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A splintering union

As Europe's sceptics cheer Brexit, its enthusiasts mourn

The EU's member states hope to stop exit referendums from spreading

For Eleonora Ossola, one of an estimated 600,000 Italians who live in Britain, Thursday's vote to leave the European Union came as a personal blow. "It is as if your mother were to tell you to get out of the house," said Ms Ossola, who manages Italian Kingdom Radio, a station serving the country's Italian community. Millions of Europeans felt a similar sense of disorientation and anxiety. For the first time, a continent engaged for decades in the world's most ambitious project of international integration saw one of its largest countries decide to quit. Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's vice-chancellor and leader of its Social Democratic Party, summed it up in a tweet: "Damn. A bad day for Europe."

The shocked reactions of many European leaders suggested they had not fully absorbed the possibility of a vote for Brexit. Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, called a crisis meeting of parliamentary leaders and cabinet members. In Rome, the Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi, convened an emergency meeting of ministers and scrapped a scheduled summit of his party's leaders. France's president, François Hollande, held a long emergency session at the Elysée. When he emerged his tone was measured (he promised to continue to work closely with Britain), but he added that the EU now needed a "leap forward" to ward off the danger of Eurosceptic populists.

Those Eurosceptic populists, meanwhile, reacted to the vote with elation. Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's right-wing populist Northern League, praised "the courage of the free citizens of Great Britain" and called for an Italian referendum next. (It is not clear whether Italy's constitution would permit one.) A jubilant Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's anti-European National Front, described the result as a "victory for liberty" and renewed her longstanding call for a referendum on exit for France. "The Europhile elite has been defeated," crowed Geert Wilders of the Netherlands' anti-immigrant Party for Freedom. He promised a referendum if he becomes prime minister. That outcome is rated wildly unlikely – but in the aftermath of the Brexit shock, anything seemed possible.

For European leaders, the most pressing question is how to deter contagion. That means making Britain's exit look like an unattractive option, and preventing it from enjoying the benefits of EU membership once it has left. The idea, as one French minister said before the result, is "not to punish" Britain, but to send a strong signal to others. Before the vote Emmanuel Macron, France's economy minister, warned in an interview with *Le Monde*, a French newspaper, that British banks would no longer benefit from the European passport system. Some German leaders were similarly outspoken. "Out is out," said Elmar Brok, a member of the Christian Democratic party and leader of the foreign affairs committee in the European Parliament. "We have to prevent copycats now."

But most German politicians have been less confrontational, hoping that the panicked reactions of financial markets and business leaders to Brexit will be enough to scare off others. Markus Kerber, a director of Germany's main employers' association, said he expects bilateral trade to "nose-dive" and German direct investment in Britain to grind to a halt. Some in Germany want to put economic health before political principles: Clemens Fuest, president of the Ifo Institute, Germany's most highly regarded economic think-tank, called on politicians to ensure "that Britain remains integrated in the internal market as far as possible".

It was in Europe's south and east, which have benefited hugely from their association with the wealthier north, that the reactions were most complicated. In Italy, one response was startling: the broadly Eurosceptic, populist Five Star Movement, which has shot up in the polls in the last few years, has always maintained that it wants a referendum on membership in the euro, though it has left the question of EU membership open. But on the morning after the Brexit vote, its supporters discovered that the party's online platform now eschews referendums in favour of transforming the EU from within: "The only way to change this 'Union' is constant institutional engagement."

Poland's conservative government, too, seemed torn between its Eurosceptic impulses and the interests of the large numbers of Poles who work in Britain, Germany and elsewhere in the EU. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the governing Law and Justice party, said the union faced a crisis that required a new approach, perhaps even a new treaty. Yet he warned against any moves towards tighter integration, especially by the EU's founding members (which he colourfully termed the "Carolingian EU").

That fear seemed to gain credence from the response to Brexit of Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's foreign minister. Mr Steinmeier invited a number of his counterparts to meet at a villa near Berlin on June 25th. The list includes the foreign ministers of Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France and Italy – a cosy meeting, now that Britain has gone, of the EU's original core.