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## Now what? European foreign and development policy after Brexit

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## Now what? European foreign and development policy after Brexit

Bonn, 27 June 2016. When the EU heads of state and government meet tomorrow in Brussels the mood is sure to have reached an all-time low. The British have decided to leave the EU, with a narrow majority of 52 percent. The 'leave' votes were concentrated in England and Wales, whilst a large majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland chose to remain in the EU. Most leave votes were cast by the older generation, leaving the younger to deal with its consequences.

Unfortunately, in Britain there was ultimately no sorcery at hand to return Cameron's genie to its bottle. The process also shows that referendums are of only limited suitability when it comes to making highly complex and far-reaching decisions. When and if the UK will initiate formal 'Article 50' exit negotiations with the EU remains unclear, while in the meantime the country has thrown the EU into fundamental crisis. What does the impending Brexit mean for European foreign and development policy? The only thing that is certain at this time is that the coming weeks and months will be marked by great uncertainty. Once started, UK-EU negotiations will presumably initially focus heavily on the single market and subsidies from agricultural and cohesion policies, less on foreign policy, development policy or trade agreements such as the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).

For months to come, the EU will be primarily concerned with itself. This is all the more regrettable at a time when we need a strong and transformed Europe more urgently than ever. In view of advancing globalisation and close international interdependency, individual member states (including the "big three" – UK, Germany and France) have been able to accomplish less and less on the international stage when acting alone. In view of reality, the argument of the 'leave' campaigners that a departure would restore Britain 'to its former glory' appears all the more paradoxical. After all, during his recent visit US President Obama reminded the British that they wield considerably more international influence as part of the EU than if they were forced to seek out various coalitions. "The European Union does not moderate British influence – it magnifies it," Obama told Brexit supporters. Only time will tell who is ultimately right. It is to be hoped that the EU can turn the situation to its advantage and use Brexit as an opportunity to work together more closely on foreign and development policy. Individual EU member states are hardly able to achieve much on their own when it comes to tackling terrorism, the

refugee crisis, ending conflicts, reducing the fragility of states and poverty through development, foreign and security policy, as well as other policy areas. It is only through close European co-operation and the utilisation of comparative advantages of individual actors that Europe can make a difference internationally. The EU played a key role during recent international negotiations leading to the adoption of the Paris Accord on Climate Change and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The success of both agreements and thereby the opportunity to have a positive influence on global challenges crucially depends on whether the EU itself is able to set a positive example.

Britain has had a major effect on foreign and development policy. As the second largest donor worldwide, the United Kingdom is a heavyweight and one of the states that leads the way when it comes to the strategic orientation of development policy. In many cases the British took a sceptical approach to closer European co-operation on development policy, preferring smaller, 'like-minded' groups. In view of the likely exit, the 'balance of power' in European development policy will be adjusted. Newer member states such as Poland and Central and Eastern European countries should play a more important role. In any case, Germany will be required to assume considerably more international responsibility. In recent months Europe has initiated a process to define new, common visions for European foreign policy actions. The new EU global strategy, drawn up last year by High Representative Federica Mogherini, is intended to focus EU foreign relations in a common direction. This strategy is set to be approved tomorrow at the meeting of the European Council. In development policy itself discussions have recently begun on a revision of the European Consensus on Development. This statement was adopted in 2005 and saw the Commission, the European Parliament and member states agree to a common perspective for European development policy for the first time.

These strategy processes should not be abandoned because of possible Brexit. Quite the opposite: in 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon attempted to place the EU in a better position to act together internationally. It served to institutionally strengthen European foreign policy. It is particularly important for the EU to improve its foreign policy orientation at this time. The EU needs to make it clear that it can make a positive and sustainable contribution to resolving the many crises and conflicts in its neighbouring areas and facing up to global challenges.