

Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter. Welcome to 2017

Written by Patrick Bijsmans and Russell Foster

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PATRICK BIJSMANS AND RUSSELL FOSTER, JAN 15 2017

2016 was an eventful year for Europeans. A Dutch rejection of European Union extension, the Union's uneasy refugee deal with Turkey, the shock of Brexit, the selection of an American president-elect whose (lack of) economic vision casts shadows over transatlantic commerce, and finally a referendum in Italy which, like its earlier counterpart in the Netherlands, seems to suggest growing popular resistance to the European project. 2016 is already being recorded as the year in which deep dissatisfactions and structural weaknesses in the EU, some traceable to the Credit Crunch of 2008 and some to the foundations of the post-war project in the 1950s, finally reached critical mass. Expansion has halted. The Eurozone is fracturing faster than the cracks can be repaired. And the second-most powerful economy in the Union has opted to withdraw into internal factionalism, inspiring movements across the continent as angry and disillusioned voters tired of the distant plutocrats of the *status quo* throw in their lot with anti-establishment, unashamedly anti-European parties that defy categorisation according to an obsolete left/right spectrum. Yet these events were merely an opening skirmish. The Battle for Europe has barely begun.

Welcome to 2017. A year which, as a spate of media attention suggests, will be recorded as an epochal year in European history. A year that might be used by future historians to mark the end of the long twentieth century; a year over which people might retrospectively lament the end of the post-war project. Perhaps 2017 will not be quite so bleak, and future scholars may see this year as the beginning of the European Union's renaissance rather than its apocalypse. But one thing is for certain – 2017 is the year in which the fate of the European Union will be decided.

Elections are scheduled in countries whose commitment to, and involvement in, Europe are far more significant than the withdrawal of an archipelago nation whose support for the Union has always oscillated between lukewarm and grudging. In the EU's core states of France, Germany and the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen's *Front National*, Frauke Petry's *Alternative für Deutschland*, and Geert Wilders's *Partij voor de Vrijheid* might propel into power charismatic isolationists who will make Nigel Farage and Norbert Hofer appear amateurish. Three elections that have the potential to change Europe as we know it. Both Le Pen and Wilders have already confirmed that, if they win, they will organise referendums on Frexit and Nexit (admit it; 'Brexit' at least sounds better). Petry has not dismissed European integration as such, but does want a referendum on the Eurozone. While this might appear harmless in comparison, it raises the serious question of whether the European Union can continue to exist without the Eurozone, or whether the two are now so entwined that the dismemberment of the common currency area will drag the entire European project with it. Predictions at present are unclear, but 2016 was a year of wrong predictions. "Brexit? After the fury of the Scottish schism, surely the English will come to their senses." "Trump? That incompetent charlatan? Of course not!"

Yet here we are. If there is one thing to learn from last year, it is that we are out-of-step with our own populations.

It must be conceded that none of this may happen. In early December 2016, pundits expected that Austria would end up under an admittedly ceremonial, but powerfully symbolic right-wing populist, the first since the defeat of the New Order in 1945. Instead, the new president is to be a liberal politician and former member of the Greens. Perhaps there is hope, and perhaps further hope for popular support for the EU will come from an unlikely source – Brexit. In the summer of 2016 Europeans feared a surge in anti-Europe sentiment across the continent. This has admittedly happened. But as the shock of Brexit – whether horror or elation – dulls into banality and tedium, it is increasingly clear that Brexit is going to be an ugly, messy, mutually spiteful process. And in a dark irony, this might be the salvation of Europe. None of this may happen.

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In late November last year the European Parliament's chief negotiator, liberal MEP Guy Verhofstadt, reportedly welcomed Brexit secretary Davis Davis 'to hell'. Perhaps his words were more prescient than even he imagined, as one of the EU's first casualties of 2017 was Great Britain's representative to the Union, Sir Ivan Rogers. The man charged with negotiating as painless a divorce as possible left with what may transpire to be an ominous warning on "muddled thinking". Closely following this came a statement by the British Prime Minister which seems to indicate a more bitter separation than originally imagined. Regardless of when Mrs May triggers Article 50 ("when", not "whether", as the latter would be at the risk of national rioting and the overnight evaporation of public faith in British democracy), neither Britain nor Europe is prepared for an exit within two years. Current indications suggest that negotiating Britain's exit could take a decade. Assuming that there is still a European Union to leave in the mid to late 2020s, the painful, dragged-out negotiations of Brexit and the continued possibility that the first country to leave the EU will suffer severe economic decline, EU policymakers and anti-EU politicians in Europe may look to Britain and realise, respectively, that the Union needs urgent and substantial reform and that withdrawal has long-term national disadvantages which outweigh the short-term party advantages of winning a few years in office.

But in 2017, Brexit is no longer *the* dominant issue. While the British – whether Leave or Remain – might imagine that they are the EU's main talking point, it is clear that in the minds of EU policymakers and administrators, the British and their internal squabbles are a sideshow. Another financial crisis, in a crumbling Eurozone which cannot be propped up forever, is not only inevitable but imminent. The shaky deal between a Union scrambling to shore up its borders and a Turkish Republic rapidly sliding towards authoritarianism appears increasingly untenable. If Recep Erdogan reneges on the deal Europe will likely experience a second Migration Crisis which, in a year of border fortifications and mutual mistrust between populations and politicians, will make 2014 pale in comparison. And while there is hope of a significant thawing in relations between the White House and the Kremlin in the wake of Mr Trump's inauguration, a geopolitical vacuum following the imminent defeat of Islamic State and the continuing weakness of the Russian Federation's economy present new urgencies and opportunities for Mr Putin to cling onto power through further foreign meddling. The recent arrival into Eastern Europe of large contingents of American armour indicates that Europe may face a new standoff against Russia. These are gloomy predictions, but 2016 was a gloomy year. Is there sufficient reason to believe that 2017 will be different?

All in all, much to think and write about. We aim to provide you with our own reflections, but we will strongly welcome guest contributions from others. If you are interested in writing a piece for this blog, don't hesitate to write to us! We are interested in all aspects of Brexit, from its significance in Scotland and its fallout in EU nations, to its portrayal in media and its impact on those academic libraries on which many readers of this blog so urgently depend. 2017 will be a testing year for Europe, so make your voice heard! More details on how to submit ideas or posts are available [here](#).

Wishing you all the best for 2017!

About the author:

Dr. Patrick Bijsmans is Assistant Professor in European Studies at Maastricht University. His research interests include Euroscepticism, media coverage of EU affairs and the European public sphere, as well as issues related to teaching and learning in European Studies. He teaches BA and MA courses in European Studies, covering topics such as EU politics and academic research and writing skills. He also coordinates the teacher training trajectory of the university's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Dr. Russell Foster is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in European Studies at King's College London. Prior to this he was a Marie-Curie International Fellow in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Russell studied History at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; International Relations and Human Geography at Newcastle

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