




The Brexit Effect: How Has British Withdrawal Shaped the EU's Development?

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INTRODUCTION

People remember where they were on the morning of 24 June 2016, at the moment when they heard that, the day before, the British electorate had voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. It was a highly unexpected outcome. Opinion polls had underestimated the support for British departure from the EU, or “Brexit”. Yet a small but clear majority of the British electorate had voted for the conclusion of the country’s 43-year-old membership (Clarke et al., 2017).

The result caused shock across Europe, particularly among political elites. Even if Britain had been far from a typical member state, the referendum’s result raised fears about the EU’s future. Had the Union’s development and its members’ integration gone too far, too quickly, and without the necessary popular approval?

Perhaps Europe’s politicians should not have been so surprised. According to research undertaken by the European Parliament (Del

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Monte, 2022), 43 national referendums on issues related to European integration were held in 1972–2016. They included, for example, votes in aspiring member states on the terms of their accession to the Union, or in existing member states on new treaties or forms of co-operation. Of those referendums, 15, more than a third, resulted in a block on proposals for deeper integration. Aside from the Brexit vote, some of the most significant such events have been Norway’s disapproval of accession to the EU, in 1972 and 1994; Denmark’s vote against the Treaty on European Union in 1992; the Danish and Swedish rejections of the single currency, the euro, in 2000 and, 2003, respectively; and the French and Dutch votes against the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Each of these decisions was against the wishes of the incumbent national government. The era of “permissive consensus”, during which Western Europe’s voters allowed their politicians and the EU’s bureaucrats to take decisions more or less as they pleased, clearly ended by the 1990s (Newman, 2006).

All those 15 referendum results were embarrassing for the governments concerned. Most required difficult and complicated strategies for subsequently navigating around public opinion (for example, Laursen, 1994). Some of the strategies made demands of other governments across the EU. In cases, the extant national policy frameworks simply continued to operate. Against this historical backdrop, the main question to be addressed in the current chapter is: what has the Brexit referendum, and Britain’s subsequent drawn-out departure, meant for the EU?

Everyday life was affected for many EU citizens, which required action from the EU. A good number of people from other member states were resident in Britain—perhaps as many as 3.5 million of them by the time Brexit was implemented (Lindop, 2021). No longer could they stay and work simply by dint of being EU citizens. Some applied to the British authorities to change their formal residence status. Some left.

Beyond the individual level, however, what about politics and governance? Has Brexit required concerted remedial action by the Union’s supranational political actors and member states? Or have operations just carried on largely as before, only with 27 member states rather than 28? In addition, has Brexit had a more indirect impact, stimulating new dynamics in European politics and power relations between actors at both national and supranational levels? And in what direction have any changes pushed the EU? Has Brexit promoted or undermined the integration of the remaining member states?

To answer these questions, a certain methodological challenge must be met. Since Brexit was finally implemented in January 2020, a great deal else has happened in and around the EU. Immediately afterwards, Europe and the rest of the world were struck by the coronavirus pandemic, which required an enormous mobilisation of public institutions and political will at all levels of government across the continent. Almost exactly two years later, Russia sought violently to conquer Ukraine. These events had considerable impacts on the EU. How, then, to disentangle the Brexit effect from these other effects?

In two later sections, I try to make a virtue out of a necessity. Focusing partly on those two crises, the pandemic and the war, and the policy fields in which EU responses to them occurred, I employ a simple counterfactual approach. Knowing what we know about the preferences of the actors within the EU and of successive British governments, I ask whether it is likely that much would have been different had Britain still been a member when those crises unfolded.

The focus on crisis is chosen deliberately, as many scholars have seen it as a facilitator of deepening European integration. One of the “founding fathers” of the EU, Jean Monnet, asserted that “Europe will be forged in crises” (Håkansson, 2024, p. 25; Jones et al., 2021, p. 1525). More recently, it has been suggested that the Union progresses by “failing forward”: first, by turning to ineffective responses via negotiation between member states’ governments; then by involving the supranational institutions to achieve more robust collective action (Jones et al., 2021). The logic draws on one of the classic theories of European integration, “neofunctionalism”, which proposes that piecemeal cooperation between European countries leads in time to the institutional integration of those countries (Hix & Høyland, 2022, pp. 19–20).

Before we turn to crisis, however, I adopt a more straightforward descriptive approach to the effects of Brexit on the EU. In the next section, I go through the changes to the legislative institutions and procedures that Britain’s departure induced. Then, after a discussion of the two crises, I look at political developments in some member states, particularly the fortunes and positions of the more EU-critical parties before and after Brexit. My general conclusion is that, far from impeding European integration, Brexit has contributed to its acceleration. However, the future remains uncertain. It is not inevitable that this integrative effect will endure.

