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Research Note

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While the British government struggles to find the best path to Brexit, the position of other countries in the EU will be key to determining the fate of whatever path is chosen. Having an exclusive focus on the negotiations in Brussels between the UK government and the Commission risks missing important pressures that are playing behind the scenes. Researchers at the Sussex European Institute conducted studies of elites in four states during the summer of 2017 to try to gauge the responses to the first phase of Brexit.* The focus was on elites, on parliamentarians, commentators and think tanks as we sought to chart how Brexit was being received. Based on a series of interviews and discussions in Berlin, Paris, Warsaw, London and Dublin, as well documentary sources, it is clear that during the first phase of Brexit there has been a strong and shared emphasis on EU unity among the EU27.

Germany

For Germany, the main takeaway point from the interviews is that politics trumps economics. There was a strong consensus that the main priority of the German government in the Brexit negotiations is (and should be) to keep a united front among the EU27, and to prevent any further disintegration of the EU. Though there was recognition of the economic costs of Brexit for Germany and the possibility of higher German net contributions to the EU budget, such concerns were secondary and do not drive the German position. There was clear rejection of any special bilateral deals with the UK that would undermine the integrity of the single market and might set a precedent for other EU states. This is explicitly not being seen as punishing the UK, but as a vital necessity to preserve the EU. There was a strong sense that, importantly German business and industry are fully behind this line, and that there had been a process of consultation with business leaders to align them with government thinking. Any expectations that business interests might push Germany towards a softer line in the Brexit talks thus appear unfounded.

A second theme was the central role Germany plays in European diplomacy around the Brexit talks. The German government made a conscious effort to listen to the priorities of smaller member states to ensure that they are incorporated into the EU negotiating position amidst the dense network of bilateral exchanges, on the level of governments and parliaments, between Germany and other EU members. A key example that was given was Germany's support for the Irish wish to include UK-Ireland relations in the list of 'divorce' issues that need to be settled before the Brexit talks can move on to the longer-term relationship between the UK and the EU. Overall, the German government was credited for having been influential in sustaining the common European position on critical issues such as the timetable and sequence of the negotiations. What emerged is a picture of Berlin as the critical diplomatic hub for coordinating and maintaining a strong and united line of the EU27.

There was a general sense of frustration with the British approach to Brexit and the loss of political goodwill towards the UK in Germany. This was seen in terms ranging from the perceived incompetence, irresponsibility and delusion of the British government to its failure to offer unilateral guarantees for the status of EU citizens in the UK. From their talks with British MPs, the interviewees

reported what they saw as a complete lack of understanding and wishful thinking about Germany's interests in the Brexit talks. There was irritation with what was understood as an attempt by the British government, in its letter triggering Art. 50, to use the UK's contribution to European security as a bargaining chip in the negotiations. There was a similar response to an "unfriendly act" of the perceived efforts of British diplomacy to tempt individual EU states to break rank with the position of the EU27. It was clear that Brexit would significantly weaken the UK economically and reduce it to a marginal voice in world politics. The UK has little political capital left in the German Bundestag to draw on.

Ireland

For Ireland, the EU is more important than the UK, but there was a strong desire for a continued close relationship with the UK. Ireland is losing a major economic partner, and a close ally in the European Council. However, at this early stage, there is a strong consensus from all parties that Ireland will not negotiate separately with the UK. Ireland clearly has the most to lose from a hard Brexit, but there was a strong sense that Ireland will not tolerate a 'have your cake and eat it' deal for Britain. This is due just as much to contagion fears as to Irish-specific concerns.

Ireland has had strong initial diplomatic success in ensuring that avoiding a hard border with Northern Ireland is one of the three priorities of the first phase of Brexit negotiations between the UK and the European Commission. Former Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Irish diplomats and the Foreign Office received praise across all parties for this diplomatic success. For the most part, there was early optimism that the EU is looking after Ireland, and that Ireland's interests are best protected as part of 'Team EU'. Unsurprisingly, the memories of Ireland's treatment by the troika and of the notorious Trichet letter to the late Finance Minister Brian Lenihan during the eurozone crisis, haven't been forgotten. Similarly, Ireland's dispute with the European Commission over a €13 billion unpaid tax bill led others to question whether the EU's goodwill on the Brexit issue is coming for free. Nevertheless, the general sense was that Ireland is staunchly united with the EU27. Ireland, according to one respondent, wants to retain its EU identity and increase its influence in the EU now that its 'best friend is gone'.

Ireland's politics and economy are tangled up in Brexit to an extent that is not the case for the rest of the EU27. Across all parties, the protection of the Northern Irish peace process, of trade links with the UK, and the stability of the domestic economy are the key drivers of the Irish position on Brexit. Ireland will not accept any deal which imposes a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, but some fear the worst. There was a feeling that Britain is not awake to the difficulties facing Ireland and the real risks to the peace process in Northern Ireland. Britain was subject to criticism for not representing the North at all, and for putting the unionist community in the uncomfortable position of having to even think about a united Ireland. Others are sanguine about the continuation of the Common Travel Area and the use of high speed customs clearance technology as part of a 'frictionless border'. Some cannot envision any solution other than special status for Northern Ireland, and explicitly define this as continued EU membership. The difficulties of interpreting what Britain wanted were emphasised, which makes preparation for Brexit especially difficult. It is worth noting that, because it must be agreed unanimously by the EU27, Ireland can block a transition deal for Britain. This is important, because it seems that a hard border will not be accepted by Ireland. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has insisted that Ireland will not 'design a border for Brexiteers'. All parties are united in this.

