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## Brexit Set to Spread Across Europe

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As Europe digests the results of Brexit, one thing can be said with certainty – the fears that the devastating blow to European unity could spark a chain reaction of further referendums appear to be justified. Demands for similar referendums are gaining momentum. A survey published on June 27 by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) found that anti-EU political parties are currently calling for a total of 33 popular referendums in the coming year.

On July 1, Czech President Milos Zeman called for a referendum on exiting the European Union and NATO – just a week after the Brexit vote.

The Czech President also called for a referendum on NATO membership.

Dutch campaigners have gathered more than 56,000 signatures on a petition calling for the Netherlands to hold a referendum on whether to leave the EU.

Geert Wilders, the right-wing, anti-immigrant, anti-Brussels Dutch politician, described Great Britain's vote to leave as «*a fantastic result*» in an interview with *The Times*.

According to him, the vote showed that the bloc was far from an inevitable entity. He predicted that others would follow suit. «*The Netherlands will be next*», he said. «*We are no longer building anything, but demolishing and dividing. That's why we want a referendum to quit the EU*», Wilders added.

Sweden, along with Denmark, is Britain's closest ally when it comes to voting on European policies and staying out of the eurozone.

The nationalist Swedish Democrats immediately welcomed the result of the UK referendum.

«*With Brexit, I think the tide has turned. We can see that a larger proportion of the Swedish population are increasingly Eurosceptic and in favor of leaving the European Union*», said Mattias Karlsson, who leads the party in the Swedish parliament. «*In the end I think it will be very hard for the establishment to refuse these people a vote*», he concluded. The country accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees last year and is facing great problems with their integration. Consequently, Sweden's far-right has gained momentum in a development that has reminded some of the rise of pro-Brexit UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain.

Denmark held a referendum last December, although with a much more limited impact: Danes decided against handing over more powers to the EU. The referendum was needed for Denmark to remain in Europol under the new rules. However, it was rejected by 53 % of voters.

Thulesen Dahls, the leader of the far-right Danish People's Party, believes that Denmark should now follow Britain's lead and hold a referendum on its membership.

According to him, a referendum could give Denmark a new opportunity if the Danish parliament cannot agree on reforms with the EU.

Many Danes fear that more refugee flows could threaten the small nation's welfare system. Besides, Denmark has so far relied on Britain as a strong ally in negotiations with the EU as both countries have had similar policy stances.

Greek newspaper *Kathimerini* fears that Brexit could ultimately become a threat to Greece's EU membership. The Union could be pushing Greece out in order to save cohesion among the remaining members. «*It could open the way for a new round of speculation about a possible Grexit*», the outlet warns.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is planning to hold a referendum in Hungary on whether the EU should be allowed to resettle refugees despite a lack of consent by national parliaments affected by the decision.

The referendum indirectly questions Brussels's authority and hurts EU cohesion.

The French are some of the largest Eurosceptics: 61 percent have an unfavorable view of the union.

France's Front National (FN) hailed Brexit as a clear boost for Marine Le Pen's presidential bid next April, as well as a move that gave momentum to the party's anti-Europe and anti-immigration line. Le Pen has said that if she wins the French presidential election, she will hold an in/out referendum on the country's membership of the EU within six months.

A majority of those questioned in Italy want a referendum on their own membership.

Almost half of all Italians would vote to leave the EU if given the opportunity.

Opposition parties are questioning Italy's loyalty to the bloc, despite the country being one of the founding members of the European project. Italy's anti-establishment 5-Star movement has now officially called for a referendum on whether to keep the euro. The hardline, right-wing Northern League has hailed the British vote as a triumph for Euroscepticism and called for the issue to be put to a national vote.

In a move that could turn into the next blow to the EU after Britain's exit vote, Austria's highest court on July 1 ordered a rerun of the country's presidential election. The landmark decision gives a right-wing candidate, Norbert Hofer, the chance to turn his loss into a win to boost not only his party but also far-right and nationalist movements elsewhere in Europe lobbying for a weaker EU or an outright exit from the bloc. Mr Hofer, who narrowly missed out on winning the Austrian presidential election last month, has said that his country should have a referendum on

EU membership if, within a year, Brussels makes any moves towards political «centralization» and fails to refocus on its original role as an economic and trade alliance.

Sampo Terho, the Finns Party parliamentary group leader, calls for an EU referendum to be put at the core of its next general election campaign.

The Eurosceptic Finns Party is a member of the ruling coalition.

Finland has started collecting signatures for a petition demanding to hold a referendum on leaving the European Union.

The petition is authored by Sebastian Tynkkynen, who heads the youth organization of the Finns Party. The politician has proposed to hold the referendum in December 2017. Once the petition is accepted, it will be discussed by parliamentary committees before being put to a vote of MPs.

The European Union, once «whole and free and at peace», has fallen into the grip of a structural crisis of great magnitude. Amid the growing disunity, the EU will find it extremely difficult to speak with one voice on major international problems. The bloc badly needs economic and political stability. With so many discords and unresolved problems, this is hardly the right moment for the EU to confront anybody, especially Russia. The anti-Russia sanctions war is causing a major rift inside the EU, at the time the bloc is facing a daunting pile of problems.

Europe will benefit if the escalation of military tensions with Russia is ended and a dialogue on security issues is restored. After all, Russia and Europe face common challenges, such as international terrorism, political extremism, cybercrime and the threat of technogenic disasters. They need to urgently address the shared security concerns, such as the OSCE development, talks about a new agreement on conventional arms control and confidence building measures in Europe, the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones, the fight against terrorism, and migration policy among other things.

This is the wrong time for confrontations and self-inflicting sanctions wars. As internal divisions get deeper, the EU badly needs partners, not opponents.