

Election cycles hit EU-UK relations

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Electoral politics have moved once again centre stage in Europe over the past month, with Labour and Conservative party conferences in the UK and a historic election in Germany. France too is preparing for elections next year and elsewhere electoral calculations are also heavily shaping the agenda for the next couple of years. None of this promises to ease post-Brexit relations between the EU and the UK.

The post-2019 electoral lull in the UK, albeit punctuated by by-elections, is well and truly over and both main parties are readying for new polls, even if they can still be three years off. The Conservatives took a mixed approach at conference: aggressively challenging the EU, as David Frost did over the Northern Ireland protocol, and soft-peddalling the disruptions caused by Brexit, as Boris Johnson did vis-à-vis the supply chain squeeze.

The combination did not go down well among some segments of the business community and the public, with Keir Starmer's speech to the Labour conference being higher rated generally. Yes, the Tories are appealing to their base and can be expected to hew closely to their strategy in 2019, when they picked up a slew of Leave-voting Labour seats. For now, there's no reason to ditch that winning formula. Labour has certainly changed since 2019 but its current attempt to burry its head in the sand over Brexit may yet cost it dearly in its shifting heartlands.

With quite a few aggressively xenophobic and jingoist British media outlets yapping at their heels, maybe UK politicians could never have been expected to take a sober look at Brexit. Northern Ireland is a case in point, with the DUP taking a hard line position on the protocol, despite the country suffering less from some shortages than the rest of the UK thanks to its continued ease of access to the EU single market. EU-UK relations are clearly hostage to domestic Loyalist politics, as they have been to UK-wide reactionary politics all along.

The Europeans may be forgiven to conclude that nothing much is to be gained from constructive engagement at the present moment. The French have always been more demanding of the UK than some in the whole Brexit process. They have every reason, from fisheries to the Aukus defence pact with the US and Australia, to double down on their sceptical stance towards the UK. Next year's presidential elections mean that Emanuel Macron cannot afford to look weak on any of these issues. After Francois Hollande's one-term Monsieur Normal presidency he has once more attempted to create an Olympian aura around the person in the Elysée. If nothing else, that alone would be reason enough for him to maintain a firm line towards a mocking British government and Prime Minister.

Boris Johnson's statements both on Aukus and the Brexit-related shortages and labour market problems, have only reinforced the impression in Europe, and certainly in Paris, that he is not a serious person. Nor is he trusted, at all. Some diplomats and analysts are desperately trying to discover pinpricks of light, for example by pointing at the excellent security cooperation that's still ongoing. That's one area that the French still very much want the UK on board, it is argued. While that may be true, France followed its own lead in

Afghanistan, and did much better than the UK, it appears, in managing its evacuation. Also, the French might get a pre-WWII déjà vu, with a wavering UK turning to a remote and reluctant American ally while neglecting the balance on the continent.

French resentment has until now been partly kept in check by Germany's willingness to let bygones be bygones and move on from Brexit. Angela Merkel was a vocal opponent of the UK's exit from the

EU and Germany has placed itself solidly behind the EU negotiators in the process but politically, Germany has displayed a desire not to let things come to a head. From a business angle too, the German position has made sense, because not only the UK has been disrupted by Brexit, so have parts of the EU. Particularly the more fiscally conservative and business-leaning governments in the EU, e.g. the Netherlands, have appreciated the German position.

Even a slight change of direction in Germany could affect the negotiating space between the EU and the UK, let alone the political jousting that is inevitably part of such talks. With Merkel stepping down after 14 years, the Germans voted mostly for continuity, giving the left-leaning junior coalition partner SPD a slight edge. If the party succeeds in forming a government, it will very likely be restrained by either the post-Merkel CDU/CSU or by the business-friendly FDP. Still, its candidate for chancellor, current Finance minister Olaf Scholz, will have to start distinguishing himself from what came before, even if ever so slightly. If the Greens also enter the coalition, which is very possible at the moment, they might double down on issues such as environmental standards and the impact of trade deals.

Patience with the UK has been wearing thin in the EU for a while now, regardless of the political affiliations of the countries' leaders. This can be seen from the way in which the Dutch immediately distanced themselves from Johnson's claims that Prime Minister Rutte was going to mediate on the Northern Ireland protocol. No EU member state will circumvent or undermine Brussels at this stage, that's a British pipedream. The ranks were closed anyway, electoral movements in the EU do not make this front more united but it does make it even pricklier.