Brexit as the Salvation of the European Union? Views from a Complexity Perspective

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1 – Introduction

The European Union seems to have been in constant crisis which has manifested itself through the so-called Sovereign Debt crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit or, currently, what one might call the 'crisis of democracy' which has set the stage for a confrontation between the EU as an organization and some of its new member states, particularly Poland and Hungary. These crises have led to a mountain of literature attesting to the fragility of the European integration process.

Yet, despite all of this, the last year or so have seen a change of mood within the European Union as a whole. Support for the process

of European integration is up in almost all member states and a new spirit of political dynamism has been detected within the institutions of the European Union. By contrast, in the United Kingdom serious fragmentation has been entrenched as a result of its decision to leave.

This apparent revival of the European Union as a political project whilst the United Kingdom struggles to adapt to its own decision to leave raises a number of pertinent and interesting questions, which this article will seek to, at least in part, answer. Amongst these questions are: What conditions have changed over the last 12 months to justify the renewed optimism displayed by the European Union? How does this contrast to the conditions in the United Kingdom? What challenges remain for the EU in order to overcome its current problems? What does all this mean for the future trajectory of the European integration process?

In answering these questions, this work will use the conceptual framework of Complexity to argue that, whilst, in particular, Brexit, has given the EU new purpose and unity, it needs to work on several other of its inherent conditions (and contradictions) to be assured of overcoming its current challenges and reestablish itself as a credible and sought-after international political actor. How this can be done will be discussed towards the end of the piece.

2 – THE CONTEXT: THE MULTIPLE CRISES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the European Union is passing through a crisis has not been disputed, either in academic circles or by the European Union itself, for quite some time. For instance, one EU diplomat who, at the time, was based in Brazil, stated bluntly that 'regionalism is in a deep crisis' and argued that the European Union was really quite lost: 'The only time we have real power is if someone wants something from us'.[1]

Yet, there are significant disagreements about what this crisis actually is and represents. A lot of the literature discusses the economic crisis, which has hit some of the EU's member states hard (FEATHERSTONE, 2016; MAJONE, 2014). Others, however, have argued that this economic

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[1] Interview in 2013, with a senior official at an EU Delegation in South America.

crisis – which manifested itself in fears for the future of the single currency – was merely the symptom of a much deeper political crisis at EU level. In very basic terms, Böll (2012) has shown that, at the EU, politics too often trumps policy when it comes to deciding on a course of action. Along the same lines, but going further, several other analysts have wondered whether the very future of the European Union and its integration project is at stake since there were now questions in many parts of Europe of whether integration had gone too far (GIDDENS, 2014). This, in turn, is both the consequence of, and contributes to, a weakening of key principles that historically underpinned the European integration process. Schmitter (2012), for instance, argues that there has been a breakdown of solidarity between EU member states. With that, one of the fundamental pillars of the whole European project is falling away, putting at risk the very future of that project as a whole. In the place of shared commitments and visions, recent years have seen the emergence of important new differences and cleavages within the European Union, for instance between new and old member states, between rich and poor states, between those believing in the necessity for further integration to tackle shared problems and those seeking to re-empower the member states vis-à-vis the European Union. In other words, there has been a significant process of fragmentation which has not allowed the European Union to act effectively or sustainably to address the many problems it faces (OFFE, 2015). Rather, as Bittner (2010) has argued, these many significant differences have led to a situation where the European Union only does what it can, rather than what it has to. In practice, this means that it does little things, whilst it leaves big, strategic questions and problems unresolved.

This being the case, the EU, for several years, confronted a situation where it became increasingly challenged from within its own member states. Most clearly, this has manifested itself in national and European elections, where euro-sceptic parties have scored some notable successes and have gained widespread representation in parliaments in many EU countries, as well as the European parliament itself (LEHMANN, 2015). However, challenges have also come from some of the very same national governments, which directly take part in EU decision-making. Perhaps the two most obvious cases here are those of Poland and Hungary, whose

Prime Minister, Òrban, has publicly stated his wish to implement in his country an 'authoritarian state' along Russian lines, in a clear rejection of the liberal foundations of the European Union (KELEMEN, 2015).