AN AWKWARD PARTNERSHIP

Britain had always been an “awkward partner”, to quote the title of a book by a British political scientist, Stephen George (1990), published three decades before Brexit was implemented. Nor was Brexit entirely unforeseeable. A chapter on British EU membership that was published in 2013 had the title, “Towards isolation and a parting of the ways?” (Allen, 2013).

For example, Britain had held an earlier referendum, as early as 1975, just two years after it joined the European Economic Community. The question put to voters was whether Britain should stay in. (They decided, by a comfortable margin, that it should.) British governments complained fiercely during the 1980s about what they felt was the country’s outsized contribution to the Community’s budget. It stood aside from the Schengen agreements in 1985 and 1990 on ending border controls. It insisted on being exempt from significant parts of the Treaty on European Union (the Maastricht treaty) in 1992, including the “social pillar” and monetary union—that is, the euro (Best, 1994). Britain legislated to instal a “referendum lock” in 2011, according to which any future adjustment to the EU’s treaties would require a confirmatory plebiscite in Britain. In 2012, Britain vetoed a proposed “fiscal compact” (formally, the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union), in which European institutions were to be given supervisory powers over national budgets. Once again, the other member states went ahead anyway, without Britain.

These were only the most serious of numerous conflicts in which Britain was at odds with most other member states and the supranational institutions. It could be reasoned, then, that Brexit would be good for the EU. Britain’s absence could have removed a brake on the Union’s development and thus facilitated a renewed bout of integration between its member states. In this context, it is worth noting that it was as late as the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007 that, for the first time, the EU adopted a formal path by which a member state could leave (Huysmans, 2019).

On the other hand, the effect could perhaps have been the reverse. The immediate effect of Brexit was certainly “disintegrative”—that is, damaging to the coherence of the Union. It is also conceivable that Brexit could have energised latent discontent with the EU among its various electorates (Lichfield, 2016). It is often argued that the EU is more popular among political elites than among the rest of the member

states' populations. Almost every other member state had at least one political party that was sceptical about or even hostile to the EU. For those parties and their supporters, Brexit could have been an inspiration and a stimulus. It could have made leaving the EU, a hitherto impossible proposition, feel like a realistic option.

These are the questions and the propositions that the current chapter will seek to answer and test, respectively. How has the EU been changed by Brexit? Has it promoted or impeded the integration of its member states into an “ever closer union”, the objective articulated in its founding treaties? In the last few years, a lot of research has focused on the causes and consequences of Brexit for the country that left (for example, Baldini et al., 2022; Cutts et al., 2020). This is probably because it is easier to understand a historical event than to discern the long-term future effects of that event. Here, however, I review some of the growing body of research on the effect of Brexit on the EU (see also Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019). I look at changes that have already taken place, but I also reflect on the EU's direction of travel—that is, what sort of development is likely in the coming years.

THE INSTITUTIONAL AND PROCEDURAL EFFECTS OF BREXIT

The EU is a unique political system (Hix & Høyland, 2022, p. 2), somewhere between a federation and a confederation. It has no government in the customary sense. Rather, it features a highly complex system of decision-making. The system involves two main types of institutions. First, there are intergovernmental bodies, in which the 27 member states are represented. Second, there are supranational institutions, such as a parliament, a bureaucracy, and a court, which are supposed to represent the collective interests of the entire Union. Negotiation between these various institutions is constant.

Balance is crucial. Just in respect to size, the variation between the member states is huge: the three biggest member states have populations of more than 58 million people each; the three smallest have fewer than 1 million each. This disparity has to be taken into account in decision-making procedures. Political ideologies, preferences and interests also vary widely, sometimes reinforcing other differences, sometimes cutting across them. Enlarging the Union, which has happened seven times since the 1970s, has forced adjustment to this complex mosaic in order to

retain a balance that more or less satisfies the most important actors. The departure of Britain, the Union's third-biggest country, naturally required something similar. In reviewing this re-balancing, and its possible consequences, we begin with one of the supranational institutions, the European Parliament.

The Parliament is elected by the citizens of the EU every five years. Because the electoral districts are based on national borders, candidates are nominated almost exclusively by national political parties. Brexit was obviously going to mean that the mandates elected by British voters would disappear. The member states, in the shape of the EU's Council of Ministers, decided how to address this change in 2018. However, by the time of the June 2019 elections to the European Parliament, after which the changes were due to take effect, there was a problem. Unexpectedly, Britain had not yet left the EU. So, in these strange and unusual circumstances, Britain took part in the election.

Britain finally departed at the end of January 2020. The 73 British members of the Parliament vacated their mandates. A little more than a third of them were immediately distributed to other member states, "thereby re-balancing the current imperfect application of the principle of degressive proportionality" between member states, as researchers from the Parliament put it (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020)—meaning that there is only a rough connection between a member state's population and the number of mandates that it has in the European Parliament. Among the 14 member states that benefited from this reallocation, France and Spain did best, gaining five mandates each. Sweden got one. Most of Britain's mandates, however, were to be saved in case of future enlargements of the Union—or a change in the electoral system.

