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Reaction to the paper “Europe after Brexit: a proposal for a continental partnership”.

After the vote in favour of leaving the EU, it is highly welcome to look for constructive options: EU-UK relations are crucial. The UK is a very important partner for the EU and should be treated as such. But the UK should also envisage a cooperative spirit for this new relationship. Against this background, serious concerns arise concerning this paper.

1/ The concept of “continental partnership” (CP) undermines any idea of European sovereignty. It is asymmetrical as it foresees that the UK would be consulted about EU legislation, with the risks of delay and dilution which that entails, even if these powers are consultative. In contrast, the EU would have no right to feed into CP members’ national legislation.

What if one CP member unilaterally decides to adopt an aggressive tax policy, or light touch legislation? The “Single Market” was supposed to be single and fair for all.

2/ The choice made by the authors to focus solely on EU-UK relations is misplaced.

Although important, the issue of the UK leaving the EU cannot be separated from the need for an EU vision of what it wants.

3/ The separation of the 4 freedoms (sacrificing the free movement of people) denies the virtues of the best allocation of human capital (crucial for companies and to an even greater extent for research). It buys into the idea that immigration is a threat, which is a tribute to political movements which are against the Open Society. The complex reasons for the leave vote are not properly analysed. A Bruegel publication could provide a more in-depth and precise study on the diverse elements which motivated the vote, e.g. rising inequalities in the UK, citizens’ fear of globalisation, loss of sovereignty, contributions to the EU budget etc.

4/ For democratic reasons, it is important to respect the vote expressed in the UK.

This is not a question of “applying punitive terms to [its] exit”. To try to maintain the status quo as much as possible would create frustrations on the other side of the Channel, as well as increasing the risk of the blame being turned on ‘Brussels’ for refusing to accept the result. In addition, there is a real danger of creating an attractive precedent, which could spell the end of the European project.

5/ A common complaint about the EU is the complexity of the decision making process. The CP reinforces this, which is unfair for the remaining citizens of the EU.

6/ The composition of the group of authors does not reflect the procedure enshrined in the Treaties. A diversity of input from the different European levels should have been guaranteed. Concluding the agreement after the triggering of Article 50 requires the consent of the European Parliament, as well as a qualified majority vote by the Council.

7/ The paper does not take a position on the issue of timing, although crucial. In order to end uncertainties for companies, households and citizens Article 50 needs to be triggered as soon as possible. The next European Elections are in 2019 which means that transparency concerning the conditions of the polls requires Brexit negotiations to begin before Christmas 2016.

8/ This CP option is being sold as 'out of the box'. However, it advocates that intergovernmental cooperation should be used even in the field of the Single Market, despite the role already played by the EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Court of Justice). This is not an innovation, it is a regression, above all when one witnesses to what extent the current intergovernmental cooperation fails to deliver implementation. Of course intergovernmental cooperation with the UK in some fields that do not require the same degree of institutional intervention, such as defence for example, could make sense.