in that area, with the UK acting as a major ally, but not the leader of the effort, which

reinforced the hierarchical view of the organisation that these smaller Eastern European states were already developing. Responding to these challenges, post-communist NATO members also wanted to see a greater level of recognition, respect and trust on the part of their Western allies, the UK included. At the beginning of the Iraq War, Poland was 100 per cent supportive of the alliance and even the most adamant dissidents of the 1980s became its cheerleaders. Romania sent in troops in Afghanistan with pride in their special skills (for example, being able to fix old Soviet machinery like no American or Brit could) and with unrestrained support for the military actions there. Protesters against the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars did not crowd the streets of Budapest, Warsaw and Bucharest, as they did London. Instead, these countries sought to increase the presence of NATO bases as a guarantee of their safety against any future Russian threat. But the bases came in through the actions of US embassies and not those of the United Kingdom. The local media always reported on the presence of the US military, or the CIA, not on any British leadership in this process. The Eastern European NATO members were as committed to the security goals of NATO as the UK, and with more support on the ground for its military operations than in the United Kingdom. In August 2017 Romania had more troops in Afghanistan than the United Kingdom. But these Eastern European states still suffered institutional indignities on the part of the UK, especially on matters of visa and work permits, even after these countries did everything that was required of them to join the EU, to an extent never required of other members at the time of their accession, like Greece or Spain.

Even as the United Kingdom and other Western European states were starting to take advantage of the enormous pool of well-educated or simply hard working Eastern Europeans who wanted to make a better living than in their home countries, the myth of the lazy Romanian Gypsy and the Polish plumber were starting to take hold of the public imagination in Western metropolises like London. In 1990, when I spent six months in London as a college student, being from Eastern Europe was a great conversation opener pretty much anywhere. People were curious, interested in knowing more about the communist bloc and genuinely delighted to celebrate with us the newfound freedoms and opportunities that came with the fall of communism. By the mid 2000s, when I travelled back to conferences to various places in the UK, any cab driver and bar tender I ran into had a few stories (real? made up?) about some thief from Eastern Europe. I rarely encountered words of praise for people from my region; they came largely from academics or members of the military who had served in Afghanistan or Iraq with Eastern European troops.

To people living in states that used to be British colonies, the tribalism that started to spread even more widely in the 2010s is not news. It is simply old racism in new bottles. But for many in Eastern Europe, the xenophobia and hatred directed at their co-nationals was an unexpected blow. Different people, however, began to draw different lessons. Some wished to separate themselves from being the object of racist attitudes by taking on similar positions regarding refugees from North Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan. Eastern Europeans are Europeans, Christian, white and with a long tradition of upholding European civilisation against the barbarians (read Islamic states) at their gates. They fought alongside the Brits and French in the Crusades. They held down the Ottoman 'Yoke' as guardians of Europe. They embraced an attitude of superiority and desire to belong to this imagined past that Maria Todorova depicted so well in *Imagining the Balkans*. All of a sudden, Hungary's government positions were sounding more like those of Nigel Farage than those of Tony Blair.

Others have begun to lose faith in both the possibility of being treated by the British as their colleagues rather than another inferior species of EU and NATO members. When this drift towards tribalism started to happen, many Eastern Europeans shifted their hopes towards the United States as a state that would appreciate and support the work done by their countries to build democratic institutions and uphold the rule of law. But then Brexit happened and the man who praised Nigel Farage won the US presidential elections. With an East German as its chancellor, Germany remained the only possible contender of an EU state that would still

appreciate and support the work done by Eastern European countries inside the union, as well as their specific historical background. Statements by Angela Merkel often play on the news in these post-communist countries, especially when it comes to her recommendations about specific austerity measures or anti-corruption campaigns.

As the rule of law is being shaken up in Poland, Hungary and Romania, the UK has played no role in challenging these serious shifts towards authoritarianism. On 28 June 2018 Hans Klemm, the US Ambassador to Bucharest, published a formal declaration on the official site of the embassy that called upon the Romanian government to oppose changes proposed in Parliament which would bring about the end of an independent office that investigates corruption and helps shore up the rule of law. The declaration was co-signed by eleven other ambassadors, but the UK's was not among them, even though the British ambassador was considered one of the most popular Western diplomats in Bucharest.

Though largely symbolic, this absence suggests to me that the UK has become irrelevant in Eastern Europe in terms of playing a leading, or even supporting, role with regard to upholding important values and institutions its great thinkers of the eighteenth century helped establish. In essence, interest in the British model and the UK as a state was never a central element of diplomacy (hard or soft) in most of Eastern Europe, and the public indifference to Brexit has only confirmed this long term trend. Democracy and the rule of law may continue to be important, not just on paper, but also as powerful values to which people in Eastern Europe are willing to dedicate their lives and die for. But it will not be because of the UK.