**Europe Looks Ever More Divided After Brussels Deal**

Whatever its citizens decide, U.K.’s push to renegotiate membership shows trend toward weaker union

By **STEPHEN FIDLER**

Updated Feb. 19, 2016 5:47 p.m. ET

Whether the people of the U.K. decide to remain in the European Union or not in the summer referendum, Britain’s effort to renegotiate its relationship with the bloc that [concluded Friday at a summit in Brussels](http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-talks-on-eu-reform-enter-second-day-with-issues-still-unresolved-1455869486)reinforces a trend toward weakening cohesion among its 28 governments.

If the last few years are a harbinger of the future, the high point of European economic and political integration is in the past. Europe’s nation states are reasserting themselves, for better or worse.

A British exit from the EU would likely seriously damage European unity. A new report compiled for the World Economic Forum by a panel under the chairmanship of former Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt says: “Brexit would be a turning point in EU integration, which has, so far, been seen as largely irreversible,” noting that other governments in Europe would be pressed to offer their citizens a similar choice.

But even a vote to remain risks setting a precedent. Other governments may want deals of their own or seek to take advantage of the exceptions the British accord has carved out, like those limiting social-welfare payments to other EU citizens.

The British negotiation wasn’t the only evidence at the summit of the eroding coherence of the bloc. The fierce fight that took place Thursday night over migration emphasizes that no single issue, not even the crisis of Greece and the euro, has set member states so fiercely at one another’s throats.

German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](http://topics.wsj.com/person/M/Angela-Merkel/5351) made no attempt to hide her ire at neighboring[Austria’s decision to raise barriers against migrants](http://www.wsj.com/articles/austrias-daily-cap-on-migrants-may-break-eu-law-says-juncker-1455798186) from the south and limit the numbers of asylum seekers it accepts to 80 a day. That threatens to lead one country after another to raise barriers at their borders, trapping thousands in Greece.

Other governments blame Ms. Merkel for accelerating the influx of migrants into the EU by welcoming them last summer, and she is under increasing pressure politically at home too. The sure touch that Germany showed in its leadership of the euro crisis has been absent in the turmoil over migration. The summit revealed Ms. Merkel increasingly dependent on mercurial Turkey to slow the flow of people into Europe.

Germany’s leadership of the euro crisis had many critics, but it was an inescapable fact and had a strong internal logic. A crisis in which German leadership is fitful or absent is one in which the EU’s widely divergent nations—and more divergent now because there are 28 of them compared with just 15 at the start of 2004—have reasserted themselves.

In some ways, though, the high point of European togetherness appears in retrospect to have been something of a chimera. Both the euro and the Schengen passport-free border areas, the deepest manifestations of European integration, look like fair-weather constructions, unable to cope when the storms struck.

From a British perspective, the politicians of Europe wanted the prizes of a common currency and border-free travel but were unwilling to give up the national sovereignty required to make them work. They willed the ends but not the means, launching the euro without a common treasury or bank deposit-guarantee fund, for example, and the Schengen area without a European border force.

Members of the euro and Schengen will probably face more choices over pooling their sovereignty if the two are to survive in the long-term. In the euro area, anxieties about the banking system have intensified in 2016, in part because the “banking union” meant to address its weaknesses is a long way from completion. A European border force appears to be in the making, though that alone will not prevent the re-erection of frontier controls in the face of a further surge of refugees.

Some countries may not want or be able to make those commitments. Even France, whose officials depict themselves as keepers of the flame for eurozone integration, won’t countenance the treaty changes that would shore up the currency—largely because they expect they would lose the necessary referendum on the matter.

Among some, the dream of closer European unity dies hard. Leaders in the countries of continental Western Europe saw World War II as the failure of the nation state, and some of their successors still campaign for more integration. Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel was the most exercised at the summit about Prime Minister [David Cameron](http://topics.wsj.com/person/C/David-Cameron/5940)’s wish to have the U.K. excluded from the EU treaty’s commitment to “ever closer union.”

For reasons of necessity and idealism, some countries may need or want to integrate further. For others, domestic politics will mean that they will never be able to make that commitment.

This week’s summit appeared to be a further nail in the coffin of “ever closer union.” That will be a cause for regret for some in Brussels and further afield. For others, however, the end of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to the EU and the development of a more modular union may be the best way to ensure its survival.