EUROPE 31.01.2020 | Christos Katsioulis

What Megxit can teach us about Brexit

Britain has formally left the EU — and nobody knows what will come next. But perhaps Megxit can give us an idea

Read this article in German.

Theresa May will probably go down in history for coining 'Brexit means Brexit', this almost Dadaistic phrase. It hasn't gotten much clearer since then, though Boris Johnson won the election with 'Get Brexit Done'. Nobody knows what will happen after 31 January. For the Leave camp, it's obvious that everything will get better.

Therefore, if we truly wants to understand Brexit, we have to take a wider perspective. And, as always, if we are looking for inspiration, guidance, and levelheadedness in the (still) United Kingdom, we end up at the royal family. Entire strategies are sometimes derived from the Queen's most offhanded remarks or even her choice of hat. But now we need to look two generations further. And here we see that clues as to Brexit's future direction come, of all people, from the royal family's '*enfant couple*', Prince Harry and the Duchess of Sussex.

The young couple's departure from the royal family, which the British tabloids immediately jazzed up into 'Megxit', provides a neat blueprint for what Boris Johnson is now planning to do with his country. The UK is supposed to leave the EU, but will remain a central part of Europe, meaning less work, more attention and maybe more money.

Boris Johnson, the Prince Harry of Europe

The British tabloids took careful note that the duties of the royal family were too heavy a burden on the narrow shoulders of new parents Harry and Meghan. But of course this isn't just a problem of workload or – read through the Brexit lense – the need to follow strict EU rules.

In the age of the attention economy, the mere fact that a prince, adrift

among the wider field of heirs to the throne, rebels against his grandmother scores big popularity points for the couple. The number of followers of Meghan's Instagram account quickly rose to over eleven million. It was similar for the British after the referendum. Political London has seldom been the centre of global attention, but the viewer ratings of the debates in the venerable Westminster Parliament reached unprecedented heights and Speaker John Bercow became a global cult figure.

At heart, Boris Johnson wants to be nothing less than the Prince Harry of Europe.

Of course, it helped that the ceremonies in Parliament sometimes looked as if they had been taken from an elaborately produced Netflix series about the Middle Ages. This phase of high-level political theatre went hand in hand with an almost total political stagnation. The cathartic moment came with the elections in December 2019, when the tension dissolved in a surprisingly clear election victory for Boris Johnson that abruptly brought Brexit back into motion. But the Brexit tension now dropped one more time because the departure on 31 January is a quiet one. There will be a few parties from enthusiastic Brexiteers, but no tolling of Big Ben or church bells ringing. Basically, for now Brexit is nothing more than hanging flags and singing in the European Parliament.

At heart, Boris Johnson wants to be nothing less than the Prince Harry of Europe. Like the royal offspring, he comes from aristocratic roots and shows a penchant for blunders. They may have even more things in common. All he needs to do now, for example, is convince the European 'Queen' and her family to grant him freedom without taking away too many of his privileges. Of course, I mean Ursula von der Leyen and the 27 heads of state and government of the EU. The only question that remains is, what does he actually want? To find the answer, it helps to read up on Buckingham Palace in the tabloid press. The rule of thumb goes like this: 'Get more with less'.

Look to Canada

On 31 January, the UK formally left the EU, but nothing else will change for eleven months. During this time, Johnson must succeed in building a beneficial relationship with Brussels. The direction and structure is largely open; it's only clear that it should lead to freedom and

independence. Geographially, we can again see the overlap with the 'royal rebels' – namely, Canada.

The place where Harry and Meghan want to build their future – freed from the duties of the Royal Family – is a kind of paradise for Brexiteers. Canada's free trade agreement with the EU (CETA) seems like a blueprint for their own relationship with Brussels. We will have to see how realistic and suitable that really is. But it will become apparent in the forthcoming negotiations on the EU's relations with the new third country that will emerge.

Instead of continuing to be merely part of the EU, the island could build a 'golden' bridge out of the Union.

So far, core questions still remain completely unresolved: Which EU standards will Great Britain continue to accept? Are there efforts in London to become a 'Singapore on the Thames', with low regulatory hurdles, attractive tax models and the possibility of operating well below EU standards? What access to the internal market will goods from the island have and how will the significantly bigger range of services be treated?

Royal Europe!

So far, Prince Johnson has largely been reluctant to answer all these questions. Therefore, yet again we need to refer to the example of Megxit. In the family drama of the prince, his unfortunate spouse and the dutiful grandmother, it's often overlooked that the young couple are already quietly building their future. They have had the 'Royal Sussex' brand protected as a trade mark; and one may assume that this will serve as a vehicle allowing them to avoid lowering their living standards, even in the absence of royal subsidies.

Maybe that's Britain's future? Instead of continuing to be merely part of the EU, the island could build a 'golden' bridge out of the Union. 'Royal Europe' would be an island-sized theme park in which the role of the Royal Family can finally translate their worldwide impact into hard cash. A country that is no longer an EU member but Europe with a golden rim might well be an attractive venue for many of the world's wealthy.

Boris Johnson's past is right in keeping with some of the ideas in circulation in this regard. His record as Mayor of London offers three key points of reference: he has significantly advanced the city towards citizen-friendly and climate-friendly transport; he has brought many rich people with rather dubious fortunes to London; and his grandiose investment

projects have not even been built on sand, but left hanging in air. Welcome to Royal Europe – a cycling paradise open to anyone who can afford it!



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