

Brexit Aftershocks: An Inside Look at the EU's Raging Power Struggle



European leaders at the post Brexit summit earlier this week

AFP

In response to Brexit, European Commission President Juncker wants deeper EU integration. German Chancellor Merkel does not. SPIEGEL takes you inside the vast EU power struggle triggered by the UK referendum. By SPIEGEL Staff

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Brexit

From DER SPIEGEL



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For the last supper, quail salad is served. It's 7:30 on Tuesday evening, and the leaders of 27 European Union countries -- without British Prime Minister David Cameron -- are scheduled to meet the next morning. A whiff of nostalgia is in the air, even if everyone is angry with Cameron, who because of a power struggle in his party, didn't just gamble away his country's EU membership, but may ultimately have triggered a political meltdown in the proud United Kingdom.

Cameron is buoyant, doing his best to avoid appearing as the tragic figure he has now become. His counterparts from across the EU are tactful enough to keep quiet about what they really think of the outgoing British premier. They speak of Britain's historical accomplishments -- at a time when the country, after 40 years of EU membership, looks to be leaving the bloc.

Taavi Roivas, the youthful prime minister of Estonia, who always sat next to Cameron during European Council meetings, expresses his gratitude that British soldiers ensured his country's independence 100 years ago. French President François Hollande recalls how British and French soldiers fought side-by-side in World War I. The Irish prime minister notes that his country was at war with England for almost 1,000 years and that it was really only the EU that brought lasting peace.

And what about Cameron? He says that he wouldn't do anything differently if he had it all to do over again. It wasn't a mistake to hold the referendum, he tells the bewildered gathering, but the EU leaders refrain

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from contradicting him. Perhaps one important element of the European project is that it is no longer seen as necessary to respond to [every folly](#). Only at the very end of the evening, when an EU diplomat is asked whether Cameron was presented with a departing gift, did he answer laconically: "He got a warm meal."

By the next morning, no one is thinking of Cameron anymore. He made history, if involuntarily, but history has now moved on from the British prime minister. The vote in favor of Brexit, after all, hasn't just convulsed British politics, it has also set the stage for the next monumental power struggle within the EU.

On one hand, that struggle is about the question as to how uncompromising the EU should be in hustling Britain out of the union. For those in favor of a strong and powerful EU, for those who always saw the UK as a bothersome obstacle in their path, the British withdrawal process can't proceed fast enough. Plus, French President Hollande and others want to use Britain as an example to show the rest of Europe how bleak and uncomfortable life can be when one leaves the house of Europe. Hollande, of course, has good reason for his approach: The right-wing populist party Front National has threatened to follow Cameron's example should party leader Marine Le Pen emerge victorious in next year's presidential elections.

Power Struggle in the EU

But there is more at stake than just the treatment of Britain during the Brexit negotiations. The more important question is how Europe will look 10 or 15 years from now -- the question as to whether the project of an "ever closer union," as optimistically formulated in the Treaty of Lisbon, will be continued. Or will Europe pivot back toward the nation-state, possibly even with the return of powers and competencies from Brussels to the governments of EU member states?

It is a power struggle between two opposing camps, both of which see Brexit as an opportunity to finally change Europe to conform to the vision they have long had for the bloc. The protagonists of an institutionalized Europe are Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Parliament President Martin Schulz. On the other side stands the majority of Europe's heads of state and government, led by Angela Merkel, who has created an alliance on this issue with those governments in Eastern Europe with whom she was at such odds in the refugee crisis just a few months ago.



European Parliament President Martin Schulz and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker

The battle for Europe's future begins early on Friday morning, not even two hours after the result of the Brexit referendum became clear. At 7:30 a.m., Schulz joins a conference call with Sigmar Gabriel, the leader of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), of which Schulz is a member, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German foreign minister and also a senior SPD member. Schulz begins by saying that his heart has been broken by the British vote, but then goes on to make clear what is at stake: "If we now allow the British to play games with us, the entire EU will fly apart," he says.

That sentence sets the tone. It is a strategy not just propelled by the fear that other EU member states could seek to follow the British example. The hope is to get rid of the British as quickly as possible since the country has long been one of the most adamant opponents to all forms of greater EU integration.

„How should the division of responsibilities develop in the EU?“

more responsibilities for the EU

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Graphic: How Germany views EU power.

