

BREXIT: HOW EUROPE FELL OUT OF LOVE WITH THE EU

SCHENGEN, Luxembourg: When the ceiling fell in recently at the European Museum in the tiny Luxembourg village of Schengen, the local mayor was quick to deny that there was any wider symbolism. Ben Homan blamed the accident on shoddy workmen who used the wrong type of fasteners in the museum, which celebrates the birthplace of the cherished 26-country Schengen passport-free zone. But just as the museum remains under repair, the dreams on which the European Union was founded seem to defy any quick fix, with the bloc itself seemingly more unloved than at any time in its history.

Britain could be headed towards voting to leave the EU in a referendum on June 23, while the future of the Schengen zone itself is threatened by the biggest migration crisis since World War II. "We need to get these visions and these dreams back, and to go back to doing what we can together," Homan tells AFP as he watches the flood-swollen River Moselle course past hills covered in vineyards. "When you are here, you live out the Schengen accord every day because if you move just 100 metres you can be in another country. Here we have seen the whole region benefit from the accord."

The picturesque village was chosen for the signing of the deal that would eventually create the Schengen area in 1985 because it sits at the point where Luxembourg, France and Germany meet. Around 50,000 tourists a year from as far afield as Asia now come to visit this monument to European unity, complete with the European Museum that opened in 2010.

'One Crisis to Another'

But Schengen is part of the wider European project that has been shaken to its foundations in recent years. Support is drying up for the utopian ideals that led to the creation of the EU more than 60 years ago from the ashes of post-war Europe. A

recent survey by the US-based Pew Research Center showed a sharp dip in favorable views of the EU among Europeans, with a huge 17-point drop to 38 percent in France over a single year.

Europeans are "not any longer passionate or in love with the European dream", with its benefits largely now taken for granted, Janis Emmanouilidis, director of studies at Brussels-based think tank European Policy Centre, told AFP. "Over the past six or seven years the EU has been running from one crisis to another - things are not getting better, they're getting worse." The migrant crisis has had a huge impact, with many countries suspending Schengen border-free movement as leaders failed to agree how to share the burden of a million-plus refugees.

The economy remains in dire straits with massive youth unemployment across southern Europe and the Greek debt crisis still threatening the eurozone while nations bicker over the cost. More deeply, Euroscepticism and populism are growing across the continent. Brussels meanwhile is increasingly accused of meddlesome bureaucracy and undermining national sovereignty - and moreover of symbolizing the global elites who are in the crosshairs of political protests around the world.

'Obsessed with Total Integration'

EU leaders have started acknowledging that Europeans do not share their appetite for the dream of "ever closer union". Even European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, an arch federalist, admitted that citizens were "stepping away" from the European project because Brussels was "interfering in too many domains of their private lives". But increasingly Europeans are rejecting any kind of idealism at all. "The European dream that is being dreamed, who is dreaming it? Even those who should be defining it are becoming more realistic," said the EPC's Emmanouilidis.—AFP



LONDON: A campaigner for 'Vote Leave', the official 'Leave' campaign organization, holds a placard during a rally for 'Britain Stronger in Europe', the official 'Remain' campaign group seeking to avoid Brexit, in Hyde Park yesterday. —AFP

BRITAIN'S RIVAL EU CAMPAIGNS RESUME AFTER MP'S MURDER

POLLS SHOW MOMENTUM FOR 'IN'

LONDON: The campaign to decide Britain's membership of the European Union restarted yesterday after a three-day hiatus following the killing of lawmaker Jo Cox, with Prime Minister David Cameron warning Britons they faced an "existential choice" on Thursday. Campaigning activities ahead of the June 23 EU referendum resumed with two opinion polls showing the 'Remain' camp recovering some momentum, although the overall picture remained one of an evenly split electorate.

With five days left until the ballot, the rival campaigns returned with a raft of interviews and articles in Sunday's newspapers, covering the familiar immigration versus economy debate that has defined the campaign so far. Cameron, who leads the campaign to stay in the EU, urged voters to consider the economic impact that leaving the 28-member bloc would have. "We face an existential choice on Thursday," he wrote in the Sunday Telegraph. "So ask yourself: have I really heard anything - anything at all - to convince me that leaving would be the best thing for the economic security of my family?"

Michael Gove, a senior spokesman for the rival 'Leave' campaign, said leaving would actually improve Britain's economic position. "I can't foretell the future but I don't believe that the act of leaving the European Union would make our

economic position worse, I think it would make it better," he said in an interview with the same newspaper. Both men praised Labour Party lawmaker Cox, an ardent supporter of EU membership, who was shot and stabbed in the street in her electoral district in northern England on Thursday. A 52-year-old man appeared in a London magistrate's court on Saturday, charged with her murder.

'Leave' campaigner Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence party (UKIP), appeared to indicate he thought Cox's killing had had an adverse effect on the 'Out' campaign. "It has an impact on the campaign for everybody," he told ITV's Peston on Sunday show when asked whether it would affect the referendum outcome. "We did have momentum until this terrible tragedy."

The only opinion poll carried out since the killing showed support for "In" at 45 percent ahead of "Out" on 42 percent - a reversal of the three-point lead that the pollster, Survation, showed for 'Out' in a poll conducted on Wednesday. Two other polls published on Saturday showed the 'Remain' campaign had regained its lead over 'Leave', while another showed the two camps running neck and neck.

But pollsters said most of these surveys were carried out before Thursday's attack, and thus did not reflect the full impact of the event. "We

are now in the final week of the referendum campaign and the swing back towards the status quo appears to be in full force," Anthony Wells, a director with polling firm YouGov, said.