Within this context of a general malaise, the decision through a popular referendum in 2016 by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union appeared to be the ultimate expression of this crisis, with one of the economically most important member states seeking to exit the organization. Much ink was dispensed on the question of what this means for the European Union, but there was a general consensus that it represented, in the clearest form yet, the growing resentment by the general population against the European Union (PEET, 2017; GRANT, 2016). Several commentators and politicians expressed the fear-and in some cases the hope-that BREXIT, as it came to be known, would lead to a chain-reaction, with other countries seeking to leave the block as well. France and the Netherlands, with national elections in 2017 in which euro-sceptic candidates were polling very well, were seen as the possible next candidates, dealing a potentially fatal blow to the European Union as a whole (SOROS, 2016).

Yet, such predictions have, at least for the time being, proved to be premature. No other country has come forward to ask to leave the EU. The elections in the Netherlands and France did not propel rightwing - and anti - EU populist politicians to power. In fact, some commentators have detected a new sense of purpose and even a little self-confidence in the EU since the BREXIT vote (STEARNS, 2017).

I will now use the conceptual framework of Complexity to both explain the crisis through which the EU has been passing, the impact BREXIT has had on this crisis and some future scenarios that the EU may have to navigate. I will argue that Complexity offers a clear guide to identify the conditions which can sustain the current equilibrium and those that may undermine it in the future. It also allows for the drawing of a clear contrast between the EU and the UK, pointing to actions the UK could take to bring about a more coherent response to the challenges posed by Brexit.

3 – The European Union as a Complex Adaptive System

The European Union is used to crises. In fact, some have argued that the organization's modus of development and evolution is dialectical, that is, periods of progress are followed by periods of regression (MONNET 1978; LINDBERG 1963). That this should be so, perhaps, is no surprise simply because, in a descriptive sense, the organization is so complex, here understood as complicated. In other words, so many factors play into the question of what the EU can and cannot do at any particular moment, that these periods of progress followed by problems are natural and, as such, to be expected.
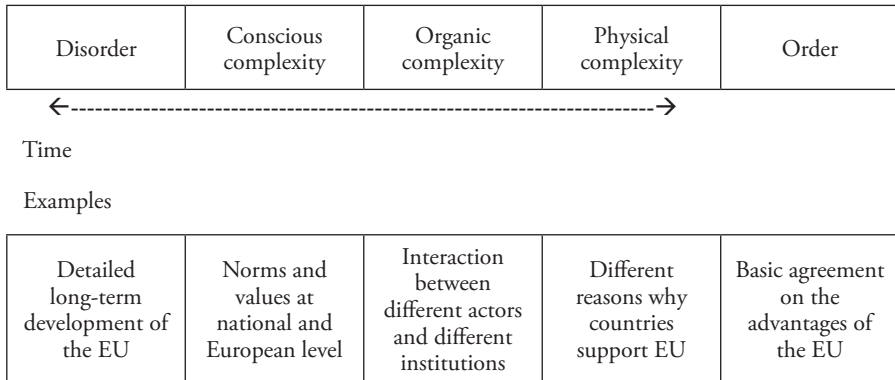
Yet, other authors have gone further and argued that the European Union is in fact complex in a conceptual sense, characterized by: the presence within the system of a large number of elements; these elements interact in a rich manner, that is, any element in the system is influenced by, and influences, a large number of other elements; these interactions are often be non-linear; there are feedback loops in the interaction; the openness of the system and its elements to their environment; these systems operate in a state far from equilibrium; these systems have a history; the elements of the system are ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole (adapted from GEYER, 2003; GEYER; RIHANI, 2010).

Dooley (1997) defines this as a Complex Adaptive System, 'a collection of semi-autonomous agents with the freedom to act in unpredictable ways and whose interactions over time and space generate system-wide patterns'. In such systems, agents 'are constantly changing, as are the relationships between and amongst them' (EOYANG; HOLLADAY, 2013, p. 16–17). As a consequence, 'uncertainty becomes the rule' (EOYANG; HOLLADAY, 2013, p. 17). Yet, uncertainty does not mean permanent instability. In fact, in most cases, changes in the relationship between agents take place within a framework of fundamental systemic stability. As Eoyang & Holladay (2013, p. 17) put it, interactions 'simply change the conditions and relationships among the parts and the whole; they do not change the system in any fundamental way.' The interaction between parts and the whole often sustains existing patterns as 'parts interact to generate emergent patterns while the patterns influence parts and their interactions. The result is a self-generating, self-organizing

reality of human systems dynamics' (EOYANG; HOLLADAY, 2013 p. 18), based on the interdependence between the parts and the whole of the system. Self-organization here is defined as a process by which the internal interactions between agents and conditions of a system generate system-wide patterns (EOYANG, 2001).

