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We Live in a Disintegrating World



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My favourite slogan about Brexit over the past three years is written in large white letters on a red gable wall in the Tigers Bay district of Belfast. It was painted before the referendum of 2016 and, below a union flag, reads: “Vote Leave EU. Rev 18:4.”

The biblical reference is to a verse in the Book of Revelations that reads: “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”

These seemed to me, when I first saw a picture of the mural, to be compelling reasons for leaving the EU and about as truthful as many other reasons advanced by those in favour

of doing so. The verse cited is, in fact, more pertinent to the issue of resisting a large and oppressive international organisation than the muralist may have realised. Revelations is filled with mysterious references to monsters, such the “beast from the land” and the “beast from the sea” who has “seven heads and 10 horns”. But experts consider these weird creatures to be coded hostile references to the Roman Empire and to Roman Emperors who were persecuting the early Christians, of whom the author of Revelations was one, in Asia Minor at the end of the first century AD.

The Belfast muralist has finally got their way as the UK escapes from the supposedly diabolical clutches of the EU. Leavers consider today to be one of liberation and Remainers lament a self-inflicted disaster that they see as being against the flow of history. But in both cases, this is a very west European view that gives a very partial and misleading view of recent history: if we include the eastern side of the European continent from the Atlantic to the Urals over the past 30 years, the trend towards the greater integration within the EU is more than counter-balanced by disintegration to the east.

The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s are seldom considered to have any lessons for the EU: the Soviet Union was believed by much of the rest of the world as an evil empire and Yugoslavia similarly as a sort of mini evil empire, the demise of both being both inevitable and a good thing.

But the forces favouring disintegration that broke up the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have ominous points in common with those now threatening the EU. Fairly or unfairly, people outside the decision-making hub in Moscow, Belgrade and Brussels felt that their wishes were being ignored and power monopolised by unrepresentative elites at the centre. Local politicians rode a nationalist wave, claiming that all sorts of good things would happen once self-determination had been achieved.

In some cases, these promises were kept; in others they were soon discarded and forgotten, at least by those who made them. In many senses, we have long been living in an era of disintegration without quite realising it, as multinational federations break up and international organisations, such as the UN and World Trade Organisation (WTO), fragment or become moribund. President Emmanuel Macron was lambasted for describing Nato as “braindead”, but it is scarcely alone. This trend is obscured because academics and politicians in western Europe have tended to be enthusiasts for the EU and for the integration of nation states, as if there was no chance of a shift in the opposite

direction. Timothy Less, of the Centre of Geopolitics and Grand Strategy at Cambridge, formerly a diplomat at the Foreign Office specialising in eastern Europe, points out that there have always been plenty of expert institutions in Europe “focusing on integration, but very few study disintegration”. Along with others with experience of eastern Europe in recent decades, he is sceptical about the prospects for the EU surviving the permanent crisis stemming from the diverging national interests of its members.

The nation state is being re-energised because multinational entities like the EU failed to cope successfully issues like immigration, deindustrialisation and globalisation. But the process of disintegration happens within as well as between states, producing winners and losers in close proximity to each other. In the UK, the referendum and two general elections highlighted the political and economic split between metropolitan cities plugged into the global economy and the hinterland around core urban areas. The gilets jaunes in France draw on a similar pattern of support, as does Donald Trump in the US.

A central question for both the UK and the EU post-Brexit is whether or not this impulse towards disintegration will continue, or whether it will be counterbalanced by a contrary trend towards consolidation. The Brexit crisis fostered the growth of nationalism in England and Scotland, as well as of nationalist/Catholic and unionist/Protestant nationalism in Northern Ireland. The Scottish National Party leaders were jubilant at their success in the general election in December as were Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland, encouraged by the Tories abandoning the DUP and proposed tariff barrier down the Irish Sea.

But the break-up of the UK may be further off than many believe at the height of the crisis because a strong Tory majority makes Scottish and Irish separatism less of a practical possibility. The SNP might have been better off avoiding a general election and keeping a weak minority Tory government in office, whose feebleness would have further disillusioned Scots with the union. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein is very much a constitutional party these days, looking for Irish unity to be delivered by demographic change and a border poll.

As for the EU, it has looked strong when negotiating with weak UK governments, but in other tests of strength, such as defending the nuclear deal with Iran from demolition by Trump, it has been pathetically ineffectual. For all its commercial clout, it appears incapable of withstanding pressure from the US, Russia and China. The decay of

multinational institutions and alliances may not lead to an apocalyptic crisis, as the author of Revelations foretold, but it will certainly produce a more dangerous world.

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