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# THE REFUGEE CRISIS, BREXIT AND THE RISE OF POPULISM: MAJOR OBSTACLES TO THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

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**Abstract:** *This article describes the main challenges that the European Union is facing over the last years. It also analyzes the European Integration process and the emergence of the European Union. European integration process began after the Second World War. European politicians realized that "the old continent", which was destroyed and razed to the ground, needed unification in order to play more important role in the bipolar international system. The European integration was a step by step process, which reached its culmination after signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, when the European Union was formally established. The European Union created very favorable ground for free movement of people, goods, services and capital within the internal market. Despite these positive developments, new threats emerged over the last years that can put an end to the European integration process. From these threats and challenges, particular attention is dedicated to Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit), rise of radicalism and populist parties, migration crisis and a heightened terrorism threat.*

**Keywords:** *The European Integration Process; Brexit; Populism; Extremism; Migration Crisis*

## INTRODUCTION: THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

European Union is a supranational organization which includes 28 Member States of Europe. It is the product of the European integration process which began after the Second World War. After World War II, the international system was no longer Eurocentric. Europe, which was destroyed and razed to the ground, was no longer a major force in international politics. World War II considerably changed the balance of power and ended the European hegemony in the world (Korneli Kakachia 2011). The bipolar system was established and the European dominated international system became a thing of the past. Two superpowers emerged after the World War Two - the United States and the Soviet Union and divided Europe into two separate spheres of influence. Soviet Union established totalitarian communist regimes in Eastern Europe. There was a constant fear of spread of Communism in the rest of Europe. European leaders realized the necessity of uniting European nations in order to have 'more weight' in international affairs and play more important role in international politics.

European statesmen came to the conclusion that the maintenance of peace and stability would only be possible if the Franco-German rapprochement could be achieved and if these countries would be integrated into a common political space. In order to avoid new wars and conflicts, European states had to reject imperialism, chauvinism, and closely cooperate with each other.

On September 19, 1946 former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered his famous speech at the University of Zurich and voiced the idea of creating "a United States of Europe". As he stated: "There is a remedy which ... would in a few years make all Europe ... free and ... happy. It is to re-create the European family, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe" (European Commission, 2019). According to Winston Churchill it was necessary to accelerate the European Integration process and recreate the 'European Family' in order to avoid new hostilities and wars on the 'old continent'. Sir Winston Churchill believed that the first step towards the European unification process should be the creation of the Council of Europe.

The Congress of Europe was held in The Hague in 1948. The congress was attended by 750 delegates from different European countries, as well as observers from the US and Canada. The Congress discussed ideas on the development of political co-operation between European countries. It was decided to establish the Council of Europe. The congressional participants expressed their views on the role and structure of the Council of Europe. On 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1949, the Charter was signed and The Council of Europe was founded by the Treaty of London. Nowadays, Council of Europe plays very important role in protecting human rights and the rule of law promotes the consolidation of pluralist democracy and deepens political cooperation between the European States (Valeri Modebadze 2015).

One of the most important steps towards the European integration was the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community. The author of the idea was Jean Monet, who believed that the Coal and Steel Industry of Germany and France should be under the supervision of one supranational authority, which would control the production of these resources, and therefore no country would use them for waging war. The purpose of the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community was to prevent new wars and conflicts between France and Germany. In 1951, on the basis of the Treaty of Paris, which was signed by six European countries (Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg), the European Coal and Steel Community was founded (Valeri Modebadze 2015).

The next stage of the European integration process was the establishment of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. The European Economic Community was created on 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1958, after the Treaty of Rome entered into force. After the establishment of the European Economic Community, the common market and united economic space was created, tariffs and customs duties were abolished, which facilitated the deepening of economic, commercial and trade relations between the European countries.