Geyer (2003) argues that such systems are, therefore, marked by elements of order, elements of complexity and elements of disorder or unpredictability. These elements interact often in, at best, partially predictable ways. He illustrates these elements in relation to the process of European integration through a model he calls 'Complexity mapping' and which will be used here to illustrate the causes and consequences of Brexit, both for the EU and the UK. To do so, let us first look at the process of European integration as a whole through complexity mapping:

Figure 1 – The range of phenomena in the international political system.

Disorder	Conscious complexity	Organic complexity	Physical complexity	Order

←---→

Time

Examples

Detailed long-term development of the EU	Norms and values at national and European level	Interaction between different actors and different institutions	Different reasons why countries support EU	Basic agreement on the advantages of the EU

There was, historically, basic agreement between the member states of the European Union about the advantages of being a member of the EU and the common problems that may be solved through its mechanisms and institutions (NUGENT, 2010). The corner stones of the EU in its early incarnations were the need for Franco-German reconciliation, especially within the context of the Cold War. There was also basic agreement that this highly political objective should be pursued through essentially economic means, i.e. the creation of a common European market. 'Model

Europe', which commits the European Union to just this promotion of free trade as well as democracy and respect for Human Rights can also be classed under the orderly elements of the integration process, making the EU, for some, a 'normative power' (MANNERS 2002; DINAN 2004)**.**

Yet, within this fundamental framework, what Eoyang & Holladay (2013) call 'containers' which constrain the system and are a precondition for any chance of coherent development, there have always been key elements of complexity. Critically, the *exact* reasons why countries have sought to join the EU differ. Whilst, for instance, Germany may have seen the EU integration process as a project of peace and reconciliation which was treated as a policy of state regardless of government, other countries, for instance, the new member states from Eastern Europe, see EU membership primarily as an economic instrument to 'catch up' with their neighbours to the west. As a result of this so-called 'physical complexity', also, their behaviour once inside the EU, even where and when they pursue the same objectives (NUGENT, 2010). These differences are the result of, and reinforce, so-called 'organic complexity', that is, the differences between member states in terms of their institutional structures, the way they conduct politics or, indeed, the way different institutions within the EU interact and often pursue quite distinct agendas and objectives in different ways to one another (GEYER, 2003).

Even more complexity emerges into the process when one takes into consideration so-called 'conscious complexity', i.e. the way different actors interpret concepts differently depending on their particular circumstances and belief systems. As will be shown below, this is especially important in relation to Brexit, where these issues have always played an enormously important role. What, for instance, is meant by 'integration'? What do we understand by 'sovereignty'? What does one understand by 'European citizenship'? Bearing this complexity in mind, the future development of the EU is, and will remain, unknowable (see GEYER, 2003, for a detailed explanation of the model).

These considerations of the various levels of complexity which one can encounter within the different layers of the European Union and the its interactions with the member states are critical to understanding one fundamental fact about the whole process of European integration:

In considering what the EU is, what it means or what it should do, there is hardly ever one single and 'objective' truth. Rather, one's view of what is 'right' about and for the EU is influenced heavily by one's own particular circumstances and framework (EOYANG; HOLLADAY, 2013). There are, therefore, several 'truths' circulating about the EU integration process depending on what the Complexity literature calls 'local boundary conditions'.

It is these fundamental facts which, in many ways, make one understand what has made the EU an organization used to crises. In simple terms, there are so many differences present within the EU system so as to make coherent and sustainable development very difficult. Coherence here is defined as 'the degree to which parts of a system "fit" each other or the external environment, and it is a necessary factor in sustainability'. In practice that means that: meaning is shared among agents; internal tension is reduced; actions of agents and sub-systems are aligned with the system-wide intentionality; patterns are repeated across scales and in different parts of the system; a minimum amount of energy of the system is dissipated through internal interactions; parts of the system function in complementary ways (EOYANG, 2001, p. 30).