The redistribution of mandates also affected the balance between the party groups in the European Parliament, albeit not drastically. These party groups comprise the elected members from like-minded national parties. The loss of 17 British mandates was a significant loss for the liberal group, but it got back six—more than any other group—in the reallocation. The green group suffered a net loss of seven, the social democrats a loss of six; the Christian democrats enjoyed a net gain of five. But none of this did much to change the balance of forces in the European Parliament. The backing of the two biggest groups, the conservatives (including Christian democrats) and the social democrats, remained necessary but insufficient to secure any politically realistic majority. Broad ideological agreements remain the norm in the European Parliament, especially since

the conservatives and social democrats lost their collective majority in 2019 for the first time. (The British party that did best in 2019, the recently formed Brexit Party, did not affiliate to a party group.)

Of course, British politicians and officials left the other EU institutions, too. The serving British member of the European Commission, a career diplomat, left that role. His portfolio, related to security, was folded into that of the commissioner from Greece. Britain's representatives in the intergovernmental organs, the European Council, the Council of Ministers, and in the administrative committees (including the Committee of Permanent Representatives), also left. As in the European Parliament, this changed patterns of co-operation between the remaining actors within these institutions, but less transparently. Nevertheless, it is possible to gauge some of these effects, both in theory and empirically.

First, the effect on the power of other countries in the Council of Ministers is mediated by the complicated voting rules that were adopted in 2014–2017 (Hix & Høyland, 2022, pp. 72–79). Most decisions in the Council these days are subject to “qualified majority voting”. Normally, this demands that, to be approved, a legislative proposal must satisfy three criteria: 55 per cent the member states (that is, more than half of them) must support it; they must number at least 15; and they must have populations that are collectively equivalent to at least 65 per cent of the Union's total. To put it another way, a minority of states can block a proposal if it can ensure that any one of these criteria is not met—although the minority must also comprise at least four states. These rules did not change with Brexit. This meant that the biggest remaining EU member states could more easily contribute to a blocking minority. France and Germany, for instance, could together form one with the support of just two more countries, if one of those additional countries had at least a medium-sized population (Kleinowski, 2018).

Rules are one thing, however. At least as much depends on what member states want. What did Britain tend to want? Did it tend to have many allies? Let us here focus on economic matters, which have always been central to the EU's activity.

From the 1980s, Britain's ideological reputation, under both centre-left and (more often) centre-right governments, was as a member state that wanted free trade between the EU and the rest of the world, and that preferred limited public intervention in the domestic economy, including the EU's internal market (Allen, 2013, pp. 115–128). The British prime minister in 1979–1990, Margaret Thatcher, is remembered largely as a

fierce “Eurosceptic”—a critic of the EU. This was not always the case, however. She campaigned in the 1975 referendum for Britain to remain in the European Community. During the 1980s, her governments were keen supporters of European integration—or, at least, integration of a certain type. What they advocated was “negative” integration, in the sense of removing barriers to commerce, rather than “positive” integration, in the sense of establishing common EU rules, institutions and resources that offset market forces and allow the projection of political power in other ways.

Support for positive integration, by contrast, has most often been associated with France and other southern countries. Jacques Delors, a French president of the European Commission in 1985–1995, was often in conflict with the Thatcher governments. In many ways, the entire EU was founded on a deep partnership between France and the biggest member state, Germany. However, in economic debates, Germany often stood between the British and French poles. As the EU’s richest member state, Germany had a firm interest in maintaining strong control over the Union’s spending. This interest sometimes overlapped with Britain’s desire to limit the EU’s policy toolkit generally.

In various ways, it has been possible to track empirically the respective positions of the member states in discussions about how to regulate the EU’s internal market (Huhe et al., 2020). For instance, national experts attached to the Council of Ministers were asked, in several rounds of interviews in 2003–2015, about which other countries’ experts they tended to confer with informally when legislation was being proposed. (In such discussions, the member states’ experts can explain their respective positions and arguments to each other and explore the scope for common positions.) In separate research, on over 300 controversial pieces of legislation that arrived on the Council of Ministers’ agenda in the decade from 1998, Britain’s position could be compared with those of certain other states (Hix et al., 2016). Formal votes in the Council of Ministers are not always necessary. When they did occur in 2008–2015, however, member states’ voting behaviour could also be noted.

According to these measures, and with remarkable consistency, Britain belonged to a cluster of like-minded states that also included Denmark, the Netherlands and, above all, Sweden. There is evidence that these three states quickly began to form new ties with others after Brexit. Still, that probably means that they had to adapt their positions to others’ preferences. To put it simply, the sort of positions on market regulation that

the north-westerners tended to hold have been weakened by Britain's departure.