Soon the Rome Agreement was followed by other important agreements. In 1965, a merger treaty was signed which came into force in 1967 on the basis of which three institutions (European Coal and Steel Community, European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community) were merged into a single institutional structure. 1992 is a turning point and a significant moment in the history of the European Union. In 1992, 13 states of the European Economic Community signed a Treaty of Maastricht which entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1993. After signing the Maastricht Treaty, the European Union was formally established. European Union has developed into a single market, which creates the favorable ground for free movement of people, goods, services and capital within the internal market. Nowadays, European countries have very close economic and political links with each other. They became so interdependent that no country is willing to wage war against other European states and carry out expansionist policies. The very important moment in history of the European Union was the introduction of a common currency, which further accelerated the economic integration of the European countries and simplified business procedures between EU Member States. The EU is often viewed as the basis for the European stability and prosperity (Valeri Modebadze 2015).

Despite the above mentioned positive processes, European Union is now facing a number of challenges. Since the 2008 global financial crisis many Member States of the European Union have faced considerable economic, financial and social problems. The economic and refugee crisis has contributed to the rise of radical political parties and euroscepticism.

As a result, anti-European sentiments are widespread among many European nations. Among the most prominent challenges, that the Member States of the European Union are facing, are the following:

- Britain's Exit from the European Union (Brexit);
- Rise of radicalism and Populist parties;
- Migration crisis and a heightened terrorism threat.

## BRITAIN'S EXIT FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION

Perhaps the most serious challenge facing the continental Europe is the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, also known as 'Brexit'. In June 2016 a public referendum was held in the United Kingdom, to decide whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union. 51.9% of Voters favored leaving European Union, whereas 48.1% supported to remain in the EU (Alex Hunt and Brian Wheeler 2019). The leaders of the European Union are especially afraid of 'Domino Effect'. The United Kingdom's exit may accelerate the disintegration process in the European Union, destabilizing not just the region, but the entire world. The EU officials and European governments are determined to make Britain's exit from the European Union as painful as possible for fear of the spread of euroscepticism, populism and extremism across Europe. If populist right-wing leaders in France and other Member States of the EU will come to power, they might accelerate the breakup of the European Union. German government expressed the concern that Brexit may lead to a domino effect, listing Austria, Finland, the Netherlands and Hungary as countries that could follow the UK's lead (John Lichfield 2016).

Brexit could strengthen anti-EU movements and anti-European sentiments in the Member States of the European Union. Former President of the European parliament Martin Schulz fears that Brexit could trigger 'the implosion of the European Union'. As he stated in an interview with the German newspaper 'Frankfurter Allgemeine': "If the British leave the EU, there will be demands for further exit referendums" (Frankfurter Allgemeine 2016). Schulz expressed his concern that in the future, in other Member States of the European Union right-wing and left-wing populists may come to power. Schulz blames the heads of state and government for the loss of confidence in European institutions: "Hardly any of the heads of government really fight to get to the hearts of people" (Frankfurter Allgemeine 2016).

The biggest problem for the Member States of the European Union is how to untangle thousands of ties binding United Kingdom to the 'Old Continent'. In 2018 more than half a million people demonstrated in London against the upcoming withdrawal of Britain from the European Union and demanded from British government to arrange a new referendum. However, Theresa May's government is not willing to hold a new referendum and is determined to carry out its plan despite the massive protests from the British people.

The main disadvantage of Britain's exit from the European Union is that it is slowing the United Kingdom's economic growth. British economy is a highly open economy, which has been closely interwoven with the rest of Europe. Therefore, Brexit will have negative impact on the British economy and in the future may cause the economic crisis in Britain, as well as in Europe.

In case of the disintegration of the European Union, small and economically weak countries would suffer most and would feel the negative consequences of the EU implosion.

President of Austria Alexander Van der Bellen does not rule out that the negotiations on Britain's exit from the EU might fail, which would mean a Brexit without an orderly agreement. According to him such a scenario would probably be the worst scenario for the British people. He expressed his concern at the opening of European Forum Alpbach: "The Brexit decision is comparable to leaving the plane at high altitude" (Thomas Mayer 2018).

