

'Brexit': Word of the Year

Written by Patrick Bijsmans

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PATRICK BIJSMANS, NOV 16 2016

This is the first full post for *E-International Relations*' blog section 'Brexit: A European Perspective'. And although we did not plan it that way, it could not have come at a better time, because on 3 November dictionary publisher Collins announced that 'Brexit' is named Word of the Year 2016.

Defined as 'the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union', I think we can all agree – whether for or against the EU – that the outcome of the referendum held on 23rd June 2016 will have a profound effect on the future of Europe and of the UK. But with Donald Trump's victory in the US just a few days ago, we may also ask whether 'Brexit' is the rightful winner. In fact, when you scroll down the list published by Collins, you'll find that 'Trumpism' was another contender. Even Nigel Farage called Trump's win 'bigger than Brexit'!

In any case, after the UK's vote to leave the EU and the Americans' choice for 'The Donald' to become the 45th President of the United States of America, I assume that 'the people' stand a good chance of being named *Time's* Person of the Year. They would then succeed Angela Merkel, who won last year 'for providing steadfast moral leadership in a world where it is in short supply' and who, incidentally, was called 'insane' by Trump. Oh, the irony...

While many Europeans may have been quite shocked by Trump's victory, Eurosceptics across Europe seem to perceive it as a boost for their own politics. *Front National's* Marine Le Pen was among the first to congratulate Trump with his win, while Frauke Petry, leader of the *Alternatieve für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany), tweeted that the Americans had opted for a new start. Dutch populist Geert Wilders called Trump's victory an historic one and declared that he and his *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV; Party for Freedom) would, too, 'give our country back to the Dutch!'.

Politico has been publishing very actively on the issue. Nicholas Vinocur wrote that Europe's populists are talking about a new world order, 'one in which national sovereignty beats international agreements, in which immigration is kept to a minimum, and in which alliances that have existed for decades no longer hold sway.' And Harry Cooper has done some nice work for those interested in European politics, presenting 'a calendar of possible populist victories' in Europe's near future.

For my part, I am not just randomly mentioning Le Pen, Petry and Wilders. Le Pen will be aiming for the French presidency in April and May of next year, the AfD hopes to win its first ever seats in the *Bundestag*, and Wilders' PVV is hoping to become the biggest Dutch party in the March 2017 general elections. Successful results for these Eurosceptic parties in all three founding members of the EU is quite likely. While one could imagine that Merkel will still be in charge a year from now, Hollande definitely seems to be a lost cause. Even when Le Pen does not win, there's still former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who's become more critical about the EU than before.

Meanwhile, for what it's worth, polls suggest that Wilders might come in second in the Dutch elections – after having been in the lead until not so long ago. In fact, there are some who think that 'Brexit' and 'Trumpism' may actually increase support for the EU, such as Mario Monti, who discussed further European defence cooperation on BBC Radio 4 the day after the American elections.

This then takes me back to the start of this blog post, to 'Brexit' and 'Trumpism' and to the question what will become

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the Word of the Year 2017? 'Frexit', 'Nexit' or maybe back to 'ever closer union'? I wish I knew. I have become a bit hesitant to make predictions since I was a panellist in a debate on Brexit just before 23 June and argued how I thought Brexit was not going to happen... (Neither did I really expect Trump to win – even though I was less convinced.)

In any case, there is no doubt that next year's going to be another interesting one as far as European politics is concerned. Is it possible that, despite increased support for the EU in quite a few Member States after Brexit, other Europeans will be susceptible for a similar path? No doubt an issue that we will further look into in this blog section.

To be continued!

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. Patrick teaches BA and MA courses in 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.