Economic crises or political crises – one only has to think about the crises of the 1970s or the Luxemburg empty chair crisis of the mid-1960s – can hit the EU in many different ways whilst the ability of the organization as a whole to influence these crises can be quite limited. Eoyang (2001) and Eoyang & Holladay (2013) have argued that, in social systems, such differences and different truths are normal and, indeed, are a prerequisite to change as the tensions these differences generate allow the possibility for movement. However, in order for this to occur in a sustainable manner, it is critical that a stable framework exists around which all actors can unite and through which they can define and pursue common objectives. Such a stable framework, the 'container' already referred to above, allows tensions to be channelled into energy and action, provided there are channels (also called 'exchanges') through which these tensions can be released into the policy-making process (ref).

In what follows, I will argue that the current crisis of the European Union is qualitatively different to those that have gone before it precisely

because the elements of order (those that hold the system together) have been weakened whilst the number of differences within the system have increased exponentially, meaning that the system is not able to hold the tensions that are generated. Brexit is both factor in, and response to, this crisis, but also, at least temporarily, is key to understanding the change in mood within the European Union.

4 – The crisis of the European Union as a Complexity map

There are, of course, several factors that explain what caused the crisis of the EU and, as indicated at the beginning, there is a mountain of literature analyzing these factors. For our purposes, what is important is to identify the overarching themes that can explain this crisis.

Critically, the elements of order which held the European Union together for so long have, at best, frayed. As argued above, the EU was always seen as a project to guarantee the peace in Western Europe and reconcile France and Germany. In many ways, this problem has been resolved since a conflict between those two countries seems, at the very least, highly unlikely. With the Cold War at an end and, on the whole, the countries of the former Communist bloc in Eastern Europe more or less successfully integrated into the European Union, the EU has been lacking, for some time I would argue, an overarching theme which could answer the basic question of what makes this organization indispensable and what is it still there for?

Yet, this question is all the more urgent because the number of differences introduced into the system has increased exponentially. With enlargement-itself a sign of the historic success of the European Union-the number of reasons for wanting to be part of the EU has increased and with it the ideas about where the EU should go, how it should get there and what, precisely, it should do and for what purpose. In short, what the EU means for countries now differs widely, yet this is not *simply* a consequence of new members joining but also of the passage of time which means that there is now a generation of leaders in charge-as well as a new generation of the population-for whom the old historic reference point of peace or the Cold War, do not have the same, if any, traction.
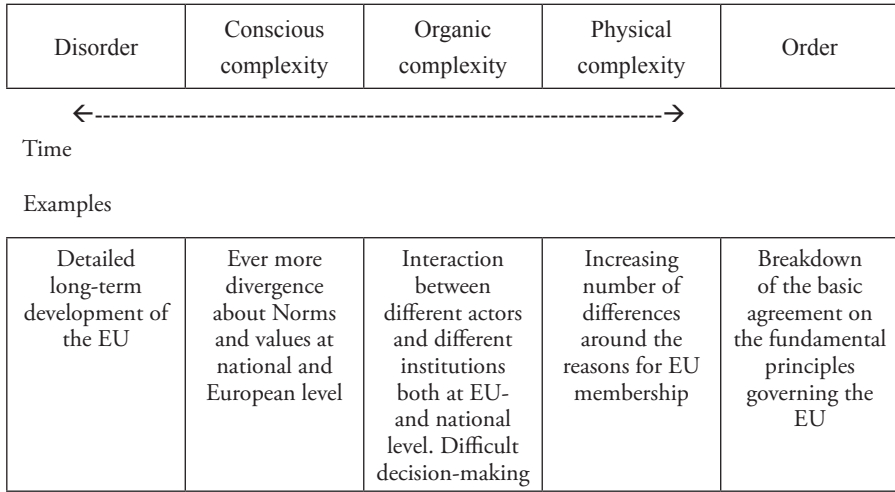
To this one can add the fact that, under these circumstances, finding consensus even in the more mundane day-to-day policy decisions has become more difficult. It is hardly a surprise that 28 member states, with all the different histories and contexts they bring to the table will disagree more frequently. Whilst there have been reforms to the decision--making processes within the EU to, essentially, do away with the right to national veto over many policy areas, there is still a reluctance on the part of political leaders to use these instruments, lest they advertise division and also because there is a *culture* of consensus within the organization (CINI & BORRGÁN, 2016). However, with ever more divergence on the key terms of European integration – What about sovereignty? Where should power lie within the EU institutional framework? What kind of model do we want to construct for the EU and what does this mean for the organization?– the EU has allowed a situation to develop in which the organization does what it can rather than what needs to be done, with the search for the smallest common denominator dominating the political business (BITTNER, 2010). There is, then, plenty of tension within the EU, but the system itself is not robust enough to hold this tension. As a consequence, the EU has lost the ability to show leadership. It became an organization which sought to avoid conflict over policies and actions in the name of political expediency, a tendency which far predates the economic crisis and subsequent problems with the single currency, as the process of admitting Greece to the single currency or the way breaches by Germany and France of the Stability – and Growth Pact meant to govern that single currency were handled (CINI & BORRGÁN, 2016). The EU reacts, rather than acts.