## THE RISE OF RADICALISM AND POPULIST PARTIES IN EUROPE

The popularity of extremist parties in Europe is on the rise. The results of recent elections and public opinion polls show that far-right political parties are gaining popularity in many Member States of the European Union. The rise of extremist parties sends tremors across Europe. In 2018 two populist parties - the Five Star Movement and The League formed a coalition government in Italy. We have witnessed the rise of popularity of right wingers and extremists in other European Countries as well, such as France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Sweden.

Populism draws strength from public opposition to multi-culturalism, mass migration processes and the perceived 'decline' of national identity and national culture. People attribute the 'decline' of national identity to the arrival of large numbers of migrants and the rise of multi-culturalism. The refugee crisis and the recent terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany contributed to the strengthening of populist nationalist ideas in the European Union. The 'new right' criticizes European politics, defend the idea of closing the borders and oppose migration processes to Europe. Despite their euroscepticism, most of them have representation in the European Parliament and some right – wing parties have even used European funds in their campaigns (EUROEFE 2016).

We can mention some of the right-wing political parties, the popularity of which is rising over the last decades in Europe:

*Alternative for Germany (AfD)* is a right-wing populist party in the Federal Republic of Germany. Since its foundation in 2013, the AfD has gained more and more popular support. The party is often criticized for right-wing extremist tendencies. It became the thirds largest political party in Germany after the 2017 federal elections and obtained 94 seats in the bundestag. It is a newborn force known in Germany as 'the teachers' party', since it is led by macroeconomists.

This party is against the European integration process and is often described as the Eurosceptic party. Its supporters criticize the single currency and the pan-Europeanism. The party has grown significantly since 2015 and the number of its supporters has increased considerably. It has become, first and foremost, an anti-immigration party, since it rejects Angela Merkel's welcoming policy toward migrants. The AfD often criticizes Angela Merkel's welcoming policy toward refugees, particularly from the Arabic countries. It advocates the deportation of those migrants, who have committed crime in Germany. More than 1.5 million migrants arrived in Germany since 2015 and the AfD supporters believe that this migration process has caused the rise of crime in their homeland. Alternative for Germany (AfD) is in favor of closing the EU borders in order to limit migration processes to Europe (Jefferson Chase 2017).

Another right-wing political party that is famous for its Europhobic discourse is the *National Rally*, until June 2018 known as *the National Front*. It is a right wing political party which was founded in 1972 by Jan - Marie Le Pen. It is an anti-European party which opposes the French membership of the European Union. Current leader of the party – Marine Le Pen supports French withdrawal from the European Union (Frexit). During the French presidential election, which was held in 2017, she promised French people to organize a French referendum on EU membership if she were to win the presidential election. The party members are in favor of a zero tolerance approach to law and order issues and opposes multiculturalism and free migration. France has traditionally been a recipient of immigrants and the migration processes have caused the emergence of multicultural society. Immigrants are perceived as a threat to French society due to a multitude of factors, and the terrorist attacks that the country has suffered in recent years - committed, for the most part, by young French radicalized children or grandchildren of immigrants. Party supporters are known for their xenophobic attitudes and sentiments (El Orden Mundial 2018).

If the above mentioned parties will come to power, then European Union will be in serious trouble and it might cease to exist. The rise of populism and nationalism represents a serious threat to the European Union. The strong man of the populist government of Italy, Matteo Salvini is a hard eurosceptic and believes that: "The current European Union is a walking dead" (Julio Algañaraz 2018). The right-wing populist parties of Europe intend to unite in order to have more 'weight' and influence in the European parliament. The union of all these parties would form a political group that could surpass the 250 MPs in the European parliament. In this way they could create a very powerful force that could have more influence in European politics. Mateo Salvini regularly meets the leaders of the right-wing populist parties in order to unite Europe's anti-migrant and national political movements and create a political union – 'Freedom Front' (Idefe Martin 2019). The 'Freedom Front' will include following right-wing parties: The National Rally, the League, the Belgian Flemish Interest, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and Austria's FPÖ. According to Le Pen the aim of this new movement is to fight against the European Union (New Europe 2018).