Moreover, Britain was also by far the biggest EU member state outside the eurozone. It could have been expected to shield Sweden—and maybe Denmark, too, despite Denmark's formal derogation from monetary union—from any possible pressure within the EU on recalcitrant states to adopt the euro. Now Poland is the biggest member state outside the eurozone. Poland is, of course, a smaller country than Britain. It is also a neighbour with which the Scandinavians have, at times, had much frostier relations (although a rapid thaw set in after the Polish election in 2023). No wonder Sweden generally saw Britain, after Brexit, as “an ally lost” (Braun, 2016).

So much for policy on trade and market regulation in the EU. Since Brexit, the EU agenda has been dominated by crisis management. We turn now to the two most acute crises and how the EU responded to them in Britain's absence.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AFTER BREXIT

For the EU, crises have come thick and fast over the last few decades. The financial collapse of 2008 triggered the Great Recession, which in turn threatened the survival of the eurozone. Seven years later, there was the wave of migration into Europe, caused in part by the Syrian civil war. Britain was, of course, still a member of the EU during these years. Yet it was relatively lightly affected by both crises. Britain did not adopt the euro, so stood at a safe distance when the single currency looked most vulnerable. Outside the Schengen zone, Britain had some insulation against the migration that spilled across other member states' borders, culminating in 2015.

Crisis affects the Union in different ways (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). Much depends on the nature of a particular crisis and what aspect of the Union it affects. The migration of 2014–2015 prompted member states to reintroduce border controls. It subsequently proved extremely difficult to agree on a common migration policy for the Union, even after Britain had left. Only in late spring 2023 could the European Parliament and then, under the Swedish presidency, the Council of Ministers agree on the positions that they would take into legislative negotiations with each other. The eurozone crisis, by contrast, led to a considerable empowerment of one of the Union's supranational institutions, the European

Central Bank, which decided suddenly in 2010 to change its policy and start purchasing sovereign bonds in order to allow the weaker eurozone countries to finance their public debts. This was a major expansion of the bank's activity. As Britain was outside the eurozone, it could not stop this development.

What can we say about the two more recent crises, the pandemic and the war on Ukraine? Let us look at each of them in turn (Anghel & Jones, 2023). How might they have been handled had Britain still been a member?

The pandemic arrived in Europe almost exactly as Britain departed the Union. There was a mix of initial responses from the EU. The first reactions were mostly at national level—and largely unco-ordinated. Member states scrambled to “re-border” the Union's territory. Crossing between countries became not just more difficult; it was more or less forbidden (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). The member states also initially prioritised securing their own supplies of medicines and medical supplies. Some even banned the export of such items. In late February, Italy, the first European country to be badly affected by COVID-19, activated the Union's civil protection mechanism, in which a member state calls on its peers for help. The call “was met with silence” (Boin & Rhinard, 2023, p. 665).

As the pandemic progressed, however, this picture changed. The EU's main institutions, primarily the European Commission, and EU agencies, such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, became increasingly central policy-makers. In March and April, 2020, money was pumped into schemes such as the EU Solidarity Fund and the Emergency Support Instrument. The European Central Bank again began to buy sovereign bonds aggressively, thus implementing a powerful monetary stimulus in order to offset the economic contraction induced by the crisis.

It is hard to imagine that Britain, as a member state, would have done much to change the initial response to the pandemic in any particular direction. It would probably have acted much like the other member states. Later, it could not have blocked the Central Bank's intervention, even if it had wanted to. What might have caused more disunity was the procurement of vaccines when they became available at the start of 2021. As it happened, post-Brexit Britain gambled successfully by placing early orders for large stocks of different vaccines. The launch of Britain's vaccination programme, which came before the EU's joint effort, earned the

British government great credit domestically (at least for a while). No member state was forced to join the EU's vaccine procurement scheme. However, had Britain still been a member and nevertheless refused to join the scheme, it would certainly have caused controversy and disunity with its EU partners.

Still, these practical and political developments were of short-term significance. The difference between the vaccination programmes probably did not have much long-term political effect.

In one further respect, however, British membership might well have made a difference in the pandemic. By late March, 2020, some member states were pushing hard for fiscal support from the Union. They wanted the EU to sell "coronabonds". In other words, they wanted the EU to raise its own funds on the financial markets—and to take responsibility for repaying the debts to investors. That would have been a big new departure for the Union. Britain's old allies within the EU—Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, plus Austria—were strongly against what they saw as a major transfer of resources from the richer countries to poorer ones. They also insisted that any recovery fund should give out money in the form of loans, not grants.