Critically, with this increase in tension within the EU, there was also an increase in public dissatisfaction with the organization, which showed itself in various elections across Europe at various levels and which led to a surge in political representatives critical, skeptical or downright hostile to the EU (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2013). Whilst some of the most expressive results of this trend occurred in so called 'second order elections (such as the victory of the anti-EU UK Independence Party in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections in Britain), others directly influenced member-state governments, such as in Finland, Hungary or

Poland, the latter two being very open about their desire to dismantle key aspects of 'model Europe' (KELEMEN, 2015). This 'popular uprising', in turn, would inevitably influence what the EU can and cannot do politically. These challenges, however, were often a *response* to public opinion.

It is worth visualizing this as a Complexity map again:

Figure 2 – The range of phenomena in the crisis of the European Union.

Disorder	Conscious complexity	Organic complexity	Physical complexity	Order

←---→

Time

Examples

Detailed long-term development of the EU	Ever more divergence about Norms and values at national and European level	Interaction between different actors and different institutions both at EU- and national level. Difficult decision-making	Increasing number of differences around the reasons for EU membership	Breakdown of the basic agreement on the fundamental principles governing the EU

Brexit, then, can be seen in this context which also lays bare some of the risks and opportunities for the EU going forward.

5 – Brexit as a Complex Adaptive System: The UK and EU perspectives

Brexit was, no doubt, a tremendous shock to the system of the European Union. For the first time ever a member states decided voluntarily to leave the block, not because political elites had decided, but because a majority of the electorate had done so. The result prompted various analysts and politicians to predict that other countries might well follow the UK out of the EU and that, with it, the whole organization might collapse (SOROS, 2016). Yet, this has not happened. In fact, since the

Brexit vote, public support for the EU in the rest of Europe has generally ticked up (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2017). In what follows, and using complexity mapping as a tool, it will be argued that part of this has to do with the fact that the UK has not considered Brexit as a complex adaptive process and is paying the price for this failure. On the other hand, for the time being at least, Brexit has given the EU a rallying cry around which to unite which has stabilized the system as a whole and reduced tensions within it. Let us start with the UK perspective.

The only thing that most British politicians agree about since the referendum is that 'the will of the people has to be respected' (RENTOUL, 2017). In other words, barring a dramatic change of public opinion or some other unforeseen dramatic event, the UK will leave the European Union in March 2019.

However, agreement ends here. There is absolutely no agreement on the basic elements of complexity associated with Brexit. On a most basic level, what prompted people to vote for Brexit? Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, for instance, interpreted the result as a mandate to, above all, control immigration to the UK, concluding that this should mean also the exit of the country from the European Single Market and the customs union and therefore end freedom of movement. Whilst there is some evidence from surveys to suggest that the issue of immigration played a significant role in the victory of the 'out' vote in the referendum, those same surveys also show, however, that a majority of voters in the UK prefer remaining part of the single market (MAY, 2017; MOST…, 2017)

There has also been little to no debate about the institutional process of leaving the EU and the impact this will have on the delicate balance of power between the UK's own political institutions. Two issues demonstrate this problem clearly. On the one hand, there needs to be a decision on how to deal with EU law applied in the UK once the country leaves the EU. Since it is clearly impossible to repeal all EU law at once, the government is currently proposing to incorporate all existing EU law into UK law before deciding, essentially on a case-by-case basis, whether to keep, replace or discard pieces of EU legislation. This has been criticized as a massive power grab by the executive branch in some quarters, undermining the sovereignty of parliament (GRICE, 2017). A second key issue is

how to handle those policy areas, such as education or health, for instance, which are either partially or wholly devolved to the governments of the constituents parts of the UK, i.e. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Who would have the final say on dealing with the impact on those policy areas during and after the exit process? Who and how would any future deal regulating the relationship between the UK and the EU post-Brexit be decided within this framework? There are, hence, key elements of organic complexity unresolved, without even talking about citizen rights, or the responsibility of adjudicating these rights post-Brexit (BREXIT…, 2017).

