ACADEMIC LIFE

Britain under Brexit

On 8 July 2016, English Conversation Club for Sociologists located at the Institute of Sociology held a round table on the occasion of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Ukrainian sociologists together with their colleagues from University of Bedfordshire and University of Glasgow discussed the EU referendum results and tried to envision how post-Brexit Europe would look like.

OL'HA BUROVA, (*moderator*), *PhD in Sociology, Research Fellow of the Department of Socio-Political Processes, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

What do we mean when we say "Brexit"? Some people just regard it as Britain's exit from the EU, while others expect inevitable changes in the global economy and politics.

Today we are going to discuss why and how Britain decided to leave the European Union.

In fact, the EU referendum revealed how sharply the country had been divided along regional, class and age lines. For example, England voted strongly for Brexit by 53.4% to 46.6%; Wales also supported "Leave" by 52.5% to 47.5%. Scotland and Northern Ireland instead voted to stay in the EU: Scotland backed "Remain" by 62% to 38%, 55.8% of Northern Ireland also cast their votes for "Remain" and 44.2% for "Leave".

Different socio-demographic groups also voted differently. As for the age, the older the voters, the more likely they were to have voted to leave the EU. Nearly three quarters (73%) of 18- to 24-year-olds voted to remain, falling to under two-thirds (62%) among 25-34s. A majority of those aged over 45 voted to leave, rising to 60% of those aged 65 or over. Most people with children aged ten or younger voted to remain; most of those with children aged 11 or older voted to leave.

So, why did Britain end up voting to leave the EU? To find an answer to this question, we need to look back on Britain under Margaret Thatcher's premiership in the 1980s. Thatcher set Britain on a new economic course: the government was betting on free enterprise and individual initiative, strict government regulations of business were abolished, the share of public sector was reduced while the private one remarkably expanded. The immense social and economic changes wrought by Thatcherism are likely to have a profound impact even on today's Britain. Thatcher is seen as a powerful politician who "made Britain great again" — despite the fact that the number of unemployed rose from 1 to 3 million in three years after she had become prime minister. Therefore, the EU referendum results are not very surprising. Perhaps, the British hope that Britain will recover past glory through Brexit.

One of the biggest risks to the EU is that the Brexit negotiations will drag on for years, being added to a long list of never-ending Euro-zone crises such as Greek default, immigration challenges, an unresolved economic crisis and constant terrorist threats.

However, the European Union law will be in effect in Britain until it ceases being a member, and this process could take some time. The UK will continue to abide by the EU treaties and laws, but not take part in any decision-making.

NATALIA BOIKO, *PhD in Sociology, Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Social Psychology, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

Being a sociologist and social psychologist, I am interested not only in political but also in social aspects of Brexit. I would like to share my views concerning the current situation in the UK (shortly after the EU referendum) and some possible consequences of Brexit. Having analysed the British public's reaction to the referendum results, I can conclude that today's social situation in the UK is characterised by considerable instability and social tension. In fact, the Brexit referendum has divided British society into two opposing parts according to socio-demographic characteristics of voters. We can see the following picture: Scotland against England, provincial England against London, the rich against the poor ("If you've got money, you vote in, if you haven't got money, you vote out") and (the most noticeable difference) the young against the old. Such a sharp divide may lead to even more instability and social tension. Another fact deserving attention is that the day after the Brexit referendum the British people actively searched the Internet for information about the European Union and consequences of the UK's exit from the EU. So, they might have voted emotionally rather than rationally.

I think that the decision made by Britons will definitely urge sociologists, psychologists and social workers to study social aspects of Brexit.

TETIANA PETRUSHINA, *Doctor of Sciences in Sociology, Senior Research Fellow, Head of the Department of Economic Sociology, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

Across the world, people have been watching the choice made by Britain. They are trying to understand how Brexit results will influence different aspects of life not only in the European Union and Great Britain but also in every country of our globalising world, including Ukraine.

Brexit proponents say that the EU cannot protect its citizens from risks associated with globalisation. They draw attention to multiple challenges facing the EU today: lingering financial and economic crisis, immigration problems, a perceived asymmetry between contributions to the EU budget and membership benefits, conflicts between different European countries, etc. They also complain about over-bureaucratisation of the EU institutions.