At 8:15 a.m., Merkel grabs for the phone in the Chancellery. She spent the morning following the referendum returns at home in her apartment and she is shocked by the result. She doesn't have a plan B and now Merkel wants to play for time so she can develop a strategy. In contrast to Schulz and Juncker, she doesn't believe that Britain's departure from the EU is a foregone conclusion. For Merkel, the British have always been an important ally in the fight against an overly powerful EU and against overly lenient fiscal policies of the kind favored by France and countries in southern Europe. On the other end of the line on Friday morning is Horst Seehofer, the powerful governor of Bavaria and head of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party to Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Seehofer has a similar view of the situation to Merkel: Treat the British amicably, don't rush them and play for time. And immediately choke off all efforts aimed at "more Europe."

Stronger, More Independent EU

At 8:45, the SPD posts a position paper on its homepage called "Re-Founding Europe." It was written by Schulz and Gabriel before British voters headed to the polls for the Brexit referendum. In the Chancellery, it is interpreted as it is meant: as a challenge to Merkel's policies. Europe now needs the courage to "risk something grander," the paper reads. Merkel would like leadership in Europe to run through its member states. Schulz, though, like Juncker, would like to transform the Commission into a "true European government." "We need an ambitious and powerful thrust and not a timid patchwork," the paper argues.

Schulz and Juncker have long been working towards limiting the influence of European heads of state and government in the EU, wanting instead to develop a stronger, more independent union. That is the nucleus of a package they agreed to one late night in May 2014. The deal came following months of campaigning ahead of European parliamentary elections, with Juncker as the lead candidate for conservatives across the EU and Schulz in the same role for European Social Democrats. Juncker won and became Commission president while Schulz remained in his role as president of European Parliament. On that night in May, the two pledged to cease working against each other and to join forces to ensure greater powers for the EU -- and to ensure that the European Council, made up of EU member state leaders, loses influence. It was a pact against Merkel, who would like to have prevented Juncker from becoming Commission president.



DPA

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron

At 1 p.m. on the Friday after the Brexit referendum, Merkel makes a statement to Berlin journalists in which -- in contrast to Schulz -- she does not demand a rapid British withdrawal. One shouldn't "draw quick and easy conclusions from the British referendum that could further divide Europe," she says.

From Merkel's point of view, the crisis is one for European member state leaders to address. She sees the idea of "more Europe" as being the intensification of cooperation between EU governments, not the transfer of yet more authority to Brussels.

After Merkel speaks with Juncker on the phone that weekend, her belief that the Commission president is more a part of the problem than a part of the solution doesn't change. The chancellor believes that Juncker's appetite for power is one of the reasons why the British have turned their

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backs on Europe.

Merkel coordinates her approach with her powerful finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, who in the past has always presented himself as a passionate European in contrast to Merkel, the technocrat. But now, the two are in agreement. Simply calling for "more Europe" plays into the hands of Euroskeptics, Merkel says at a previously planned Friday meeting of CDU and CSU leaders in Potsdam. Those who are now demanding more integration, particularly in the euro zone, didn't understand the message of Brexit, Schäuble believes.

No Pressure on Britain

Schäuble wants to present a plan for how the remaining 27 EU members can improve their cooperation and strengthen their cohesion. Included in his list of measures is the completion of the single market and the unhindered, cross-border movement of capital. Schäuble believes it is also necessary to establish common, EU-wide bankruptcy proceedings for companies. Member states should also reach agreement on how to achieve greater economic growth, he says, in addition to improving controls of the EU's external borders and coming up with a joint asylum policy. If not all 27 member states are willing to pursue such measures, Schäuble says that those prepared to move ahead together should do so.

On Sunday, Merkel meets with a handful of confidants, including Chancellery Chief of Staff Peter Altmaier. The group examines a variety of different eventualities, including a second British referendum and snap UK elections. Merkel and Altmaier want to do all they can to prevent Britain from leaving, with Merkel saying that the EU should avoid exerting too much pressure. "Policymakers in London should have the possibility to reconsider the effects of leaving," Altmaier says in an interview.

On the same day, Merkel holds a long conversation with François Hollande. The French president insists on a rapid decision from Britain -- he wants to get rid of them as quickly as possible. The EU, he says, must be extremely clear about what leaving the bloc entails. Hollande also believes that Britain's departure represents an opportunity both for himself and his country. Brexit would increase France's influence in the EU.

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In contrast to Merkel, Hollande would prefer a strategy pursuing deeper European integration. Prior to his election, he promised to reshape the EU and to give it a "friendlier, warmer face." At the time, Merkel understood the message to be: "Allow us to take on more debt!"

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