

UK soft power downfall



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Policy brief

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Summary

The UK culture industry has been hit by two major crises in recent years. Covid-19 and Brexit. Unlike the Covid crisis, which had a more short-term impact and affected much the same way most of Europe, the post-Brexit impact continues to have a strong negative impact on the development and export of the UK cultural capital. Dealing with these Brexit impacts is possible and, given the profound negative impacts on British culture, necessary. We can see the cancellation of (not only) music festivals, an outflow of artists to EU countries and a gradual increase in the influence of EU and US artists on UK festivals. All of these impacts are reducing the capacity to export British culture abroad. This reduces the overall strength of the UK's soft power and may lead to a weakening of the UK's position internationally.

The key to stopping the current trends is to end the outflow of artists from the cultural sector. Artists are leaving due to lack of opportunities, both in terms of pay and lack of opportunities to grow and travel to EU countries. The possibility to enter the EU for touring is limited under the current situation due to the lack of a uniform solution for visa processing. Simplifying visa processing and establishing Work Permit-Free Travel will improve the current situation.

The Research Panel recommends the following measures: *Developing a Transitional support package with a period ending after the bilateral agreements have been resolved, establish Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements to enable a pre-Brexit state, create Music Export Authority for small and medium-sized artists.*

Introduction

Brexit serves as the perfect example of how something, that has been negotiated and debated for a long time, can result in drastic changes. The implications of those changes are relatively difficult to predict with high accuracy. It was widely anticipated that Brexit would majorly affect migration and economic development. However, it also brought about crucial changes in cultural aspects.

There is a tendency to underestimate the influence of culture. Such an approach is deeply flawed, especially in today's globalized society. While countries are trying to remove borders and lean towards closer cooperation, it is apparent that Brexit caused the United Kingdom (UK) to step back and consequently lose a noticeable amount of its influence within the international arena. Not being a part of the European Union, the UK is no longer able to access the funds, cooperate as an equal, and be a part of a diverse yet united Europe.



What is more concerning for the majority of British politicians and citizens, however, is that the UK is not able to achieve the same level of success without the support from the EU as it used to. As Adam Gregory once noted: "Then Brexit came along, and literally every barrier in the world went up overnight". The new borders and restrictions made it harder for Britain to export its culture. The UK, already considerably weakened by COVID-19, is now failing to recover due to artists not being interested in traveling in and out of the country. A huge number of artists were already forced to quit their occupation due to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and today, the number of people ending their careers is growing even faster. Without European financial assistance, Britain is not able to support the creators to the extent that it did before.

In attempts to react to the emerging crisis, Tom Cargill, an expert on foreign policy, set up the British Foreign Policy Research Group in 2016-2017. It was aimed “to work as the connective tissue between the UK’s policy-makers, businesses, institutions, and ordinary citizens, to promote the connectivity and understanding needed to underpin Britain’s national resilience and global leadership in the 21st Century”. Later in 2020, as an addition to that, the Soft Power Research Group, dealing with cities, theaters, galleries, museums, sports, etc., was created.

”Then Brexit came along, and literally every barrier in the world went up overnight.”

Subsequently, in June 2023, *The Future of UK Soft Power: Building a Strategic Framework* was presented to the public. The article explored the approaches that could be used to apply soft power in practice. Particular attention was drawn to the ways in which Brexit has changed reality. It was evident that festivals appeared to be affected the most out of all the tools of soft power. The number of participants of British festivals is ever decreasing with little hope to recover. In order to make up for the lack of interest, the authorities need to attract the American artists who are outshining the British contribution and make Britain seem like a less influential actor. As a result, it is most evident that the British soft power capacity has weakened due to Brexit. This work will demonstrate the reason behind this through a set of case studies and statistics. The goal is to provide a variety of strategies aimed at strengthening the cultural exchange of the United Kingdom.