Economically, Brexit was viewed as both an economic threat and an opportunity for Ireland. IDA Ireland, the state body responsible for attracting FDI into Ireland, is working hard to harvest the

benefits of attracting UK companies to Ireland, especially in the financial sector. Respondents from the government party (Fine Gael) insist that Ireland is equipped to handle the workload from Brexit at this point. Brexit is being prepared for in national planning, budgets, and working with agencies. However, opposition parties criticised the Irish government for being underprepared with relevant agencies on investment, science and food not yet even recruiting staff to deal with Brexit. There was a sense among some of the opposition that while Ireland deserves top marks for diplomacy, they are not sufficiently prepared to meet the economic challenges, or seize the opportunities, of Brexit.

There was frustration and disappointment at the Brexit referendum result and the subsequent negotiations. The British Government was perceived as sending totally mixed messages. One respondent noted that there appears to be a lot of confusion and lethargy in the British approach, while another remarked on the 'insanity' of Brexit from the point of view of British business; the UK will end up outside, but dependent on the EU in the same way that 1950s Ireland was dependent on the UK. The Conservatives were perceived as being in disarray, and there were fears that the British could head for no deal. Yet, respondents express disappointment more than frustration, and hope for calmness, pragmatism, and above all, clarity in negotiations.

France

The French responses to Brexit confirmed that absolute priority was being given to maintaining the cohesion of the EU27: French national interest was seen as being inseparable from the fate of the EU. In fact Brexit was even presented as a catalyst for tackling a number of difficult EU reforms, such as the budget and the governance of the Eurozone. There were clear signs of renewed faith in the ideals and aims of the European Project amongst elites, inspired by Macron's ardent pro-EU stance and his defeat of the FN's election campaign policy of 'Frexit' and a return to the French franc.

Since the elections in May and June, France's euophile elites therefore feel they have a fairly free rein to attempt to reform the economy to reduce unemployment and the budget deficit in line with the demands of Brussels. Macron hopes to trade off economic reforms for increased political control and increased federalization of the Eurozone. The decimation of the old party system in the wake of the elections means that the only real challenge is from the hard Left, under firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon, but even this is having limited success so far.

In response to Brexit, the inter-ministerial committee (SGAE) that oversees all government policies relating to the EU, established a dedicated task force and identified key national interests. There are policy areas such as agriculture and fisheries which will play a critical role in future negotiations, and which will be divisive domestically as well as within the EU27, and it is expected that various economic actors will intervene more once negotiations develop further. But it was clear that, in the interim, these issues have been put on hold in the interests of EU cohesion.

On the question of the negotiations, there was acknowledgement that a transition period would be necessary, but also uncertainty over exactly what this would or should entail: above all, there was frustration at the failure of British politicians to come up with a coherent set of proposals. Accusations in the British media of the French response to Brexit as being very punitive, were openly rebuffed. France does not want the UK to leave, and Macron clearly told May in Paris that the door was still open. But there was strong opposition to the idea of the UK 'cherry-picking', and the French will naturally try to take advantage of opportunities that arise in areas such as financial services.

On bilateral issues there was emphatic agreement that Brexit would make little difference to Franco-British relations: in defence policy in particular, France is keen to maintain strong bilateral links, and the Lancaster House agreement of 2010 will remain the centrepiece. The idea of developing a

European defence capacity, with Germany being asked to step up, was seen as unrealistic as an alternative. France is also eager to continue cooperation on security issues in face of the terrorist threat.

So the overall message from French elites was one of optimism for a full on return to the European agenda, with or without Brexit. France's position with regard to the future development of the EU will most likely be framed as an endorsement of the idea of differentiated integration, pushing for further integration of the core member states around a revived Franco-German partnership, rather than as a looser type of arrangement drifting towards a 'Europe à la carte'. For beneath the show of confidence, lies a deep fear that British diplomats might just be able to make a success of Brexit: on no account should the UK be allowed to strike a better deal outside the EU than as a member of the club.

Poland

Brexit means that Poland is losing a key EU ally. There was a sense that both countries shared a similar vision of an expanded single market combined with a reluctance to allow the EU more economic policy powers, especially on taxation. They are strongly Atlanticist and viewed the development of EU security and defence policies as complementary, rather than an alternative, to the NATO alliance. Poland also saw the UK as a strong supporter of an assertive EU approach towards Russia, fearing that France and Germany are too inclined to strike up cosy bi-lateral deals with Moscow that side-line the post-communist states.

