

Britain's decision to leave the E.U. is a warning to America

By **Anne Applebaum** Columnist June 24

Like everybody else in London, I woke up this morning, after not much sleep, to graphic depictions of the pound crashing, the stock exchange collapsing and markets all over the world in turmoil. I have no doubt that tomorrow, or the next day, the story will be different. Traders will take a step back and notice that nothing, actually, has happened yet. There will be cheap assets to pick up. Markets will stabilize.

The true impact of Brexit, on Britain and on Europe, will not be visible for many years. In a certain sense, it will not be visible at all, for the real damage will be done by the things that will now not happen. The slow agony of the divorce proceedings will take up precious political time and energy in London and other European capitals, so Europe's leaders will not unite to cope with other crises. The United Kingdom will turn further in on itself, so British energy and talent will not be dedicated to pushing back against the Islamic State, resettling migrants, resisting Russia. The situation of the U.K. will be unstable and uncertain for a long time, so investments will not take place. Money will not be spent. Opportunities will not be created.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there are tens of thousands of decisions to be made in the U.K., on legal issues; on joint foreign policy, security and diplomacy; and, if Britain leaves the European single market altogether, on tariffs and trade.

Scotland voted overwhelmingly to stay in Europe, and so the question of Scottish independence necessarily returns. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, has called the referendum result "democratically unacceptable" for Scots, and one sees her point.

Opinions newsletter

Thought-provoking opinions and commentary, in your inbox daily.

[Sign up](#)

Northern Ireland voted to stay in Europe, and so the unification of northern and southern Ireland becomes a live issue again. Minutes after the referendum result was announced, Sinn Fein, the Irish nationalist party, declared that "this British Government has forfeited any mandate to represent the economic or political interests of people in Northern Ireland," and so it has. It can be only a matter of time before a movement calling for a Northern Irish referendum takes off.

Other European countries may now face political instability as well. The British vote has, in just a few hours, energized the supporters of anti-European — and in some cases anti-democratic — parties elsewhere in Europe. Not just in the smaller European nations but also in big countries — France, the Netherlands, Italy and possibly even Germany — the political

scene may shift dramatically, particularly given the likelihood of slower economic growth. Once again, much of the damage will be invisible, taking the form of things that will not happen. The Dutch prime minister, the German chancellor or the French president, consumed with fighting off new political challenges at home, will not have time to think creatively about their own economies or Europe's institutional structures, let alone the outside world.

Finally, I do realize that it's facile to talk about the impact on a U.S. election that is still many months away, that it's too simple to say "first Brexit, then Donald Trump." But there is a way in which this election has to be seen, at the very least, as a possible harbinger of the future. This referendum campaign, as I wrote a few days ago, was not fought on the issues that are normally central to British elections. Identity politics trumped economics; arguments about "independence" and "sovereignty" defeated arguments about British influence and importance. The advice of once-trusted institutions was ignored. Elected leaders were swept aside. If that kind of transformation can take place in the U.K., then it can happen in the United States, too. We have been warned.

Read more from [Anne Applebaum's archive](#), [follow her on Twitter](#) or [subscribe to her updates on Facebook](#).

Read more about this topic:

[Anne Applebaum: The Brexit referendum transcends the economy](#)

Anne Applebaum writes a biweekly foreign affairs column for The Washington Post. She is also the Director of the Global Transitions Program at the Legatum Institute in London.