The opposition of the "frugal four" countries, as they later became known, was initially shared by the German government (Bergsen, 2020). Yet over the next few months, Germany switched sides. The upshot, agreed by the European Council in July 2020, was "Next Generation EU", a huge EU investment fund of around €750 billion (Alcidi & Gros, 2020). Some of it was indeed to be raised by the sale of EU debt. Disbursement of its funds was to be in the form of both loans and grants, subject to strict conditionality and oversight by EU institutions of how the money was to be spent.

It seems unlikely that a British government would have agreed to Next Generation EU. The major empowerment of EU institutions through the sale of the Union's own bonds, and thus the enhancement of those institutions' financial autonomy from the member states, would probably have been unacceptable to Britain. It is also possible that the intrusive conditionality on the member states' use of these resources would have been difficult for the British to swallow.

Britain's opposition would not have been enough to block Next Generation EU in the Council, even if the frugal four and Finland, which also at times sounded frugal, had joined it. Still, if Germany had stuck with the frugal four, plus Finland and Britain, it would have been enough

for a blocking minority. Knowing this, it is possible that the German government would have faced greater pressure, both within the EU and domestically, to water down the recovery fund, or perhaps to secure stronger mechanisms to prevent it from becoming a precedent for future EU fundraising.

The pandemic was a “symmetric” shock to the EU: all the member states were subjected to it. Something similar could be said of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, at least initially. Although the easternmost member states naturally felt most vulnerable to Russian aggression, the sense of shock at the attack on Ukraine was broadly shared.

This helps to explain the strong steps that the EU took in relation to the conflict. This time, the EU response was led actively by the Commission from the start (Håkansson, 2024). Numerous rounds of sanctions against the Russian state, Russian organisations and certain individual Russians were implemented. Sanctions against two Russian allies, Belarus and Iran, were also enacted. The EU devoted considerable resources to accepting Ukrainian refugees (through a “temporary protection directive”), to sending humanitarian aid and to supporting the Ukrainian economy. It is likely that, had it still been an EU member state, Britain would have backed these steps. From the start of the fighting in 2022, Britain was a keen and vocal supporter of Ukraine. As a longstanding supporter of EU enlargement, too, Britain would have also been positive towards Ukraine’s becoming a candidate for EU membership, a status granted by the EU in June 2022. Indeed, Britain had always hoped that “widening” the EU would make it harder to “deepen” the integration of its member states.

What might have been harder for Britain to accept after Russia’s attack on Ukraine was the EU’s enhanced military profile. Britain had never been entirely opposed to a more concerted EU voice in international politics. Yet the country has for decades envisaged its foremost means of influencing the world as running through its “special relationship” with the United States. The main institutional manifestation of that relationship has been NATO. Britain was thus usually wary of any step by the EU that might detract from the primary role of NATO in upholding the security of the Alliance’s European member states.

Having already voted to leave the EU, Britain did not participate when the dormant Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO) in the area of security and defence was activated by most member states in late 2017.

In the absence of Brexit, it is possible that Britain might have joined the other states in PESCO, but not certain. Nor is it clear that Britain would have agreed to the establishment in March 2021 of the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, in which one objective was the capacity to "deploy up to 5,000 troops into non-permissive environments" (European External Action Service, 2022, p. 11; Håkansson, 2024, pp. 11–14). Britain might, too, have baulked at the European Peace Facility, an "off-budget instrument" to co-ordinate the funding of the EU's various "missions and operations" in Europe and Africa within its Common Security and Defence Policy (European External Action Service, 2023).

On the other hand, if the Peace Facility, or something like it, had come into being anyway, even if Brexit had somehow been aborted and Britain had remained an EU member state, the British government would probably not have obstructed the EU's use of the Facility to purchase equipment and supplies, including military supplies, for Ukraine. It might also have approved the EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine that was agreed in October 2022. No British government would have wanted to attract accusations that it was undermining European solidarity in the face of Russia's attack.

Rather like Next Generation EU, these measures to enhance the EU's support for Ukraine served to deepen the integration of the member states. They enhanced the power of the Union to formulate and project its power—its "actorness". It is hard to imagine that this tempo of integration would have been possible without the Russian attack on Ukraine. Whether continued British membership of the EU would have made much difference is harder to judge. A reasonable estimation, however, is that the difference would have been fairly small, such was Britain's keen backing for Ukraine. Still, this strengthening of the EU's foreign and security policy would surely have chafed in Britain.

BREXIT AND THE POLITICS OF THE MEMBER STATES

Although the EU's institutions have become ever more important, the most influential political arenas in the Union are still those at the national level—especially, of course, those in the biggest member states. When British voters decided in 2016 to leave the Union, there were fears in various EU governments that the EU-critical parties in their countries, and those parties' sympathisers, would be inspired to agitate for

something similar—that is, departure from the EU (Rosamond, 2016). There was speculation about popular pressure to enact “Frexit”, “Grexit”, “Italexist”, “Czexit” and other similar neologisms.