## MIGRATION CRISIS AND A HEIGHTENED TERRORISM THREAT

In 2015 and 2016, the European Union (EU) has accepted a large number of refugees from the Middle East & Africa and as a result experienced an unprecedented migration crisis. This refugee crisis is the largest humanitarian and migratory crisis in Europe after the Second World War. In an interview with the German newspaper 'Die Welt', the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev made it clear that this migration crisis is the most serious challenge that the 'old continent' is facing nowadays.

Anti-immigration sentiments are rising across Europe. Italy has chosen the first populist government in Western Europe. In all countries, anti-immigrant movements are gaining popularity, and Merkel's position seems very fragile. American president, Donald Trump, added fuel to the fire during the US presidential campaign, when he sharply criticized Merkel's decision to keep open Germany's borders to Syrian refugees and called it an 'insane' decision. Over the last years Germany has accepted the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers. According to the German newspaper 'Suddeutsche Zeitung' the immigration issue had a negative effect on Merkel's popularity and almost cost her the job. The chancellor affirms that she does not regret the decision she took on 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, for humanitarian reasons, but despite this, has decided to tighten immigration policy in recent years. The issue of immigration remains the biggest challenge in Europe (El Tiempo 2019).

Many terrorists entered Europe which was disguised as refugees or migrants. According to one study more than half of the terrorist attacks carried out in Germany from 2014 to 2016 were committed or planned by refugees. Since Germany has accepted refugees from Syria and Middle East, it has been a constant target of terrorism. A study published by the think tank 'Heritage Foundation' shows that the attacks committed by foreign militants has increased exponentially in 2016, at the height of the migration crisis. The planned attacks by the refugees hit nine different European countries, although they directed their anger mainly towards Germany (12 of the 22 plots) (La Gaceta 2017).

Before the arrival of refugees from the Middle East, Germany was not a principal target of jihadists and militants. The arrival of refugees gave rise to many social problems: crime rates and violence has increased drastically in many German cities and towns, Germany experienced unprecedented rise of terrorist attacks. In 2016, 60% of all attacks perpetrated in Germany were carried out or planned by foreign militants who had fought or trained in Syria. (La Gaceta 2017).

Another serious challenge that the European countries are facing is how to integrate such a large number of refugees into European societies. The vast majority of refugees are not familiar with the European culture and don't speak the European languages. Their integration into European societies will be very time-consuming and complicated process. Many European politicians question whether Europe can afford to shelter such a huge number of refugees.



Migration crisis led to the radicalization of European society. The refugee crisis and the attacks perpetrated by armed extremists in Belgium, France and Germany deepened the feeling of xenophobia. These feelings were later manifested in attacks against migrants and in a support for populist parties that oppose immigration in the Member States of the EU.

## CONCLUSION

The European Union is facing a number of challenges that threatens its existence and might put an end to the European integration process. From the above mentioned challenges perhaps the most serious threat is Brexit that could trigger the domino effect and may accelerate the disintegration process in the European Union. If the United Kingdom decides to leave, this might encourage other countries to exit from the European Union. Brexit could strengthen anti-European and populist movements in the European Union.

The number of right-wing political parties, that are famous for their Europhobic discourse, are growing little by little. Many leaders of these populist movements and right – wing parties are against the European integration process and support the withdrawal of their homelands from EU. If they will come to power, then European Union will be in serious trouble and it might cease to exist. Refugee crisis and migration processes from the Middle East and Africa also strengthen anti-European sentiments and provide the fertile ground for the rise of populism and radicalism. The migration crisis and terrorism created favorable conditions for the strengthening of populist movements and extremist political parties in European Union. 

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