All of these quite practical issues touch upon much deeper questions of identity which were critical to the Brexit vote (LEHMANN, 2015). For many leavers, the vote represented not one about economic interests but about reasserting a national, as opposed to a European, identity. The heart ruled the head. Yet, this emphasis leaves many questions unanswered: What does sovereignty, for instance, *mean* in a post-Brexit UK? How does the country reconcile the fact that two of its 4 constituent parts (Scotland and Northern Ireland) voted to remain, whilst two others (England and Wales) voted to leave? What does that say about the *various* identities that interplay within the UK? This is also a very practical question in Ireland where the reemergence of a 'hard' border between EU-member the Republic of Ireland and soon-to-be non-EU member Northern Ireland might well lead to a reemergence of tensions and conflict between nationalists and unionists, reminiscent of the 30-year conflict on that island.
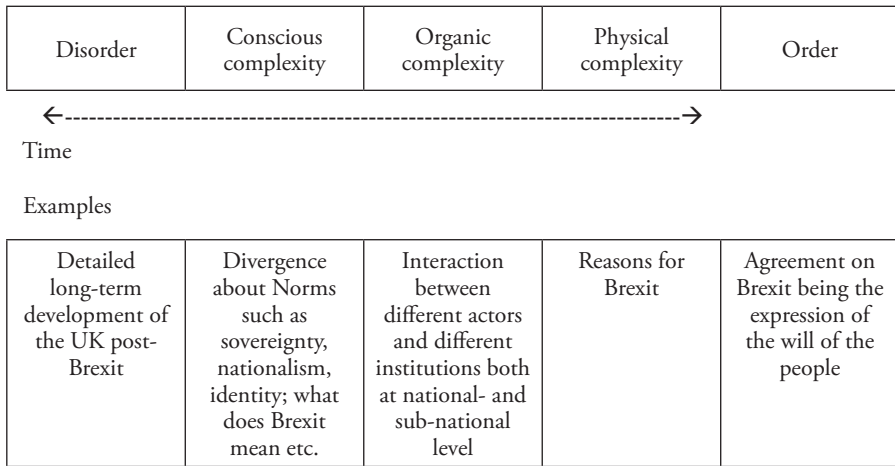
Finally, and bearing all of these questions and tensions in mind, there is absolutely no way of telling what a Brexit-Britain will look like ten years from now.

What we have, then, is a complex system which is marked by enormous differences and very few elements of order which might hold the country together as it embarks on the most significant political and economic process – and it is a process rather than an event – since the end of the Second World War. In fact, rather than clarifying some essential questions, the Brexit vote has deepened disagreements and increased tensions: What should be the UK's role in the world? How does it relate itself to the European Union? How does it approach its economic development post-Brexit? All of these questions not only do not have an

answer but have become more divisive since the referendum, exposing deep fault-lines between the different parts of the UK, generational issues and profound questions about the political and economic model to be pursued by the country.

It is worth visualizing this again for more clarity:

Figure 3 – The range of phenomena of Brexit.

Disorder	Conscious complexity	Organic complexity	Physical complexity	Order

←---→

Time

Examples

Detailed long-term development of the UK post-Brexit	Divergence about Norms such as sovereignty, nationalism, identity; what does Brexit mean etc.	Interaction between different actors and different institutions both at national- and sub-national level	Reasons for Brexit	Agreement on Brexit being the expression of the will of the people

For the EU, by contrast, Brexit has acted, at least for now, as a unifying, ordering event. For a start, it crystalized the problems through which the EU is passing and acted as a so-called 'gateway event' to focus minds. It is, in this respect, no surprise that the new French president, Macron, has used this time to set out his vision for the European Union of the future (WALT, 2017). For the time being, it is not even the main question whether, or to what extent, this vision can be realized and implemented. What is crucial is that, for the first time in a while, a coherent vision for what the EU should be has been set out.

Secondly, for all the differences marked out in figure 2, Brexit has served, in two crucial aspects, as a unifier: There is a consensus that the UK cannot be better off outside the EU than inside, lest it encouraged other countries to follow suit. So, the UK has to be made to pay a price. Related to this, the EU, as a whole, will do what it takes to save

itself and guarantee its own survival. Not only is this seen as critical by political leaders, but there are clear institutional interests in Brussels to preserve the EU that are being asserted.

