

Brexit and Instability

Written by Bruce Newsome

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BRUCE NEWSOME, JAN 28 2017

Brexit is one consequence of growing social and political instability. It is not confined to Britain, democracies are not immune, nor are supranational institutions that consider themselves liberal. Indeed, complacency about democracy and liberalism is part of the problem. Democracy has shifted to ever more centralized supranational institutions that have imposed policies that they assert as liberal, but are not, such as the insistence on preferential trade within the club, while punishing free trade outside the club.

Reductionists have criticized Brexit as anti-democratic and anti-liberal and destabilizing, but they have got everything the wrong way around. The EU is the relatively illiberal and weak democratic player in a region of relatively liberal and democratic states. The EU's administrators are much less accountable than national administrators, most obviously between its undemocratic executive and democratic member governments; between its undemocratic European courts and national legislatures; and between provincial representatives at the European Parliament and national representatives.

The EU's centralization and weak representativeness explain its remote and simplistic policies (such as the free movement of peoples), as if these ideals have no disadvantages (such as the free movement of criminals, struck-off medical personnel, and terrorists). The EU makes decisions in the name of European stability, while imposing destabilizing policies on its members (such as uncontrolled migration). The EU is not exposed to the constantly bubbling instability of a true democracy, so pretends that it is stable. When the EU encounters resistance, it hypocritically mis-characterizes this resistance as anti-democratic or illiberal.

The EU rhetorically encourages democratization and liberalization in prospective members, but it prioritizes centralization over either democratization or liberalization, so it turns a blind eye to eastern Europe's descent into authoritarianism, and is accelerating Turkey's prospective membership despite Turkey's descent into authoritarianism, in return for half-hearted cooperation in managing the flow of migrants.

Officials and political scientists seem unwilling to point out the contradictions between normative European policies to counter the symptoms of instability in foreign states, while denying those same symptoms in the EU.

Ironically, the British government's research on these symptoms is still normatively accepted as the guidebook: coups d'etat, illegal political succession, breakdown of institutions, systemic corruption, organized crime, loss of territorial control, economic crisis, public unrest, displacement, violations of human rights, and conflict. What did the British government prescribe back then and since as "stabilizers"? Security, fair development of the society and economy, governance and rule of law, congruence between society and institutions, and just and peaceful political settlements – all of which the EU has been damaging at the national level by imposing unsympathetic integration at the supranational level.

Policy-relevant researchers have identified "concentrated decision-making systems" (think of the European Commission and Court), "economic specialization" (think of the EU's favor for agriculture), high debt and high leverage (think of the EU's favor for transport planes), insensitivity to political change (think of the European Parliament's infrequent and low-turnout elections), and incapacity to learn from shocks (think of European Commission President Jen-Claude Juncker's statement that Brexit would not change EU policies).

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Four profound findings are apparent in our observations of state stability, which few observers realize or care to admit:

First, empirically, autocracies tend to be most stable at any time, and certainly last longer than weak democracies; this makes sense, because autocracies restrict and simplify choices, whereas democracies allow for free-er discourse and markets, which allow for quicker change. The EU's current problem is that its pseudo-democratic bureaucracy cannot change as quickly as its members.

Second, democratic societies are routinely unstable, even though democratic constitutions are stable. Even strong democracies are so turbulent with routine political change that they can hardly be thought of as stable (think of current US politics). Most Americans favor democracy, but do not favor politicians or Congress; most Americans do not want to change democracy, but are passionate about changing their leaders. A popular system is not necessarily a stable system. By definition, a democracy allows for frequent change, so allows for at least periodic instability. In practice, democracies are routinely unstable for reasons other than the periodic elections that allow for major changes. Given free information and free expression, everything is up for challenge all the time – effectively a form of constantly bubbling instability, although with the advantage of avoiding more dramatic change at rare intervals.

Third, while autocracies can be stable despite unpopularity for long periods of time, they accrue grievances that, once unleashed, are more destructive than democratic change, and are usually revolutionary and separatist (think of the former Yugoslavia).

The EU has been around for a long time, but that does not prove that it will progress to “ever-closer union” – as its constitution promises. Autocracies are more stable for a longer chunk of time, but change more dramatically when they do change. Autocracies tend to be stable but unpopular – their citizens can resent their lack of political franchise but are prevented from change, or worry too much about the alternatives, until their desire for change runs far enough ahead of the autocracy's capacity to change.

Fourth, unfortunately, the first alternative to a failed autocracy is usually a weak democracy, which is more unstable than either strong autocracy or strong democracy. Revolutionary states are usually trapped in a vicious cycle of failed weak democracies or partial democracies. The EU has the features of both a long-lived strong autocracy (its executive and courts) and a short-lived weak democracy (its Parliament and the European Council). It's a terrible combination that has more capacity for changing its members than itself.

As the former Yugoslavia illustrates, a strong autocratic federal executive and weak democratic council of members can deny the unhappiness of its citizens for decades, while pretending that national and local interests are old fashioned concepts given enlightened centralized government, but the conflict is only uglier when eventually unleashed.

Britain is exiting the EU as a stronger democracy (the referendum itself was a form of direct democracy), with more liberal policies (such as free-er trade with the world outside the EU), and more stability (such that sovereign borders are not overruled by foreign interests). The EU is heading in the other direction.

About the author:

Dr. **Bruce Newsome** is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of California, Berkeley. Previously he consulted to governments at the RAND Corporation of California and the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.