Europe's view on Brexit: It's the politics, stupid

Brexiters don't get it but in Europe's moments of truth, politics trumps the economy

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When zooming out from another 10 days of Brexit surprises in London and Brussels, and looking at the past decade of Europe's crisis politics, you realise one thing: in Europe's moments of truth, politics trumps the economy.

The Brexiters never understood this, although it is a crucial lesson to be drawn from the eurozone turmoil, the EU's standoff with Russia or the migration crisis.

When the unity of the union or peace on the continent is at stake, political motives for being together prevail over purely economic interests. The same will be true during the next stage of the Brexit catastrophe.

Just take the outcome of last week's EU summit. Strangely enough, the imminent economic catastrophe of a no-deal Brex only came second in the reasoning to political assessments.

In Westminster, the humiliation of the UK having to participate in the May European elections focused minds, rather tha the loss of 8 per cent of GPD and thousands of jobs. Hence Theresa May's demand for a short extension until June 30th, which she hoped could avoid that election participation. Her EU colleagues only gave her half of what she wanted (with a delay until May 22nd conditional upon a positive vote in the House of Commons, and until April 12th in the case of no deal).

On the European side, too, electoral considerations carried weight. National leaders want to show their own voters the clear costs of an EU exit, which is much easier with the UK outside. President Macron, battling at home with Marine Le Pen, pushed for a shorter extension. Apparently the Frenchman was more convincing than German Chancellor Merkel, a more prudent character, who wants to avoid major turmoil ahead of a Europe-wide public vote.

The blindness to the politics of Brexit was brilliantly illuminated when, in late 2017, David Davis gave a speech in Berlin t an audience of German business leaders. The then Brexit secretary warned the EU27 to beware of harming their own economies in the talks, advising them not to put "politics above prosperity". His audience greeted these words with laughter and disbelief. The encounter revealed the depth of mutual misunderstanding.

German and other EU business leaders see the Brexit referendum as an irresponsible act, a case of economic hara-kiri. How could a leading Brexiter, of all people, tell them not to put politics above prosperity? The British minister failed to grasp the extent to which his country's exit from the European order is experienced by Germany, Ireland and other EU member states as an existential political attack on the foundations of the union, to be withstood at all costs.

This innocent misunderstanding foreshadowed the fundamental deadlock over the avoidance of a future "hard border" between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, in order to preserve the fragile peace in the North.

That intractable issue pits the UK's territorial sovereignty against the EU's determination to defend its integrity – two grave causes. The one was expressed by May's solemn promise to party and nation not to "break up my country" (by accepting a customs border in the Irish Sea as a way out of the dilemma); the other by the EU's resolve since the Brexit vote not to let the UK "have its cake and eat it too", for fear of encouraging further exits. In sum: politics above prosperity on both sides (albeit with far lower relative costs for the remaining 27 members).

This is why the backstop turns out to be Brexit's greatest stumbling block until the very end, something which came as a surprise to the actors themselves. Beforehand, UK and EU negotiators expected it all to end with a cathartic "Battle of the Divorce Bill" (as a UK top diplomat confessed to me late last year). But the bill was settled over a year ago, whereas the backstop still haunts us three weeks before the no-deal cliff.

For this situation, not only London is to blame. The Brussels machinery is utterly ill-equipped to deal with border issues. It excels in the art of "depoliticising": taking the politics out of conflicts and treating them as problems to be technically or legally solved; it worked marvels for EU market integration. But this approach gets no grip on borders.

A border is pure politics: an arbitrary line between us and them. It is pure history, too, in this case: colonial history, a scar of past events surviving in our institutions and identities. Borders, in other words, cannot be "depoliticised", not reasoned away thanks to a legal fix or technological trick.

Nor can they be at the same time visible and invisible, as is kindly requested by the negotiating parties of the 499km line between Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough.

When accepting the backstop principle in late 2017, the Commission and the EU27 light-heartedly glossed over the fact that if you leave the customs union, you need a border somewhere, either in the Irish Sea or on the island of Ireland; hence the accusation of a trap. Just as light-heartedly, London first pretended the issue could be solved with technology before running into the sand of legal explanations. Since then, both sides have stood firm on their side of the dilemma, which means the only way to avoid a crash is delay.

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Although electoral considerations have resulted in a short delay, geostrategic ones may point toward a longer pause. In the open letter to all Europeans which Macron sent in early March, he proposed that the UK should remain part of any future European security cooperation, also post-Brexit.

In an age when Putin, Xi and Trump are all undermining Europe's cherished rule-based international order, it is not a luxury to have the UK, together with France, the only other European state with a credible army and diplomatic clout, on your side. A no deal will immediately reduce any such idea to tatters. The political impact would go far beyond Eurostar queues, penicillin delivery trouble, or rotting fruit in the ports of Rotterdam, Dublin or Rosslare – it will cause bitterness and resentment between both sides of the Channel that may last a decade or more.

In this wider perspective, avoiding a "hard border" on the island of Ireland is but one element of an overall strategic assessment.

The outcome remains as unpredictable as political life can be. My personal guess: yes, EU leaders have now granted the UK an extension once, since they cannot be seen to carry the responsibility for the fallout of no deal. But they will not do so twice.

Luuk van Middelaar is a political theorist who served as speechwriter to European Council president Herman Van Rompuy (2010-204). This month he publishes Alarums & Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage (Agenda Publishing) on the EU's crisis years. He will be speaking at the IIEA in Dublin, on Tuesday, March 26th

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