In the event, such fears were never realised. Why? I offer two main explanations. They involve the way in which the EU handled Brexit—and the way that Britain did. Below, I look first at the negotiations on the terms of Brexit, then at national political arenas.

Some scholars argue that the Union got its procedures right (Chopin & Lequesne, 2021; Laffan, 2022; Laffan & Telle, 2023). For a start, it refused to start talking with Britain until the formal withdrawal process had been activated. Then, in the negotiations over the terms of Brexit, the Union appointed Michel Barnier, a former French government minister and European commissioner, as a plenipotentiary negotiator. His mandate was set by the European Council and, in more detail, by the Council of Ministers. He was, therefore, the agent primarily of the 27 member states, although his staff were seconded from the Commission.

These decisions about procedure probably were indeed well-judged. Yet they were predicated on something even more fundamental—namely, political will. The most powerful member states, particularly France and Germany, which have invested so much in the EU over many decades, had a strong desire to drive a hard bargain *pour encourager les autres*, to use the French expression. If the EU had been too generous, and the economic costs to Britain of its leaving had thus been limited, other member states might have been tempted to take the same relatively pain-free path—or so it was feared. A tough EU line was thus needed, plus a clear and decisive representation of that line.

Early in the negotiations, which began in June 2017, there was concern among some observers that individual member states, perhaps those most worried about the economic costs to themselves of a rupture with Britain, might be tempted to defect from the joint line. Certainly, Britain hoped to split the remaining member states and bargain directly with their governments, Germany above all (Bale & Pike, 2024). This strategy seemed to be founded on several questionable British assumptions: that German export firms were desperate to maintain easy access to the British market; that they had considerable leverage over the German government; and that the German government could shape the negotiating stance of the entire Union. Yet these assumptions took all too little account of the deep political commitment to European integration that was shared by the entire German political elite. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel,

never wavered in her commitment to the joint EU position. Any other plausible German leader would probably have done the same.

Britain's management of the process was a very different story. In 2017, less than a year after the referendum result, the British Conservative government called a snap election. The Conservatives retained power. Indeed, they increased their share of the vote. However, the vagaries of the electoral system meant that the Conservatives unexpectedly lost their parliamentary majority (Prosser, 2018).

The new minority government, itself a rarity in Britain, then took more than a year to agree on its preferred form of Brexit. Even then, the ruling party remained badly split. That it was so hard for the British government even to decide what it wanted to achieve with Brexit was partly due to its gradually increasing insight into the complexity of the Irish border question, which it had initially underestimated. The recovery of full British decision-making autonomy, including on economic questions, was a declared British goal. Yet it was also committed to the maintenance of an open border between Northern Ireland, a British province, and the Irish Republic. How these incompatible principles were to be reconciled—in other words, how national policy autonomy was to be achieved without border controls—was a conundrum so tricky that it almost destroyed the entire process.

In autumn 2018, the British government did reach a rather rickety Withdrawal Agreement with the EU. Yet the government was unable to secure the endorsement of the British parliament, despite repeated attempts. Many Conservatives could not accept the concessions that the government had made. At the same time, the opposition parties felt no obligation to help the government by supporting the agreement.

During 2019, the British parliament became highly polarised (Aylott, 2020). Each pole in the debate felt that victory was within its grasp, so neither was prepared to compromise. One of these poles comprised a section of the opposition. It sought to stop Brexit altogether. At the other pole, some Conservatives declared themselves ready for Britain to leave the EU with “no deal”—that is, without any agreed terms of departure. Horror at the prospect of a “no-deal Brexit” stimulated the formation of a shadow cross-party parliamentary majority, which constrained the government from implementing any such abrupt form of departure. Yet this majority was insufficiently coherent to unseat the Conservative government or to sustain an alternative government. Deadlock, and a full-blown constitutional crisis, ensued. Twice Britain had to ask the EU to postpone

the date of its departure. Groups of rival demonstrators often gathered in London, outside parliament. It was a febrile time.

The constitutional crisis began to pass after a new Conservative prime minister, Boris Johnson, made a belated and spectacular concession on the Irish border in autumn 2019. (Put briefly, it meant that Northern Ireland would stay in the EU's internal market, despite remaining part of the British state.) This broke the deadlock. The path to the implementation of Britain's withdrawal became increasingly clear. By then, though, the reputational damage to the idea of leaving the EU had been done. To illustrate this reputational shift, we need only look at how the slow British withdrawal was reflected in public opinion and political-party behaviour in other European countries.

Migration and European integration had been distinct political issues, but they became increasingly connected in Britain after the turn of the century. The Brexit campaign, for example, really took off after a big wave of inward labour migration from the new Central and East European member states after 2004, which allowed British politicians to conflate these two sensitive issues. By 2013, the British Conservative Party, under increasing external pressure from an anti-EU challenger party, pledged to hold a referendum on continued EU membership if it should win the next election—which, to their own surprise, the Conservatives did.