This is not to say that there are not significant differences amongst and between EU member states with regards to Brexit. Clearly, for instance, the interests of Ireland, as the only country with a land border with the UK and long, and often painful, historic as well as economic connections, are different to the interest of Italy. Equally, the interests of Eastern European states, whose citizens have made extensive use of the right to freedom of movement to work in the UK, are different to the interests of Luxembourg in this regard. At the same time, there are clear challenges ahead after Brexit, for instance in relation to the budgetary framework for the organization since the UK is one of the main net contributors to the EU's coffers. This without talking about the clear and fundamental differences already touched upon above about the future development of the EU and the question of what the EU should and, importantly, should *not* be.

Figure 4 – The range of EU phenomena in the context of Brexit.

Disorder	Conscious complexity	Organic complexity	Physical complexity	Order

ß--à

Time

Examples

Detailed long-term development of the EU post-Brexit	The normative foundation of the EU post-Brexit	Different priorities and interests set by different EU and national institutions	Particular interests in Brexit negotiations	Agreement that Brexit needs to act as a deterrent to other countries; give a deal to the UK which is not as good as being in the EU

Some of the challenges under organic- and conscious complexity are formidable. However, my argument is that, seeing that the EU since Brexit has found common ground on the questions of the negotiations

with the UK at least, the organization is in a better place now to address its divergence on some of the key strategic issues under conscious complexity than it was before the Brexit vote which, above anything else, has concentrated minds. In this respect, Brexit has served as an event which has reduced tensions. However, bearing in mind that the negotiations with the UK will become more complex as time passes, and bearing in mind that they will one day end, this clarifying effect may be time-limited. This is what makes Macron's recent intervention so important: It at least *begins* the process of thinking of a post-Brexit EU. Other contributions to this debate will come and will be needed to address the issues discussed here and there is no guarantee that they will lead necessarily to a better outcome but, at least, a start has been made.

By contrast, far from resolving tensions, in the UK, the vote to leave the EU has increased them simply because no-one, in any concrete sense, asked the 'so, what' question, that is, the question of what does leaving the European Union actually mean for the country. Since this question has, as yet, no clear answer, the next question – now what do we do? – can also not be answered. The UK, therefore, is negotiating from a position of extreme weakness not because it is facing 26 other member states and various institutions but because the internal dynamics of its negotiating process and framework are so incoherent.

6 – Conclusions: Now what?

This article sought to answer the question of what explains the current relative optimism which has taken hold within the EU, despite the shock of the Brexit vote. Using the conceptual framework of Complexity, it was argued that, contrary to expectations, the event reduced tensions within the EU to such an extent that leaders have, tentatively, started talking again about the strategic future development of the organization. In other words, Brexit has actually increased the coherence within the system that is the European Union.

Yet, it would be premature to see this as a permanent state of affairs. The EU still has enormous unresolved strategic challenges ahead and is still subject to further crises if, for instance, the refugee crisis worsens or

Greece or any other given country returns to the edge of economic abyss. As such, it is critical that the EU try to use this period of relative stability to lay the groundwork for these debates.

In doing so, the UK should serve as a warning of what happens when such groundwork is not laid. Having not seen its own Brexit process as a Complex Adaptive System and, therefore, not asked the crucial question of what Brexit should mean in a society which is deeply divided along several cleavages, the country is now unable to act proactively in order to secure the best possible deal for itself. Having seen Brexit as an *event* which can be controlled, the government is now unable to construct, never mind control, the narrative in order to navigate a highly complex *process* into which an enormous number of actors want some say. The result is extreme incoherence which can only harm the UK in the longer term.

As such, for the country, there is an urgent task of trying to find *some* common ground upon which to build. Such common ground, just as in the case of the EU, might be based on what one does *not* want initially. So, an agreement might be found initially between the different actors that the first key aim should be to avoid what many have called a 'cliff-edge' for the economy upon leaving the EU in 2019. There are signs that a fragile consensus on this is emerging with the distinct advantage of buying the country time (THERESA…, 2017). However, what is needed most of all in such circumstances is recognition that Brexit *is* process which has to be navigated and during which one has to adapt to constantly changing conditions.

In other words, changing the framework through which Brexit is approached would be an important first step to increasing its chances of success. Since time is pressing, such change is urgent.

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