There is another issue that needs to be addressed: the principles that the union like this should be based on (equality, mutual benefit and respect).

At the moment, it seems quite difficult to make a clear and unambiguous evaluation of the current situation. Analysing the world after Brexit and predicting the consequences of this historical event requires taking into account all aspects, such as economic, financial, political, geopolitical, cultural, ideological, etc., with due regard to national and international security issues.

The EU referendum has given a snapshot of today's British society. Britons are divided over the EU membership; furthermore, the number of EU supporters is nearly equal to the number of Euroscepticists. Both social classes and generations are split: pensioners overwhelmingly backed Brexit while young Brits tried in vain to save the country's EU membership. 52% of those aged 35–44, 62% of 25–34s and 73% of 18- to 24-year-olds voted to remain. Their decision should be respected since they are active members of British society today and will determine the country's future.

The EU referendum can be regarded either as a manifestation of real democracy or as a failure of the policy pursued by the British authorities. Some analysts ascribe the success of the "Leave" campaign to a well thought-out strategy of the main driving forces of capitalist globalisation. Anyway, only time will give the answers to some of the numerous tricky questions related to Brexit.

ANDRII MALIUK, *PhD in Sociology, Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Economic Sociology, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union has resulted from the ever-deepening contradictions of global capitalism. It has also exposed the fault lines in the EU project itself. On the one hand, Britain's decision to leave the EU is a consequence of inter-elite conflicts; on the other hand, it is caused by the opposition between the trans-national capitalist elite and democratically inclined masses in the EU. In this regard, Brexit is a response of those social groups of British society to which the project of neo-liberal European integration is detrimental.

As far as financial capital is concerned, the advantages of the EU membership look less convincing to Britain today. Most of the initial gains from removing barriers to trade, investment and labour mobility within the EU have been exhausted. Now the capital needs investing on a wider sphere, and the sales markets need new opportunities as well.

However, Brexit is not the panacea it might seem. There is a myth that if the UK left the European Union, it could have as good conditions for foreign trade as it had while being an EU member and, at the same time, would not have to follow all the EU regulations and pay anything to the EU budget. But the experience of Norway and Switzerland in negotiating trade agreements with the European Union shows that any agreement imposes certain obligations. Despite not being EU members, Norway and Switzerland must implement all the EU market rules, standards and regulations without reservation. These countries must agree to translate all relevant EU laws into their domestic legislation without consulting their citizens. They are contributors to the EU budget. Besides, they must accept migrants as the EU countries do. So, Britain is rather unlikely to gain financially from Brexit. Leaving the EU will hardly generate substantial fiscal savings for the UK government and taxpayers. All this is determined by Britain's position in the system of international economic relations rather than by European integration.

British capitalism is increasingly turning into a kind of rentier economy, gaining surplus value not from producing goods and services and selling them at home and abroad but mainly from acting as a banker, an investor or a business advisor for foreign capitalists, thereby collecting interests on loans and accumulating rents. It means that Britain should import more and more goods and pay for them with money gained from providing financial and business services. It also means that the country is dependent on the willingness of foreign capitalists to put their money into banks and financial institutions in the City of London. Spending a lot of money on imported goods and services, the UK is running a considerable current account deficit. Positive capital flow balance has started turning into negative one.

Moreover, British financial capital reckons that there are some elements of the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie (small businesses owners) that do not gain anything from the trade or financial transactions with the EU countries. So, they may consider Brexit to be a way to return to the good old days of British imperialism standing on its own ("taking our country back").

The following fact should also be taken into consideration: for a long time, a considerable part of the working class in Britain (mainly the lower stratum workers) have been worried about losing their jobs because of cheap labour force coming from Eastern Europe

and thereby increasing competition in the labour market. Maybe British workers hope that Britain's exit from the EU will stop foreign workers flooding the country since they drive down wages and push up unemployment for British people. Voting for Brexit, British working class actually voted against the current political and economic system and immigration policy. However, even if immigration is reduced in the future, the situation of British workers will hardly improve. Migrants usually take the jobs that native workers do not take.

