The United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum

by Kathrin Kapfinger

POLICY BRIEF – The United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum

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The United Kingdom (UK) has voted – at least for now – and the majority of voters want to leave the EU. Their decision has thrown their country and the rest of the EU in turmoil: The British pound is on a record low, both the labour party and the conservatives are facing internal conflicts, Prime Minister Cameron has announced his resignation, Scotland is debating another independence referendum, and 3 million Britons have already signed a petition calling for a second referendum.

The UK's relationship with the mainland has always been rather problematic. Both its historical status as the center of a global empire and imperial power, as well as a unique insular mentality, have shaped a British national identity in the minds of many that is not compatible with taking orders from superiors. This is one of the reasons why the UK has been struggling to find its place in post-WWII Europe ever since, especially within the EU.

This most recent referendum on EU membership on June 23, 2016, is not the only one in British history. In 1975, a similar referendum took place, two years after the UK had joined the European Economic Community. Back then, all major parties and newspapers supported a continued membership, which resulted in more than 60% of the votes for remaining. This time, things look different.

Over 30 million people voted on June 23, 51.9% for leaving, 48.1% for remaining. However, a closer look at the numbers is necessary in order to fully understand this narrow decision. Nationally, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Gibraltar were pro-Remain (62% in Scotland, 55.8% in Northern Ireland, and an overwhelming 95.9% in Gibraltar), but both the population density and voter turnout were higher in Wales

and England, which favoured leaving over remaining. Another interesting picture can be found when investigating the results by age groups. While 73% of 18-24 year old voted for remaining, 60% of the voters aged 65+ years voted for leaving. This is a harsh result for the UK's youth, the very people that will have to live with this decision the longest.

But what has led the majority of voters to put their cross in the Leave box? The two official cross-party campaign groups, Britain Stronger in Europe (Remain) and Vote Leave (Leave), focused on immigration, economic issues, sovereignty, and the country's global role in their campaigns.

One of the major battlefields of the referendum was immigration. The Leave camp argued that it is impossible for the UK to control migration as a member of the EU and that current immigration levels put public services under strain. Moreover, Vote Leave blamed lower wages for British workers on immigrants. Therefore, they argued, the country had allegedly reached a 'breaking point' that could only be managed by leaving the EU and closing the borders to EU migrants. However, there is no data to actually support these claims. In fact, as the Remain campaign argued, immigrants are active contributors to the economy rather than a burden to British society.

Overall, Vote Leave fought a campaign that was aiming to convince people on an emotional level. The campaign exploited the fears of the electorate and fuelled xenophobic sentiments for its political purposes. It capitalized on a sense of frustration among British people with a seemingly undemocratic and unaccountable bureaucracy in Brussels, and perhaps a notion of nostalgia for the good old days, especially among the older generations. On the other hand, Britain Stronger in Europe struggled to generate the passion and enthusiasm that characterized the Leave campaign, probably because their arguments were based on facts and figures and because Remain supporters tried to appeal to the rationality of voters rather than their emotions.

Now that the referendum has been decided, several processes have been set in motion. On June 24, a few hours after the results of the vote were published, Prime Minister David Cameron announced his resignation. The referendum was part of his election manifesto in 2015. Cameron himself expressed his support for a continued EU membership within a reformed EU and subsequently campaigned for the Remain camp. Despite his trust in the British people and the respect for the choice that they have made, he declared that he does not see himself fit "to be the captain that steers [the] country to its next destination", wherever that may be. Thus, Cameron will leave it up his successor to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and negotiate Britain's withdrawal from the EU. The leading Brexit campaigners will not lead Britain on this next step. Boris Johnson subsequently announced that he would not seek the leadership of the Conservative party and Michael Gove was defeated in the leadership race in the second round of balloting of MPs. Now the party leadership—and race for the prime minister's office—will be between Theresa May, Home Secretary and a Remainer, and Leave campaigner and junior energy minister Andrea Leadsom.

Meanwhile, Brussels is now pushing the British government to promptly act on the decision in order to avoid "unnecessarily [prolonging] uncertainty". Several EU Member States have declared that they would not enter any bilateral negotiations with the UK before they have not made their decision to leave the Union official. In order to do so, the British government would need to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty – the exit clause. The article regulates the withdrawal of a Member State and gives the EU and the exiting member a window of two years to negotiate the exact terms of the withdrawal, which cannot be reversed once the article is invoked. Since no Member State has left the EU since the Treaty of Lisbon, there is no detailed plan of action.

Moreover, the Scottish government is currently examining whether it could veto Brexit, if it should take place, and debating a second referendum on Scottish independence. Since Scotland voted for remaining in the EU, another referendum on independence is

likely to generate a different outcome than last time. Similarly, Sinn Fein have called for a united Ireland. It seems as if the government goes through with Brexit, the unity of the UK itself could be in danger.

At the same time, a sentiment seems to have taken hold of the country that has coined the term 'Bregret'. On the day following the referendum, the second most popular question on Google in the UK was "what is the EU?" Another sign that the vote was not so much about the EU itself, but the result of fear and hate against immigrants and the protest against a perceived loss of British influence in the world. More than 3 million people have already signed a petition demanding a second referendum. However, it is unlikely that another vote will take place.

After all, the referendum was not legally binding and the British government will have to decide how to further proceed. Considering the mixed reactions to the results of the vote by the British people, the economic implications that can already be felt in the UK, and the political consequences Brexit could entail, there may still be a chance that the government and the EU will find another solution. In these times, only one thing appears to be certain – that is, nothing is certain.

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