At the time of Britain's referendum, it was reasonable to suppose that a similar conflation of issues might happen in other EU countries, albeit stimulated less by labour migration within the Union than by the flow of people from outside it seeking asylum. In the election to the European Parliament in 2014, radical challenger parties on both right and left, which were often coloured by various shades of Euroscepticism, made considerable gains. The culmination of the migration crisis in the EU in 2015 then gave a further boost to radical parties. By 2016, the Danish People's Party and a newly launched rival, the New Right, were pushing for a referendum on Denmark's continued membership of the Union. So were other radical-right parties, including the Dutch Party of Freedom, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats. In 2017, Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally, echoed the prime slogan of the successful British pro-Brexit campaigners, "Take back control", in her own effort to win the French presidency.

At the same time, "softer" variants of Euroscepticism—which involves criticism of specific EU policies, such as monetary union, or of political integration in general—became more vocal. In Germany, Greece, and

Italy, such arguments could be found on both the radical left and radical right. In several Central European states, Eurosceptics formed or joined governments (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018).

Yet the trend did not last (van Kessel et al., 2020). Even before the conclusion to her presidential campaign in 2017, Le Pen began to tone down her anti-EU position. As late as 2018, the Sweden Democrats were still calling for a referendum on continued Swedish EU membership. The following year, however, before the European election, they dropped that demand, albeit while reaffirming a critical stance towards the EU. The Danish EU-critical parties made similar retreats.

It is reasonable to infer that the most vehemently EU-critical parties discovered after 2016 that hardening their anti-EU positions did not actually bring them much electoral reward. The issue just never took off in domestic politics (Heinö, 2023). Direct indicators of public opinion, such as the EU's Eurobarometer surveys of EU citizens and residents, point in the same direction. In autumn 2016, a few months after the British referendum, the proportion of Eurobarometer respondents who thought that EU membership was a good thing was 53 per cent. Four years later, with Brexit having been finally delivered some months before (and towards the end of a transitional period, in which Britain remained within the EU's economic structures), that proportion had risen markedly, to 63 per cent. The proportion who thought that EU membership was a bad thing, moreover, fell from 16 per cent to just 9 per cent (Eurobarometer, various years).

The simplest and most persuasive explanation for these trends is that Brexit quickly lost its attraction as a policy option due to the political turbulence that leaving the EU induced in Britain (de Vries, 2023; Hobolt et al., 2022; Malet & Walter, 2023). Support for EU membership increases when the realistic alternative to it is perceived as less attractive. If the sort of alarming and humiliating political convulsions that Britain experienced in 2017–2019 were what a member state risked when it chose to leave, the idea of departure had clearly become a toxic one—as even the most strongly EU-critical parties in other member states came to understand.

CONCLUSION: BREXIT—AN ACCELERATOR OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION?

A feature that the EU has acquired over the last 30 years or so is a *lingua franca*, a common language. Geopolitical developments during the twentieth century progressively reduced the number of European countries in which anything other than English was taught as the primary second language. Thus, as the Union expanded, English gradually became its main language of internal and external communication. Brexit will not change that. In Ireland and Malta, English is one of two official languages. Far more importantly, English fulfils a crucial, perhaps indispensable, function in facilitating the constant negotiation through which the EU is governed.

More generally, the significance of Brexit can sometimes be overstated. It was, for sure, the first time a member state chose to withdraw. Yet the drama was limited and mostly confined to internal British politics. Over the last few centuries, there have been several examples of a constituent part of a federal country trying to leave the union to which it belongs. The upshot has often been violence. The EU, however, is not a state. It does not have its own military capacity, controlled by its own institutions, so it did not have the means to prevent Britain's departure. Nor did it have the will. Nothing like enough was at stake for the EU even to consider such drastic measures.

In fact, while it would be difficult to find many within the EU who actually welcomed Brexit, some of the biggest enthusiasts for European integration might, by late 2024, have been forgiven for thinking that Britain's departure was actually for the Union's best. In the 1960s, after all, the French president, Charles de Gaulle, initially refused Britain membership, as he feared the effect that it would have on the EU (George, 1990, pp. 7–9). Perhaps events many decades later have vindicated his view. Brexit—so far—has had an integrative effect on the EU, not a disintegrative one.

In this chapter, we have explored two main reasons for this integrative effect. The first is that, outside the EU, the British partner cannot be as awkward as it was for much of its time inside. Britain always preferred to retain as much autonomy as it could. It was also jealous of what it perceived as its special relationship with the United States. Sometimes, the EU's solution was to give special treatment to Britain, as with the Treaty on European Union. But the British presence made the EU

cautious. Plans for more ambitious integration were always presented in the shadow of expected British scepticism and obstruction. That shadow has now been lifted—which leaves remaining member states with similar preferences, such as Sweden, weaker and more exposed.