As mentioned before, the UK's financial capital is unlikely to benefit from Brexit. The same goes for the UK's labour force.

There are also opinions that Britain's momentous decision to break away from the EU is threatening the very survival of the European Union. The precedent that Brexit has set could be repeated elsewhere. Another consequence of the Britain's exit from the EU is that it may spur the global recession.

OL'HA MAKSYMENKO, *Leading Sociologist of the Department of Methodology and Methods of Sociology, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

One of the arguments in favour of Brexit was that the European Union allows "too many immigrants". Both ordinary Britons and politicians (like Nigel Farage, a founding leader of the far-right United Kingdom Independence Party) are increasingly concerned about immigration, which seems unstoppable and unmanageable. There are several types of long-term migration to the UK. One of them is labour migration. Hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans (and non-Europeans as well) flock to the UK in search of work, which, according to a British journalist and Brexit supporter Douglas Murray, "undercuts the native working population". Another numerous group of migrants is represented by refugees, predominantly from Muslim countries. Britons' attitudes toward them are mostly negative: Muslim immigrants are regarded as threatening Western values. So far, no other religion has evoked as many negative feelings as Islam has done. This religion is often associated with terrorism and violence.

The European Union gave free movement rights to people who moved to another member state (including Britain) to seek a job there (or become self-employed). British economists and analysts often argue that the story of EU migration to work in Britain should not be seen as "a sudden, recent mass invasion to be necessarily feared by every British worker". Instead, migrant workers are believed to have a positive impact on the economy: they have a higher employment rate than the UK on average and therefore pay more taxes. Their contribution to the UK budget is even regarded as helping to fuel Britain's economic growth.

However, the situation with refugees is rather different. Many European countries including Britain are reluctant to accept mandatory migrant quotas introduced by the EU in 2015. They are certainly afraid of not being able to handle such a large influx of new immigrants, who are now seen as an economic burden. Many Europeans are also concerned that immigration will considerably affect public services. At last, they are worried about being a victim of terrorist attacks since the majority of refugees coming to Europe are Muslims.

Brexit supporters hope that leaving the EU will prevent the supposed hazards associated with unrestricted immigration. They think that the UK (like Australia and Canada) should only admit immigrants who will bring valuable skills to the country and integrate well into British culture.

It is not surprising that the "Remain" campaign was backed by regions with a relatively large proportion of immigrants. For example, London, where percentage of immigrants is significantly higher than in the rest of the country, voted strongly to stay in the EU — by 60% to 40%.

ARTEM KURAS, *PhD in Political Science, Research Fellow of the Department of Socio-Political Processes, Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine*

The UK's decision to abandon the European Union, however "stunning" it may seem, has been determined by a set of factors. None of them, taken separately, could lead to such outcomes. Only by acting together have they produced the Brexit phenomenon. The EU referendum results will certainly influence every country in the world, including Ukraine. So, Ukrainian scientists, scholars, economists and politicians should thoroughly analyse all the factors behind the Brexit vote and try to predict its economic, social and political consequences (what the UK's foreign policy toward Europe will look like, etc.).

There are different opinions about Brexit. For example, it is regarded as a revolt of the British national elite and their supporters against cosmopolitanism which is believed to be destroying Britain. On the other hand, the decision to break away from the European Union is labelled as some betrayal of Britain's national interests. The following fact should be taken into account: not only officials in Brussels but also pro-Brussels circles in the UK did their best to prevent British voters from choosing to leave the EU — even the day before the referendum. And they will definitely try to stick the EU together.

Brexit has launched a series of changes in Europe's geopolitical landscape. Any European country may make the same decision as Britain did. So, an "alternative" (in other words, a Eurosceptic) Europe must be strengthened. That is of particular importance to Ukraine which is now striving for the EU membership.

In conclusion, I would like to note that Ukraine needs a special institution which will focus on studying Europe (post-Brexit Europe in particular) as a complex phenomenon — no matter whether it will be an academic institution, a public organisation or an NGO. Maybe the only positive outcome of Brexit for Ukraine is that it urges Ukrainians to establish such an organisation.