

English are the exception — Europeans dig the EU

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Published on 11/7/2016 in Politico.

In the wake of the Leave campaign's shocking win in the U.K.'s In/Out referendum, commentators have painstakingly defended Britain's rampant Euroskepticism as part of a larger trend.

They point to the wave of discontent sweeping through the Union, from Sweden and Denmark in the north, to France, the Netherlands and Austria in the center, and Italy in the south. Influential pro-European pundits have now joined starkly anti-EU politicians such as Nigel Farage in arguing the EU's disintegration is now irreversible. Today's dominant view, it seems, is that most Europeans do not want to be ruled by Brussels.

This pessimistic diagnosis is inaccurate. Europeans are angry about how the EU has handled the asymmetric effects of globalization, but **the majority do not believe that leaving the Union is the answer**. The fact is that Britain — or more concretely, England — is an outlier in the EU in that respect.

The English, especially those forming “Little England,” have always been uncomfortable in the EU. The eurozone crisis only reinforced this feeling. **English exceptionalism** has many sources: Westminster's democratic tradition; its imperial past; and its special relationship with the U.S.

English is the world's lingua franca, and the City of London its most prominent global financial center. Britain is extremely proud of its seat in the U.N. Security Council and its nuclear weapons. All this makes a large majority of English believe they are *primus inter pares* in the EU club.

This sentiment is exceptional. Of course, other European nations are proud too, and believe they are better than their neighbors to some degree. The Dutch have always punched above their weight in international affairs. The Nordic countries are right to brag about their welfare systems, the Mediterraneans about their lifestyle and their food, and the Central and East Europeans about their work ethic and resistance to Soviet rule. And what can one say about the boundless pride of the French? It certainly shares many of the features of English hubris.

Nonetheless, these countries have neither the capacity nor the desire to go it alone. **The era of empires is long forgotten**. For continental Europeans, especially those in the South, the EU remains a pillar of democratic stability. One should also not forget that Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European countries are too small, too close to Russia and too keen to be close to Germany to strike out on their own.

The same is true for France. Ever since the German invasion in World War II, the French have understood that tight cooperation with their eastern neighbor — even at the cost of ceding sovereignty — is essential to lasting peace on the Continent. The European Union has based itself on the same logic. Criticizing the Germans might be a national sport to the French, but they value Franco-Germanic cooperation like a national treasure.

The case of the Netherlands offers the closest parallel to Britain's change of heart when it comes to the EU. **Dutch Euroskepticism** has grown in tandem with EU enlargement. Previously, this small country was part of the inner circle of EU decision-making. Over the past decade, the Dutch were faced with the fact that their country is just one of many in the EU club. The existential crisis this triggered was further stoked by nationalism and xenophobia.

England came to a similar conclusion. The global financial crisis and the consequent bankruptcy of Lloyds Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland was the first blow to English pride. The second — and far more potent — blow came in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis.

This might sound counterintuitive. **The English have felt considerable *schadenfreude* over eurozone members' suffering.** Many in England, especially in the City, felt pride in the U.K.'s sovereign decision not to join the single currency. The response from London was: "We told you this was a bad idea, now deal with it."

But the fact is that the eurozone crisis, and the way it was managed, displaced the U.K. to the margins of the Union. And this did not go unnoticed. The evidence of **German control** over the Union dealt a huge blow to the English psyche. In part, this explains why the Leave campaign's slogan, "Take back control," had such a powerful effect. England should not be made to suffer from German Chancellor Angela Merkel's poor decisions on refugee policy, they argued. The solution was simple: Let's get out.

If they don't openly reject German dominance in the EU, the English still have serious reservations about it. Their belief that the rest of Europe feels the same way is a serious miscalculation.

Despite Anglo-Saxon commentators insisting the euro is a disaster and should be dismantled, an overwhelming majority, both in northern and southern parts of the eurozone, wants to keep the single currency. Why? Some say fear of the unknown has kept countries like Greece, Italy or Spain from quitting the euro. In reality, the situation is complex, and has more to do with the benefits of belonging to a stable, democratic and wealthy club whose bureaucrats are less corrupt than local politicians.

Those who think Brexit is the start of the EU's unraveling should think twice. Why is it that despite the euro's apparent failure, **the eurozone has added three new members and not lost a single one** over the past five years? If the EU is such a disaster, why is it that Scotland is so keen to stay in? What does it say that England's younger and best-educated generation want to stay in the EU?

Claims the EU is on the verge of disintegrating are overblown. Brexit, if it happens at all, is an exception to the rule. Yes, the EU needs to be reformed. But it is here to stay.