As we saw, it is likely that Brexit augmented the integrative impulse produced by the EU's response to crisis. The post-pandemic recovery fund, EU Next Generation, would probably never have seen the light of day had Britain remained a member. That the Union should raise its own funds in the financial markets might well have remained an idea rather than a reality. Nor might the conditions imposed on the member states in their use of those funds have been acceptable to a British government. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate about how Britain would have positioned itself in the bitter argument between, on one hand, the EU institutions and, on the other, Hungary and Poland over the extent to which those states' access to cohesion and pandemic-recovery funding should be withheld because of their alleged democratic deficiencies. The conflict between liberal-democratic principles and national autonomy might have been a delicate one for Britain to handle. Finally, it is possible that Britain would have insisted on different ways of channelling support for Ukraine, rather than those that have in practice served to boost the EU's security capacity.

The second reason for Brexit's integrative effect on the EU was the manner in which Britain left. In many ways, it involved a series of disastrous political miscalculations. The British Conservative Party leadership agreed to promise a referendum because it did not expect to be able to deliver its promise. Even if it did find itself able to deliver, it could not imagine that such a vote would lead to anything other than confirmation of British EU membership. There was thus no planning for how leaving the EU would actually be implemented. In the event, therefore, the process became subject to increasingly intense political battles in Britain. The country's democratic institutions are long-established and robust, and they eventually mediated a mostly peaceful resolution—withstanding the murder, just prior to the referendum, of a British parliamentarian. Yet the turbulent, tortuous process was anything but an attractive model to outside observers.

By 2024, moreover, Brexit could hardly be judged a success. Even its strongest British advocates were acknowledging as much (Politico, [2023](#)). Although it is not easy to isolate the economic effect of Brexit from other

factors (Norbäck, 2024), it was certainly difficult to discern any direct benefit for Britain.

Politically, meanwhile, the associations with Brexit were, if anything, even more negative. Johnson's chaotic government collapsed in mid-2022, after an internal party revolt. His party took more than two months to choose a replacement, who then lasted 49 days as prime minister before her own authority melted down in chaos. The fall of neither Johnson nor his successor was directly connected to Brexit. Indeed, the continuing turmoil could be seen, like Brexit itself, as a symptom of deeper political and social change in Britain, the effects of which were refracted through Britain's unusual political institutions. However, it did appear that leaving the EU had brought nothing but misfortune for the political party that had done most to bring it about. In July 2024, the Conservatives crashed to a historic defeat in a parliamentary election. The party's proportion of mandates in the lower chamber collapsed from more than 56 per cent to under 16 per cent. Brexit had barely been mentioned in the preceding election campaign, which indicated that the matter had been, in effect, settled. That was scarcely any consolation to the Conservatives.

It must be concluded, then, that Brexit has served to accelerate European integration rather than inhibit it. Brexit boosted the EU rather than undermining it. Is it thus reasonable to draw a further conclusion, namely, that Brexit was a failure—perhaps even a disaster—for Britain, but an unexpected success, a blessing in disguise, for the EU?

Arguably, it is too soon to say. Post-Brexit Britain, while not exactly thriving, did not break down as a functioning state. By 2024, it seemed reasonably likely that the country would retain its territorial integrity and eventually experience improved economic performance, as its supply chains slowly adapt to its new position in international markets. There may yet be unforeseen advantages in Britain's recovered decision-making autonomy.

Moreover, the EU's relative cohesion is not guaranteed. Even after Brexit, the Union is very big and diverse. It already faces the dilemma of dealing with member states that, in the EU's eyes, do not live up to its professed values. If it expands further to take in countries like Ukraine and those in the Western Balkans, as it says it wants to do, it will become even bigger and more diverse, and upholding its values internally may become even harder. Yet refusing to expand its membership would stoke other problems.

The EU cannot assume that the painful British exit has permanently vaccinated the voters in the remaining member states against the idea of life outside the union. Some of the UK's ratification struggles could have been avoided with different decisions regarding political procedures at various points. In other words, it is not guaranteed that a future exit would entail the same difficulties in some other member state as in the British case. Anyway, the memory of the upheavals that Brexit caused in the United Kingdom may fade over time, much like the effects of some vaccines.

Moreover, the deeper integration between EU member states, as we have seen, can accelerate quite quickly under favourable circumstances. In such a case, it becomes even more important, but also more difficult, to ensure continuously that this integration has popular support. If Brexit were to contribute to a short-term impetus for deeper EU integration, which in turn resulted in a voter backlash against the process in the longer term, a certain historical irony might be discerned.

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