

## 2020, when all was still well

***By Ferry Biedermann, freelance journalist working both in the UK and in Europe. He has contributed to the Financial Times, CNBC, the Washington Post, Trouw newspaper in the Netherlands and many others. He is also a former correspondent in the Middle East for the FT and Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant.***

After almost a year of Covid, the end of the Brexit transition period at the stroke of midnight on the 31st of December, is almost coming as an afterthought. While still a dog's Brexit, it has also become the dessert that nobody has left room for. Although it might still in the long run become that one "wafer-thin" after dinner mint too many that explodes the body politic of liberal democracy.

While we're on metaphors and similes, and apologies to anyone who has ever had a real such injury, to Europeans the whole drawn out process can only feel like the continued pain in a phantom limb: We thought we had lost it, but it's still hurting. There's an increasing desire on the continent to 'get Brexit done', to rip off the bandage and adapt to the new normal.

Evidence for that is not just the repetitive French call to fellow Europeans to stand firm, nor the studied German indifference, laced with a measure of solicitousness towards poor Britain. It's also the €5 billion set aside to soften the blow from Brexit for affected sectors in the recently approved EU-budget. And the EU offer of an Extension in All but Name, covering trade and traffic. The latter does not mean that the EU is desperate, nor is it a ploy for continued control, it simply comes from a wish to avoid more chaos and madness after what 2020 had on offer.

Several European media commentaries have highlighted the calm, almost stately, conduct of the negotiations on the EU side – and obviously contrast this with the operatic, high-hysterical chest-thumping gunboat diplomacy coming from across the Channel. That is unfair. The EU is huge and diverse, with a multitude of concerns to manage and interests to balance, and thus not easily distracted. While the UK is, let's stick with similes, more like a toddler finding its feet after having wrenched itself loose from mommy's reassuring grip, and hence emitting high-pitched squeals.

Yes, the gunboats. What was going on there? Cod war nostalgia? Europe may shudder at the perceived nationalism and xenophobia of parts of the British press but it certainly will miss its way with words, cod war being one of the doozies of the 1950's. Or was it part of an old script that some over-eager Brexiteers failed to feed to the shredder after their ally in Washington DC lost the election?

But onto the subjects of war and conflict, of which I know a thing or two from my time in the Middle East. Actually, I know one thing only: don't. Past that, everything becomes marginal. Of course the Middle East conflicts, for example the Israeli-Palestinian one, cannot be compared to what's happening between the EU and UK. Just take the glaring power imbalance in the first case, while here..., oh, never mind.

Anyway, by throwing around words such as sovereignty and control and then calling on the navy, Britain all by itself manages to represent two sides of a conflict, playing both the underdog and the bully. Hard-line Brexiters have made achieving a post-transition trade deal into an act of betrayal that will perpetuate their country's fealty to a faraway imperial centre, or rather an Eye of Sauron. They style themselves as the last remaining resistance against an overbearing occupying power, as Asterix in Roman Gaul.

That is one side of what's happening, the performative myth-making side of things. The other is more prosaic and deals with the usual combination of muck and lucre, pies that can be divvied up as well as genuine national interests that can be soberly negotiated.

Things do tend to become sticky when the former, performative and myth-making side of things intrudes on the latter, interest driven area. Then all of a sudden every rule, rather than underpinning mutual agreement, becomes a shackle. And every fish becomes an existential issue, rather than a surrealist one, which we all know it should be.

Brexiters will counter that hordes from the continent and beyond flooding the UK is an actual existential threat, as is loss of sovereignty, whatever that means. What this has to do with the current negotiations, I don't know. Brexit has happened, the free movement of people will stop. The UK is negotiating its own deal, so

it's sovereign, if that's what the word was taken to mean. So, what's going on?

Maybe there is a need for a cathartic hard Brexit spectacle, as I've wondered before. Or it's just that both sides are too worried that they'll be seen as suckers. The EU, after all, wants to avoid being seen making it too easy for the UK: There has to be a difference between in and out. The UK government might feel that, whatever it brings home, there will be a substantial part of its electorate that will feel that they could have reached a better deal, one that would not have reduced the country to penury, for example.

It's fitting in a way that 2020 probably won't bring a solution to this mess, deal or no deal. This will spill into 2021 and beyond, just like Covid, for which lockdowns are already in place into the new year. Let's just hope that we're not going to look back at some point at the past year and wax nostalgically: that was before it all really went bad.