

*El salto 19-10*

## **The End is Nigh**

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By mid-October, at the time of writing, there was no final decision yet. Still, it looked more likely than ever that the days of the UK as an EU member state are counted. Regardless of what the hopelessly divided British Parliament might yet come up with – and it is unlikely that this will in any way be constructive – the EU seems determined to put an end to the drama, or better: the travesty, and move on. The French have long wanted the British out, making France the EU's only nuclear power and permanent member on the UN Security Council and rendering the French dream to turn the EU into an extension of the French state more realistic. Germany had wanted Britain to remain, in order not to be left alone with France, but was unwilling to offer it concessions that other countries might subsequently also demand. So if the UK insisted on getting out – to which Germany's open borders of 2015 may have contributed – the exit should be as painful as possible, with tough conditions hopefully making the British reconsider and remain. On the other hand, German industry was always afraid of a "hard", no-deal Brexit, and in any case wants friendly relations, in particular a liberal trade agreement, after a British departure. So the Merkel government agreed to a substantially revised exit treaty. Add to this that the Irish, for their part, may see in the revised treaty a possibility for undoing one of the last remnants of British colonialism, opening a path toward the eventual reunification of the "six counties" of Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic.

Regardless of whether the British will change their mind and resolve to remain after all, there now seems to be a solid majority in the EU that wants them out, the sooner the better. Continental-European integrationists want urgently to resume integration, the

French in particular aiming at a French-led European third force in global politics, on equidistance to China and the United States. To them, if another British referendum reversed the old one, this would appear a very mixed blessing. The vote would in any case be narrow, Britain would remain deeply divided over “Europe”, and any British government would have to take the sentiments of the first-time winners and second-time losers into account. This would likely make British policy in the EU as obstructionist as under Thatcher – a highly unwelcome prospect also from a German perspective. More immediately, imagine that a re-turning-remaining UK would claim its seat on the European Commission, with a portfolio appropriate for one of the biggest economies and the most highly armed countries not just in Europe. The Commission, assembled through extremely complex international bargaining (and even with the UK not participating the issue is still far from settled almost half a year after the European Parliament election), would have to be reshuffled, with member countries having to agree to an almost lost son being entrusted with major responsibilities in a union that half of its citizens despise.

Even without the UK, there are more than enough problems facing the European Union as it stands. Take for example the Franco-German tensions over the French Commissioner after the European Parliament rejected Macron’s candidate, Sylvie Goulard. A leading conspirator was the German former *Spitzenkandidat* of the European People’s Party, Manfred Weber, seeking revenge for having been single-handedly discarded by Macron as Commission President in favor of another German, von der Leyen. Note that Goulard was supposed to be a central figure in Macron’s pursuit of a European army under French leadership. Although Weber belongs to Merkel’s party family, Merkel turned out unable to discipline him; for this she may have to pay heavily to repair relations with France and help Macron restore his domestic standing as Europe’s superstatesman. Moreover, Merkel’s succes-

sor, whoever it will be, will have to be a lot more German than Merkel, who is not seeking reelection in 2021. Other conflicts concern various centrifugal forces, in Poland where the nationalist government overwhelmingly won the latest election, despite continuous attempts by Brussels to discredit it with its voters, and in Catalonia where Spain will for long be occupied with defending its integrity as a multinational nation-state. There also is the Balkans where France, obviously in retaliation for Goulard, has blocked the start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. The region is of vital interest to Germany as a market, as a reservoir of low-wage labor for German foreign investment, and as a potential source of migration to Germany as well as, in the longer run, of recruits for a European army – whereas France is less interested in the Balkans than in Northern and Western Africa. Lots of highly explosive issues, and uncertainties galore.