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## WILL THE BREXIT REALLY COME?

The last days and weeks have deeply shaken the EU. Emotions are high and the failure of the European project seems to be thinkable. But there is no reason to become hysterical. A thorough analysis of the situation shows: There are good reasons to assume that Brexit will not come!

No question: a majority of the British people has voted in favour of Brexit. Following the iron rules of democracy, but also for political reasons, it will be difficult to ignore this choice. This is true but probably irrelevant for the following reasons:

The essential first step for leaving the EU is an application under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. This requires from exit candidates a formal and legally binding confirmation to the Council of the EU. Prime Minister David Cameron has already declared his resignation to take effect in autumn and that he will not sign this paper. He prefers to leave this specific “honour” to his successor, who then would also have to negotiate the terms of the exit. Several candidates have declared their readiness to become Party leader for the Conservative Party. How will the Party react? The frontrunner presently seems to be Theresa May, Minister of domestic affairs in the Cameron government who did not play a prominent role during the Brexit campaign, except for the question of free movement of persons. Will she nevertheless be ready to take up this heavy responsibility for the future of her country? At present in Parliament a majority of the Conservative Party is against Brexit. There will be enormous public pressure on her to clarify the situation before she is elected. And will she convince the majority of the Parliament to back her policy? Under the present circumstances, this seems to be rather unlikely. In none of the big Parties is there presently a majority in favour of Brexit, and UKIP has still no relevant parliamentary basis.

Independent of the person who will become successor of Cameron: under the present circumstances, none of them will find in the Parliament the necessary majority for Brexit. Time is of the essence: the longer the process of uncertainty prevails, the stronger will be the pressure from media and the public. The generation conflict will become a particularly important issue in this debate. More and more people may realize that Brexit was not such a good idea and the already very thin majority of support might further shrink. Boris Johnson might have understood this when taking the decision not to run to become Cameron’s successor, a remarkable step, as a matter of fact.

The key question remains still unresolved: Who among the prominent British politicians is ready to enter into the glorious history of the UK as the one who takes

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on the responsibility for breaking up the country? Normally it should be one of those who spoke clearly in favour of Brexit in the campaign. But this does not seem to be the case. Amazing, how the driving politicians of the Brexit campaign now withdraw from their responsibility. Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage have already resigned before even being a candidate, Michael Gove was eager to do the job but his betrayal of both Cameron and Johnson kicked him out of the race. The other Brexiters have shown a low profile until now. Mrs. May says that Brexit means Brexit (a remarkable sentence of striking logic). She might declare that her candidature includes the duty to fulfil the wish of the majority of British people. Whether that is enough to convince the present majority of the Parliament and British public in three or four months, when she has finally to act, remains to be seen.

Mrs. May might be a resolute decision maker, but is this enough to negotiate with the other EU countries conditions for an exit which correspond to the claims expressed during the Brexit campaign? Without a solid backing by the British Parliament she will never obtain the necessary political strength to cope with EU Member States, which are not ready to respond positively to such a strategy. Why should they? To grant the UK further concessions and to question the basic pillar of the right to free movement of persons within the EU would act as a dangerous precedent threatening a core pillar of the European architecture. And the anger within the EU over the UK constantly requesting extra concessions has in the meantime reached its peak.

Mrs. May (or whoever has the ambition to carry out this task) has therefore not only to cope with a strong (and maybe even growing) minority in her own country and with no majority for her policy in the present composition of the Parliament. She (or he) will also be faced with a hostile mood within the European Council and the other EU Institutions. At this juncture, there is not a single chance that he/she will become winner in this game. The uncertainty about the intentions of Scotland and Northern Ireland (and why not Gibraltar?) adds to the general confusion and renders tough decisions even more unlikely. Nigel Farage claim of “independence day” may thus become an ironic connotation.

Without new elections and a clear expression of intention by the main Parties, and therefore a solid support within her own Party and a clear majority backing of her policy, it seems likely that the official presentation of an Article 50 request and the negotiations with the EU will not be made before Parliamentary Elections, e.g. not before the end of 2016 or even 2017.

Is there any alternative imaginable? UKIP has to identify a new leader and has lost quite a lot of credibility after Farage’s manoeuvring. Labour is weak, also needs a new leader and must clarify its position. A coalition from Brexiters of all Parties? Impossible in the British political environment! There could be an additional uncertainty, however: The Conservative Party may be scared that new elections would lead to a UKIP victory and that elections at this stage could lead to the loss of the present Conservative majority. A strong and credible candidate and a convincing election campaign can make a big difference. Anyhow, if the present Conservative Party is able to make peace between Brexiters and non-Brexiters among its own ranks, it will have to pay the prize for the mess they are responsible for. Better go

through it quickly and in a spirit of honour than to get stuck deeper and deeper in muddy waters.

