Brexit, what we lost in the fire

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The five-year anniversary of the 2016 Brexit referendum naturally leads to many assessments of what it has meant for both the UK and the EU, thus far. It's hard though to assess the damage while the firestorm is still raging. Also, the losses caused by Brexit feel almost intangible. As a fervently anglophile European, someone whose cultural, if not always political and social, lodestar was located to the west of the continent, it's deeply disturbing that the UK has cut itself off from us to such a degree. It feels unnatural and disconcerting.

I've lived and studied in the UK at several points in my life, which was possible, or at least made easier, because it was part of the EU. This might no longer be an option, simply because as a freelance journalist I'll probably never be able to prove that I'm making the amount of money required. I shall not lose sleep over it but my world has shrunk a little bit and that's not a good feeling.

What doesn't sit well either is an ominous sense of abandonment, that the UK is turning its back on Europe at a time when its involvement is needed more than ever since the end of the Cold War. Politically and socially, I've not always admired the British, I witnessed the Thatcher years and the poll tax riots from up close, enough said. But one towering political fact always overshadowed all the others: In the end, and however self-interested, Great Britain and its Commonwealth stood up to fascism and Nazism on the continent and held out until the Americans finally jumped in. Most European countries apart from the UK, and maybe Denmark, are tainted by WWII and degrees of collaboration and even participation in the Holocaust.

Sure, there has always been British nationalism and jingoism but there was also something else, a propensity eventually to do the right thing where that was not the case in other countries. I understand that many people around the world might disagree with this assessment, for example the Irish, the descendants of enslaved people and the colonized, but for a European whose parents in all likelihood would not have survived an even longer German occupation, I'm still grateful.

The question, though, is whether this UK of the year 2021 is the same as that UK, back then. Thankfully not, in many regards, especially relating to the much greater inequality, economic, political, and in terms of race, gender and class, that was prevalent in the middle of the last century. But would the Britain of today still stand up to fascism at home and abroad to the same degree it did then?

It's a particularly poignant question from a European perspective. Because, who are the new fascists and dictators? Do we only need to be vigilant about the Putins and Erdogans on our borders, and the Xis farther afield? Or does the main threat stem from within the EU where countries such as Hungary and Poland have set out on an illiberal path? Or, how about the countless intolerant, right wing movements and parties that are mounting challenges with varying degrees of success in Western European countries? And how democratic will that former 'arsenal of democracy', the US, remain, and for how long?

Part of many Europeans' shock at the Brexit referendum and its aftermath five years ago was the outpouring of the kind of naked nationalism and right-wing extremism that we had not expected

from the UK. At least, we had not expected it to triumph. Personally, I had held on to a quiet but relatively confident expectation that the British would once again, in the end, do the right thing. They clearly didn't, which means that a radical re-adjustment needs to take place in both world views and long-term strategic orientation for the rest of Europe.

Believe me, I understand some of the British reluctance to be part of that club of petty, squabbling, variously corrupt or inept, self-important, unrealistic, selfish, cowardly, hypocritical and so on countries that form the EU. But the UK itself is not without blemish on each of these scores either. The mistake that the UK has made, and I say this about the country, its government and its institutions, including large parts of the media, is that it thinks it will do better on its own, and not necessarily financially better but mainly better as a nation. That it will feel freer, less beholden to what is supposed to be a faceless internationalist bureaucracy, less encumbered by rules and regulations that strangle national dynamism and individual initiative.

This is a gross misconception. The European mechanisms, including the much-maligned European Court of Justice, have in the main helped break open closed shops, monopolies, and restrictive practices, whether we talk about banks, telecom companies, transport etc. They have helped uphold or establish individual rights against overweening local and national authorities. And, not least in the heavily London-centric UK, they have helped fund regions that would otherwise have been left behind even more. These are but a few of the ways in which Europe has helped the UK to be better.

It's a cliché by now to say that the international rules-based order is under attack, from the likes of Putin, Erdogan, Xi and Orban. The advent of Joe Biden in the US can also easily be but a mere blip in its inexorable descent into paranoid power politics and isolationism. The UK should stand on the other side of this, but it is at the very least wavering. Is the country really better for having its Prime Minister receive Hungary's Orban as one his first post-Brexit guests in Downing Street?

The EU will have to navigate a world in which it has one more unstable, unreliable partner to worry about. It can certainly no longer count on the UK to do the right thing, which is illustrated by the Johnson government threatening to ignore the Northern Ireland protocol that it itself insisted on. Some European observers offset this with the freedom the EU has gained from frequent British obstructionism and exclusivism. I disagree. Apart from it being far preferable to have the UK inside the EU and its institutions than outside it, something much larger has been lost.