Europe in 2023: Divided While Closer

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Policy areas that are coming to dominate debates across Europe include migration and EU enlargement. Thankfully, the UK and EU have seemingly been enjoying a constructive renewal of their post-Brexit relationship. While relations between both unions are moving in the right direction, the UK now finds itself navigating its place alongside a different EU, one which faces multiples crises, namely migration and enlargement. Should UK politicians wish to keep up the positive momentum, they would do well to understand the EU's internal divisions over these issues, and how the repercussions may come to be felt in the UK long-term.

Political divisions over mass migration in Europe have only become more prominent since 2015, when the EU, alongside Switzerland and Norway, received over 1.3 million migrants and refugees (Pew Research Center, 2016). This one year alone not only accounted for one-tenth of all asylum applications since 1985, but polling conducted in 2016 indicated most Europeans were greatly dissatisfied with the way the EU handled this surge (Pew Research Center, 2016). For countries in southern Europe surveyed, disapproval tended to be some of the highest, with 94% of Greeks, 77% of Italians, and 75% of Spaniards sharing this sentiment (Pew Research Center, 2016). Seven years onward, the EU's policymakers have not only failed to find solutions that respect their democratic mandates while maintaining humanitarian principles, but they are increasingly at odds with one another to the detriment of the EU's stability. Nothing has embodied the EU's continual inability to act decisively on migration better than the arrival of 7,000 migrants to Lampedusa, Italy, a number equal to that of the entire island's population, just last month. (Le Monde, 2023).

Soon thereafter, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited the small island to present a united front in addressing the migration issue. The truth, however, is that while gestures such as their visit might enjoy the veneer of consensus, this finish is thin and prone to cracks. During the same month, leaders of nine southern European EU member-states, the "EU-Med9," met in Malta to discuss migration (Arena, 2023). Due to the nature of the summit, Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela noted that relations between the EU and its southern European, particularly Mediterranean member-states needed "a reset" (Arena, 2023). To this end, one may begin to reasonably wonder where the post-Brexit UK fits into all this.

For one, migration is a titanic political concern for citizens, and by extension their elected representatives, on both sides of the English Channel. Should politicians in the UK wish to address similar migration concerns in their own country by continuing to capitalize on improved goodwill with the EU, understanding the different political dynamics at play within the EU, different to those the UK experienced as a member-state, is indispensable. Divisions between northern and southern European EU member-states spilled over into the meeting of the European Political Community earlier this month. This forum, created only last year with the intent to act as a vehicle for dialogue between both EU and non-EU European countries on common challenges, saw the post-Brexit UK and Italy force migration onto the agenda. Following their discussions on migration, and both keenly aware of the political heft the migration issue wields for both their respective citizens, Meloni and Sunak released a jointly-authored article in the newspapers *Corriere della Sera* and *The Times* (Italian Government, 2023). Within the text of their article, Meloni and Sunak stated that their insistence on addressing the migration issue has successfully shifted the debate Europe-wide, that they were proud their countries were leading on this subject, and that Italy and the UK were "two of the closest friends in Europe today" (Italian Government, 2023).

Importantly for the post-Brexit UK, political fragmentation within the EU also encompasses recent efforts to procure EU structural reforms with the aim of enlargement. Policy proposals were introduced by experts in a Franco-German effort to achieve a bloc capable of taking in new member-states at varying degrees of integration (Hanke Vela and Sorgi, 2023). Evidenced by the contents of the report, the experts proposed an EU whereby the bloc's current member-states, candidate states, and those outside the EU like the UK, would be structured around a series of inner and outer circle (Hanke Vela and Sorgi, 2023). The first circle would be EU member-states that are ethe most integrated, and each subsequent circle would result in the constituent member-states being less tied to European integration (Hanke Vela and Sorgi, 2023). The notion of enlargement, however, has also been greeted with a lack of consensus among political actors inside the bloc, with disagreement even arising between different EU bodies.

Notably, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, expressed his opinion that the EU must be prepared for taking in new members, such as Moldova and Ukraine, by 2030 (Sanchez Alonso, 2023). This view was then contradicted by European Commission, which is responsible for determining the progress made by candidate countries towards membership (Sanchez Alonso, 2023). From the Commission's view, a 2030 enlargement target would undermine the process for joining the bloc, and that it would assume all countries attempting to join the EU would be at similar stages (Sanchez Alonso, 2023). Additionally, politicians like Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte have taken issue with the 2030 timeline for EU enlargement.

Like the migration issue, the UK may or may not wish to join a reformed EU if polling on Brexit is anything to go by. With both Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak not wishing to open the political wounds of Brexit, this may be a tough sell even to those individuals who voted Remain. Moreover, and somewhat ironically, should lawmakers in Westminster ultimately bring the UK back into the EU's orbit, ongoing sociopolitical challenges that have yet to be fully addressed across member-states are likely to yield an EU in the coming years that is more conservative and Eurosceptic. If ant point is to be drawn from this piece, it is that UK politicians, in trying to confront challenges domestically both related and non-related to the EU, would be prudent in comprehending exactly who the actors are going to be in shaping the EU's direction internally and externally depending on the policy area.

I would also like to thank my Norwegian friend with whom I studied European politics at the University of Edinburgh. He, too, shares my deep affinity for European politics and helped me organise my thoughts for this post.

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