

Brexit and the Consequences for International Peacebuilding

Written by Vladimir Kmec

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As a form of international assistance to post-conflict societies, peacebuilding addresses both the immediate consequences and root causes of conflicts. Peacebuilding focusing on the stabilisation, reform and building of institutions of a functioning state, especially political, security, economic, public administration and civil society sectors, has become the dominant approach of states and intergovernmental organisations to post-conflict management. This approach has become an integral part of peace operations and other post-conflict actions of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN, the AU and the EU. The departure of the UK, one of the key global players in peacebuilding, from the EU could have normative, operational and financial implications not only for the role of the UK as a global peacebuilding actor but also for actions of other actors and the international norm of peacebuilding as such.

The UK has played a crucial role in the development of the international peacebuilding norm and practice. With its expertise and diplomatic leverage, the UK has helped to shape the conceptual, normative and operational basis of peace supporting actions at the UN and the EU. The UK's ability to propose and promote peacebuilding policies, including at the UN, has been possible through cooperation with partners, notably the EU. Britain exercises its international influence largely through intergovernmental institutions, in particular the EU. The EU membership allows the UK to project its soft power globally, and especially in countries with a colonial past. Without the EU, the UK would have significantly less of this soft power as well as peacebuilding and conflict prevention capabilities since arguably, leaving the EU will decrease the UK's influence globally.

At the UN, the UK acts together with EU countries. Such an approach enables the UK to push for its interests. On its own, Britain would have limited power to advocate for policies within the UN, including in the area of peacebuilding. Brexit voices seem to neglect the fact that the UN has been undergoing a shift from a system in which the Security Council with its permanent members has been responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security to one that is based on an increased involvement of non-permanent members in these matters. Through the recent vote on Chagos Islands, the UK already felt the importance of the support from its EU partners.

The UK has engaged in peacebuilding around the world. The UK has done so through multilateral organisations, notably the UN and the EU. This is in line with the international norm on peacebuilding. Multilateralism has been one of the core principles of international peacebuilding, based on the understanding that coordination in post-conflict situations increases the prospects of achieving sustainable peace and decreases the costs. Indeed, departing the EU will not prevent the UK from engaging in peacebuilding through the UN. But, even the UN has promoted regional approaches to peacebuilding and supported the efforts of regional actors, such as the EU, in developing their own capacities.

Bilateral engagements would be more expensive, and politically and internationally more impracticable for the UK on its own than through the EU. Establishing new partnerships would be difficult for the UK when considering that many non-EU countries are keen to cooperate with the EU in international peacebuilding efforts. Countries as close as Norway and Switzerland and as far as Canada and Brazil have contributed to Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) actions. The UK would most likely continue its cooperation with the EU in peacebuilding. The British

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government expressed that, after leaving the EU, the UK would remain committed to European security and contribute to EU foreign and security policy, though it stressed that it would seek to “ensure that the EU’s role on defence and security is complementary to, and respects the central role of, NATO.” British officials have also expressed hopes that the UK would continue to be part of the CSDP and, for this purpose, also hold an observer seat in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) of the Council after Brexit. However, the membership in the PSC without an EU membership is an ambitious desire. It could also alienate other non-EU partners which contribute to CSDP actions but are not part of the decision-making.

The UK has been a major donor of international peacebuilding activities. Brexit could reduce the UK’s ability to contribute to international peacebuilding. As the country already set aside contingency funds, it is expected that Brexit would most probably lead to cuts in funding across sectors, including for governmental programmes in peacebuilding. Budget cuts could affect British NGOs involved in peacebuilding abroad. Brexit could lead to a more inward-looking Britain – a tendency which can already be witnessed with the British government preoccupied with its internal affairs and absent from international peace supporting initiatives.

Brexit affects not only Britain. Brexit could also leave the EU without the important strategic thinking, expertise and political leverage that the UK has contributed to the EU’s peacebuilding activities such as the EU’s development support and CSDP missions and operations. Also, the EU budget is expected to shrink as a result of Brexit. The UK’s departure from the EU might therefore arguably leave not only the UK but also the EU more inward-looking and less engaged in world affairs. Its economic and military influence could shrink. This may have consequences for peacebuilding activities which rely on financial, personnel and equipment contributions. Budget cuts could lead to a reduction in EU contributions not only for EU actions but also for the UN, NGOs and local actors benefiting from EU funding.

Indeed, Brexit will not end the international peacebuilding practice. Yet, it could reduce the UK’s ability to uphold its normative and practical commitment to it.

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