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Russia and the Brexit: be careful of simple solutions to complex problems

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The Brexit referendum asked the British to give a simple answer to a complex question. Unfortunately, the results of the referendum will not be so simple to sort out, and for Russia, too.

The results of the Brexit referendum may appear to be overwhelmingly clear, with 52 percent of British voters choosing to leave the EU, and only 48 percent voting to remain. However, on closer analysis, the British were unable to give a simple answer to such a complicated question. Some observers believe that Britain has not shown an example of democracy at work, but rather, played a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

One problem is that the British idea of the EU is distorted, so that even the pre-referendum campaign was not able to describe properly what was at stake. Thus, a survey by the agency Ipsos-MORI, which was conducted in May (in the heat of the pre-referendum agitation) indicated that the Brits had a faulty assessment of the key problems on which they were going to make a historic decision.

For example, the Brits, on average, believed that EU citizens residing in the UK make up 15 percent of the population. The backers of Brexit thought that percentage was closer to 20 percent, while the backers of Bremain thought it was closer to 10 percent. The actual figure is a mere 5 percent.

In the same way, the respondents overestimated Britain's share of its contributions to the EU budget; in fact, the country's contribution comprised just 11 percent of the EU budget in 2014. As for the child benefit that Britain pays out to the migrants from the EU, 4 out of 10 Brits overestimate the percent by 40 to 100 times compared to the actual figure (a paltry 0.3 percent).

The Brits believe that 27 percent of the EU budget goes to the administrative expenses of the EU staff; actually, it is 6 percent. Also notable is their idea of the EU share of investment in Britain: the Brits are convinced that the share is 30 percent, while in fact it is 48 percent. Meanwhile, they believe that China's share is 19 percent, as against 1 percent in reality.

Both sides, Brexiteers and Remainers, inevitably simplified their arguments, sometimes even improperly. As a result, the parliamentary committee warned both sides against manipulating their figures. But the damage was already done – many Brits failed to understand the impact of Brexit on their own financial situation.

Political implications of Brexit

For the UK, the failure to articulate what was at stake with Brexit not only has economic consequences – it also has immediate political consequences. Witness the decision by David Cameron to step down as Prime Minister.

And it's not only the Conservative Party that must now prepare for electing a new leader. In the Labour Party, too, a riot has occurred against its leader J. Corbyn over a lukewarm campaign in favor of the EU. Still, Corbyn was telling the truth when he said that if Britain remained in the EU, the influx of immigrants would not cease; that the labor laws and social laws in the EU were favorable for the working people; that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) of the EU with the US was disadvantageous to Europe. He was giving an ambivalent answer to a complicated question, which led to the members of his "shadow cabinet" resigning en masse and the members of the Labour parliamentary group questioning his leadership.

The European elite has realized already that it is time to institute reforms – that it is time to eliminate the "democratic deficit" in the EU. It is not without reason that the Prime Minister of the Netherlands has presented to the EU summit the results of the April referendum on the association of Ukraine with the EU, although he claimed earlier that the referendum was an advisory one, the ratification of the Association Agreement being unaffected by it.

Note that as they voted according to their heart rather than reason, the Brits reflected the sentiments that have arisen in Europe against the establishment, against the elites that profit from globalization and will not heed the opinion of the people, against the growing inequality in incomes. Populism does not rise on its own; rather, it is a symptom of a ripe boil, the responsibility for which is with the elite. However, populism is dangerous in what in Britain has been tagged as disdain for experts. Voting according to one's heart on the most complex issues may become a trend.

What about Russia?

It should be noted that after all the efforts the UK Prime Minister and Foreign Minister had taken to intimidate them with the “Russian threat,” the Brits did not cave in. Russia has accepted the results of the referendum, and as President Vladimir Putin has pointed out in the aftermath of Brexit, the results “will have consequences for Britain as well as for Europe as a whole, and of course, for us as well.”

The problem, suggests Putin, is that Britain may have adopted a superficial approach to solving long-term structural problems: “If the organization of the referendum and the ensuing results which have arrived already are nothing but a display of conceit and superficial attitude on the part of Britain’s leaders to solving issues that are vital to their own country and to the whole of Europe, then the consequences will be of a global nature, and I repeat, they are inevitable. Some of them will be positive, some negative. The markets will sag, of course; they have sagged already. In the middle-term perspective, everything will certainly recover. Only life and practice will show which consequences, positive or negative, will prevail. That is the choice made by the British subjects. We have never interfered, are not interfering, and are not going to interfere in that business.”

It seems, then, that the character of Russian-British relations is not going to change considerably. They were uneven before Britain joined the EEC in 1973, and remain uneven today. In the current situation, Britain is probably going to build closer ties with the U.S., which can hardly lead to a warming in Britain’s bilateral relations with Russia.

However, the situation with respect to Russia within the EU, where Britain has taken hard anti-Russian positions, may change. The number of countries adopting a tough anti-Russian stance has been reduced by one, and now includes only Poland, Sweden and the Baltic States. For Russia, that may be the biggest impact of Brexit, at least in the short-term.

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