'Disgusting and Vile'

The murder of Cox, a 41-year-old mother of two young children, has shocked Britain, elicited condolences from leaders around the world and raised questions about the tone of campaigning. "I hope, because of the tragic death of Jo, we can have a less divisive political debate in our country and particularly in the last few days of this referendum," finance minister George Osborne, a leading 'Remain' campaigner, told Peston on Sunday.

Immigration, one of the public's chief concerns ahead of the referendum, has proven to be the most inflammatory issue in the campaign, tapping into fears that EU freedom of movement threatens national security and pressures public services. But neither side showed signs of backing away from their criticism of each other on the issue. Osborne called a poster unveiled last week by 'Leave' campaigners showing a line of refugees under the slogan 'Breaking Point' as "disgusting and vile" and reminiscent of literature used in the 1930s.—Reuters



SCHENGEN: Mayor of Schengen Ben Homan poses for a photo next to the European Monument for the Schengen Convention in this village on June 17, 2016. — AFP

REFERENDUM GAMBLE WILL DEFINE CAMERON'S LEGACY

LONDON: It's often said that David Cameron is a lucky politician who has seemed to coast through politics on instinct and charm during a career that has culminated in six years as British prime minister. But now his luck may be running out. In calling a referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union, Cameron has made a gamble that could end his career - and take his country out of an international alliance it joined more than 40 years ago. It would be a rare but fateful miscalculation for a politician who has a reputation for thriving under pressure and astutely judging political risks.

"I think he's actually been pretty stunned by the strength of the 'leave' cause," said Cameron biographer

James Hanning. "The golden rule is, never hold a referendum unless you're confident of winning it, and I think he thought that the moderate voices would prevail by some distance. But that's not the way the polls are suggesting it's going to go." The referendum campaign has been unexpectedly bitter and divisive, and was brought to a shocked halt when Labour lawmaker Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death in the street last week. The suspected killer gave his name in court as "death to traitors, freedom for Britain."

Both sides suspended campaigning until yesterday out of respect for Cox, amid fears that the political fury unleashed by the EU campaign was somehow connected to the killing. Before Cox died, opinion polls had

shown surging sentiment in favor of a British exit from the 28-nation EU - known as Brexit. A majority of supporters of Cameron's Conservative Party said they would vote to quit the bloc in Thursday's referendum.

That's bitter news for Cameron, who called the referendum to puncture growing support for the anti-EU UK Independence Party and placate the strongly Eurosceptic right wing of the Conservatives. Victoria Honeyman, a lecturer in British politics at the University of Leeds, said Cameron had seen EU battles poison the leaderships of former Tory leaders John Major and William Hague and "feared a civil war in the Conservative Party". She said the referendum was about "defusing that time bomb" - but Cameron has "moved from having one ticking time bomb to having another ticking time bomb."

When he promised the referendum, in 2013, Cameron said it would "settle this European question in British politics" once and for all. He told voters he would forge a new deal between Britain and the EU that would make remaining an attractive prospect. At a Brussels summit in February, he won changes to welfare benefits that he said would reduce immigration and an exemption for Britain from the EU's commitment to "ever-closer union" - a phrase that stirs images of a European super-state in some patriotic British hearts.

Resistance

But many voters have proved resistant to Cameron's message that Britain is stronger, safer and more economically secure within the EU than it would be outside it. The concessions he gained have been dismissed as pally by "leave" campaigners, who say they will do little to limit immigration from other EU nations because the bloc guarantees free movement among member states. It's a subject that resonates with many voters, who have seen hundreds of thousands of people come to Britain over the past decade from new EU members in eastern Europe. (Hundreds of thousands of Britons also live in other EU countries, a less remarked-upon fact).—AP

THE BRUSSELS YEARS: THE MAKING OF BREXIT BORIS

LONDON: Charming, scruffy and with his perennial mop of blond hair, top Brexit campaigner and former London mayor Boris Johnson used to be a Brussels correspondent, penning stories that helped foment euroscepticism at home. Johnson, 51, worked in the city between 1989 and 1994 - a time not unlike the present when Britain's difficult relationship with Brussels was at breaking point and the Conservatives were deeply split on Europe.

He was hired by the right-leaning Daily Telegraph newspaper and rose to become then prime minister Margaret Thatcher's favorite writer, partly thanks to punchy articles that mocked Europe's institutions. "He was beating stories up rather than making them up, exaggerating them," said Christian Spillmann, an AFP journalist who was in Brussels at the same time. Some of the more absurd stories have been mantras for British eurosceptics for years and have featured prominently in Johnson's recent Brexit campaign speeches. Writing in the left-leaning Guardian newspaper, former

Brussels correspondent Sarah Helm complained she had been tasked to look for the kind of stories written by Johnson when she was first posted there in the mid-1990s. "At that time learning about Euro-myths - smaller condoms, square strawberries, fishermen forced to wear hairnets - took up more time than explaining treaty changes," she wrote. "The myths were usually funny, often absurd, sometimes traceable to a grain of truth, nearly always grossly distorted, or totally untrue. Very often they had first appeared in The Daily Telegraph. Usually, their creator was Boris Johnson," she wrote.

Some of his articles were influential, such as one in 1992 under the headline "Delors Plan to Rule Europe" about proposals by then European Commission president Jacques Delors to centralize power in Brussels. Johnson said the story was seized on by the "No" campaign in the Danish referendum which went against the Maastricht Treaty, signed earlier that year, which had also caused deep political rifts in Britain.—AFP

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