In opting for Parliamentary elections, the debate on the EU and the future of the United Kingdom would return to the platform where it really should take place: the Westminster Parliament! In order to leave the EU, one needs a solid and clear-cut public and democratic support. Yes, if UKIP gains a majority, the Brexit will become definite. I believe, however, that this is highly unlikely. In the British political system a big difference exists between a referendum which allows voters to express their anger without clear responsibility for the consequences, and the election of a new Government, where traditional ties and interests play a much stronger role.

At least, an election campaign will be good because it should definitely clarify the situation and prevent Parties from hiding behind a diffuse public resentment against the EU. The issue is important enough to be discussed thoroughly with the brain, not emotions. Traditional Parties will have to go through the process of establishing a widely discussed and considered election platform, and the younger generation will have the chance to wake up and fight for its future, this time with much more knowledge of facts and figures and hopefully with more enthusiasm for walking to the nearby poll station.

The Brexit vote came as a shock to those who are in favour of an open and mobile society. But the Brexit also teaches all of us [three] useful lessons:

- A failure to go ahead with Brexit because of its inherent flaws could become a serious setback for populists who presently mushroom in almost all parts of Europe. They offer a populism which seeks to confuse the citizens through biased stories and ill-conceived promises for a safer world. In reality, the anti-Europe movement is not the result of a well-reflected political programme. It is the outcry of citizens who consider themselves the losers of globalisation. It recalls the time between World War I and World War II when fascism and dictatorship set the world on fire with promises of a safer, more prosperous world through racism, violence and military might. A Brexit unable to fulfil its promises will make it apparent that populism is not the right answer in the complicated modern world of the 21 century. Populists like [?Boris Johnson,] Nigel Farage, Jim Wilders or Marine Le Pen will have to explain better how they can achieve the paradise for which they publicly claim to know a recipe. Growing difficulties in seeing how to deliver the Brexit promises allows the pro-Europeans to confront the citizens with the facts instead of dreams. How will the UK cope with huge problems like overpopulation, climate change, management of maritime resources, migration, economic and financial breakdowns, domestic and international peace and stability? How can they effectively cope with challenges like growing terrorism without the help of their neighbours? Discussion about Brexit can help to lift this discussion on a higher intellectual level than that seen in the period before the referendum.
- At the same time Brexit is a warning for present day policy making: Politicians should resist the tendency in the modern world of communication to shift their responsibility as elected representatives of their people to the

consultation of a diffuse and highly unstable emotional public through referenda. Only a representative democracy is a strong democracy, capable to defend itself against populist but unrealistic and even dangerous temptations. Of course, one needs to listen to the people and respond to their aspirations and the specific interests of the majority of voters. After all, politicians are elected and want to be re-elected. But when key questions of the nation's future and its prosperity are at stake, they are requested to shoulder their responsibility for which they have been elected: To prevent their nation from being exposed to threats to their security, prosperity and the basic legal and democratic order; to take advantage of their expertise to pick up concerns and to translate them into manageable political and administrative acts; to avoid emotional, short term requests from becoming orientations which endanger the long-term wellbeing of a nation. Referenda are useful for dealing with risks which are calculable and do concern citizens directly in their daily life in their immediate environment. But to cope with basic orientations and issues, where specific know-how is essential for the direction in which a nation should move, referenda are not an appropriate tool and can even destabilize or deeply split a nation. To reduce membership of the EU to a simple "yes" or "no" question reflects more cowardice than political wisdom. Are these politicians incapable of taking the right decisions? Are referenda misused as a tool to satisfy personal ambitions instead of for acting for the benefit of a nation? Are they tricks to undermine representative democracy and the well functioning of the Parliament and other elected bodies? Do they serve to render ignorance the guide in the process of decision making instead of expertise? In this case, referenda become a tool to destabilize basic democratic principles.

- Brexit proves at the same time that the EU needs a transparent, resilient, democratic and efficient decision-making process. This can be achieved on the basis of a system which includes principles like subsidiarity and a better division of who is responsible for what. Excellent proposals, elaborated by the constitutional Convention have been ignored by the European Council. The Lisbon Treaty falls short of these proposals and is anyhow even today not fully applied. The EU needs a constitution-like basic arrangement and more support from Member States represented in the Council. It is not that the EU is weak and incapable of taking the right decisions; rather it is that the Member States as represented in the Council are not responding to the public's expectations and regularly block key proposals from the Commission and the EU Parliament.

**FINAL REMARK:** At this juncture, no one can definitely predict whether the UK will at the end apply for Brexit. There are good reasons to assume that Brexit raises so many fundamental problems that the request will never be formally handed over and that negotiations will disappear into a sort of political "Nirvana" in the coming years. The British people might have a second chance to express what the majority really wants in the framework of the next parliamentary elections. In particular the younger generation can then show its political maturity and fight forcefully to avoid

that their future is blocked by the elderly. The EU as a whole has to draw the right lesson from what had happened on 23 June and do its utmost to render the European architecture fit again. After all we need the EU to deal with the huge worldwide problems in a spirit of mutual understanding, solidarity, democracy and the rule of law!

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