



## Brexit will put up barriers the EU was made to pull down John Sturrock

**I** don't understand how you British could give up so easily. We've been trying for years to get into the EU. People lost their lives. You call it a prison.

You have no understanding of what it is like for us. We know about prisons. Your Brexit vote was demoralising and played into the hands of anti-Europeans in my country." These words of a Ukrainian colleague at a recent gathering of European mediators in eastern Germany focused how differently our European friends see things.

As colleagues from all over the continent spoke in fluent and nuanced English, a penny dropped. Many folk in the EU understand what we and our politicians are saying about Brexit. Yet, how many of us, of our politicians, understand what our fellow Europeans are saying or thinking? Our words have a profound impact elsewhere, and yet most of us are ignorant about

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their effect. A language barrier may explain a lot about our predicament.

"We are genuinely sad. We see you as friends. We enjoy your humour."

I watched a German satirical TV programme poking fun at British politicians. It was both embarrassing and familiar. The audience, while amused, also looked bewildered.

"Why is the UK doing this?"

Meanwhile, in Poland, some people fear that the growing influence of hardliners may prompt an initiative to leave the EU. While the UK is separated from mainland Europe by 21 miles of water and hundreds of years of relative isolation, at our conference in Germany the River Oder is just a couple of hundred metres wide. That river is now the Polish-German border. We walked back and forth, unconstrained, from our hotel in Poland to the venue in Germany.

Western Europe needed stability after the Second World War and after the fall of communism. The EU, warts and all, provided that stability.

In Berlin, I paused at Checkpoint Charlie. What a traumatic experience living with the Wall must have been. Barriers, both real and symbolic, eat into the soul, and do immense damage to relationships. The Wall did that in Berlin. Barriers will do so again.

In addressing the conference, I felt moved to apologise, not for Brexit itself but for the infliction of this turmoil on our European friends. The response was warm. "Thank you," one said. He might also have said: "We didn't realise you cared."



Professor John Sturrock, QC, is a mediator