This sense of common thinking has been reinforced by the ruling Law and Justice Party's view of the UK as its most important strategic partner within the EU. Law and Justice argued that Poland needed to be more robust and assertive in advancing its national interests and form its 'own stream' within the EU by, for example, building alliances with central and East European post-communist states to counter-balance the influence of the Franco-German axis. It identified Britain's Conservative government, which had a similar anti-federalist approach towards EU integration, as its most significant ally in advancing this project. Following the bitter dispute with the European Commission over the membership and functioning of Poland's constitutional tribunal, Law and Justice also saw the Conservative Party leading the UK to join Hungary, and possibly other states, in opposing any attempts to introduce sanctions on Poland, which require unanimity in the Council.

With the imminent loss of its main EU ally and attempts to build closer co-operation with other post-communist states proceeding fairly slowly, some commentators noted a pivot in Poland's international relations towards closer co-operation with Berlin. This was exemplified by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's February visit to Poland and meetings with government and Law and Justice leaders. The relationship with Germany is not without tensions. There have been issues particularly over the 'Nord Stream 2' pipeline being built under the Baltic Sea by Russian energy giant Gazprom to send gas directly to Germany, seen by Poland as undermining common European energy policies and running contrary to Mrs Merkel's attempts to encourage a tough EU stance towards Moscow. There have also been and disagreements over the European migration crisis, with Law and Justice opposing attempts, championed by Germany, to relocate migrants from North Africa and the Middle East across all EU states including Poland.

Despite Law and Justice's anti-federalism and commitment to defending Polish sovereignty, in the face of Brexit, the dominant view within the party remained that it is in Poland's interests to remain in the EU and try to reform it from within. As Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski put it in February's parliamentary foreign policy debate, the government's 'priority is to repair the European

Union, not to dismantle it'. The party argued that the Brexit vote was a vindication of its critique of the EU political elite who precipitated mounting Euroscepticism by over-centralising and trying to force their vision of deeper European integration against the popular will. Law and Justice calls for a new European treaty that brings the EU back to its original role as a looser alliance of economically co-operating but still sovereign nation-states, with a more clearly defined division of rights between the Union and its members and a consensual decision making process that makes it more difficult for any country to gain hegemony. Poland's main opposition parties, Civic Platform and the smaller liberal 'Modern' (Nowoczesna) grouping, argued that there is little appetite for amending the EU treaties. Only fringe political groupings on the radical eurosceptic right have called for 'Polexit' and although most Poles are critical of attempts to deepen European integration in a number of areas, the overwhelmingly majority of them support continued EU membership.

Given Poland's isolation from the major EU powers under Law and Justice there is, the opposition argued, a real danger that the country will end up marginalised on the EU's periphery. They therefore called upon the government to once again locate Poland within European mainstream politics by both complying with the Commission's 'rule of law' recommendations and re-building the country's previously close links with the Franco-German axis, especially its strategic partnership with Berlin. They also proposed re-opening the debate on Polish adoption of the euro so that Warsaw is at the heart of a Union that, they argued, will inevitably integrate more closely around its eurozone core. Although it has not ruled out eurozone accession (which most Poles oppose) in principle, Law and Justice argued that, given the single currency's huge problems, it cannot envisage any point in the foreseeable future when it would be advantageous for Poland to adopt the euro.

In terms of the Brexit negotiations specifically, the Polish government wanted the EU to maintain close relations with the UK and was trying to position itself as the leader of those states opposing punitive action against London. The UK is not only an important trading partner for Poland, even more importantly Warsaw wanted Britain to remain engaged in the European continent as a military security actor. However, there are a number of issues that could complicate Warsaw's plans to ensure an amicable separation. One of these is the question of the UK's contribution to the 2014-20 EU budget. Poland is currently the greatest beneficiary of EU regional funds while the UK is one of the largest net contributors to the current EU budget. The other issue is the future status of the UK's Polish community. The ability to be able to travel and work abroad has been one of the main pillars of support for EU membership in Poland and the UK has been one of the most popular destinations for Poles seeking work in Western Europe, with an estimated 800-900,000 Polish migrant workers currently living there. However, the ability to regain control over immigration from EU countries was one of the key reasons why British people voted for Brexit in last June's referendum. The Polish government will concentrate on protecting the current status and rights of Polish citizens living in the UK. The fate of the Polish community in the UK is of huge domestic political significance as virtually every family in Poland has someone living and working there. So, whatever its aspirations to lead broader debates on the EU's future, Warsaw has little room for manoeuvre on this issue, making it much trickier for it to play the role of main spokesman for an amicable Brexit settlement.

Conclusion

What cuts across the four cases are two themes. The strongest is that Germany, France, Ireland and Poland, at this stage of Brexit, are keen to pursue a united EU27 position and not to break ranks in pursuit of particular national interests. But it is also clear that Germany's role in the process and in the EU has become even more central, and Germany itself is clear on its brief to lead. There are significant differences as we might expect where relations with the UK are stronger. For Poland and

Ireland it is clear that there is a sense that they are losing an important partner. But whether the states have stronger or weaker ties to the UK there appears to be some consternation over the way the UK has approached the first phase of Brexit.

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