

# Regardless of Brexit, No Country is an Island

## A Report from the 2016 Wilton Park British-German Forum

Britain's decision to leave the European Union has already had an impact: In Britain, there is a new prime minister, the Labour Party has fallen into disarray, and the economy has taken a first hit. In the rest of Europe, the likes of France's Marine Le Pen are dreaming of 'Frexit', and others are wondering whether it's more or less integration that will rescue the Union.

The implications of Brexit were also the subject of the 2016 British German Forum at Wilton Park. The annual Forum was first established by then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and brings together young British and German professionals to discuss the big issues of the day within the context of the relationship between the two countries. Just two weeks after the referendum, I joined a group of 40 other participants — working for governments and NGOs, in academia and the media, and in business — to talk about Brexit and its implications for Britain and Germany.

As an MStrat graduate and analyst of Middle East politics and security, I approached the Forum and its overarching question from a foreign, defence and security policy perspective. As our countries are struggling to deal with major crises, such as instability in the Middle East, the threat from Daesh, the migrant crisis, or Russia's challenges to European regional order, Brexit therefore initially looked to me like an unwelcome and unnecessary distraction. However, the idea — or rather, hope — that Britain's withdrawal from the EU can be negotiated amicably and swiftly so that we can all return to the 'real' issues is unrealistic. Instead, the process is sure to consume precious attention and resources for years to come, adding yet more moving parts to our already extremely uncertain and complex environment.

Taking a linear, sequential approach must not be the answer. Emphasised by almost all speakers during the Forum was the fact that politicians and civil servants in London and Brussels will have to solve the conundrum between continued British access to the single market and the key Leave-campaign demand for restrictions to the EU's principle of free movement. Meanwhile, Germany clearly has an interest in keeping the rest of the EU together, all while containing further economic crises of its members. But at the same time, Britain and Germany have to work together with the rest of Europe to tackle the many other challenges facing our continent and the wider world that far exceed the capabilities of individual nation states.

However, for me, the Forum made clear that Brexit has also revealed another, internal threat to our security in Britain, Germany and Europe. Contrary to much of the pre- and post-referendum debate, which has focused on the growth of 'home grown' violent extremism — be it of the sort linked to Daesh, or to the far-right — this threat does not primarily come from the fringes of our societies, but from the middles. It is not posed by the individual Britons who voted to leave the EU, or the Germans, French and others who would do the same if given the chance. Instead, it is expressed in sentiments that can appear frustratingly abstract from a policy-maker's perspective: a rejection of establishment politics, a loss of trust in national and international government institutions, a feeling that we need to take back control in a globalising and ever-more uncertain world.

Brexit has to be a wake-up call across the continent. In Britain, Leave-voters may have turned out against the much caricatured 'faceless Eurocrats' and 'undemocratic Brussels machinery', but they also rejected the arguments of the majority of their own, only recently elected politicians. In this regard, upcoming elections in several other European countries are likely to bring similar results. It is this disconnect between the policy-making establishment and large segments of the wider population that populists and extremists from the fringes can exploit and draw power and

confidence from. The results are deepening divisions within and between our own societies at a time when we need to learn from each other and cooperate closer than ever. This is essential in order to protect ourselves — whether that's through implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change, dealing with threats in the cyber environment, or defending ourselves against Daesh.

In January 2014 Joachim Gauck, Germany's President, told the Munich Security Conference that "we would be deceiving ourselves if we were to believe that Germany was an island and thus protected from the vicissitudes of our age." This is true for Germany, but also for Britain — it may be an island, but even the Channel cannot protect from terrorism, climate change, or a fracturing national, regional and global order. In the coming months and years, we in Britain and the rest of Europe have to negotiate Brexit, all while working together to deal with an ever-increasing set of international security challenges, including the internal societal divisions that are at the heart of how we see and approach the world. Relations between Britain and Germany — my two home countries — will undoubtedly be crucial in making this a success.