Culture after Brexit

Despite culture being in the sphere of management of the states in the EU, after Brexit, British culture and art faced a multitude of challenges. One may argue that the EU has little influence on the sector and that the probability of Brexit majorly affecting it is relatively low. However, the statistics show otherwise.

One of the things that the artists felt relatively soon was the lack of freedom of movement. The absence of this privilege resulted in a more complicated process of touring and working in the EU, especially considering the fact that the Brits now need to face the requirements of 27 different states. The transportation of equipment, costumes and sometimes visas add to the additional costly expenses that did not exist before.

Surveys for the House of Commons evidence session from 2021 indicate the following (<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/326/petitions-committee/news/138987/committee-announces-evidence-session-on-arrangements-for-uk-touring-professionals-and-artists-in-the-eu/>).

Over 15,000 responses were gathered.

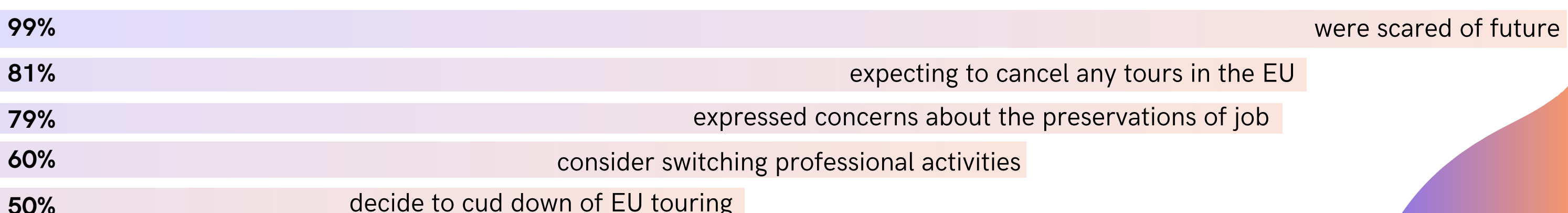
- Nearly 100% of musicians were scared of bad implications on the future development of music, touring, and survival of the industry
- 81% were expecting to cancel any tours in the EU after Brexit
- 79% expressed concerns about the preservations of job and the prospects of careers
- 60% were considering switching professional activities due to the changes
- 50% decided to cut down on the expenses of touring in the EU and decrease the number of staff members

An e-petition was drafted in hopes of achieving a visa-free permit for Touring professionals and artists. On this petition, more than 282,000 signatures were collected. However, this initiative launched by the British was not supported by the EU. What may appear to be a solution in certain cases is the Global Talent visa, however, it is more of an exception rather than a universal cure.

It is important to bear in mind that this is not one-sided. The UK is in need of European artists covering close to 7% of the UK's overall creative industries workforce. In specific cases, the numbers can vary. About 30% of visual effects and 25% of architecture are thus operated by Europeans.

The UK is not eligible to reach European funds that, whether directly or indirectly, support culture (for example Erasmus+, Europe for Citizens, and the European Structural & Investment Funds). Creative Europe alone provided the UK with approximately €18.4 million between the years 2014 and 2020. The EU spent £345 million on the British cultural projects between 2007 and 2016. The UK Government has not presented any sufficient alternative to make up for the loss of financial support, perhaps except for the Global Screen Fund, oriented at films and television.

Collaboration is the aspect that is not that evident and is not discussed that often. British artists have lost the opportunity to negotiate cultural policies with the EU states. The UK is missing out on European cultural exchange that was especially relevant for the younger generations.



British Festivals post-Brexit

Recent surveys suggest that British Festivals are losing 40% of the EU's musicians compared to the rates in 2017-2019, according to data collected in 2023. The slightly better rates of 2022 can be explained by the following factors: 1) removal of the COVID restrictions and 2) minor experience with paperwork and new regulations after the first post-Brexit events. This has left a noticeable mark on the British economy as festivals were bringing billions on festivals and the music industry. To try to make up for the decreased numbers of participants, expectedly, the organizers are raising prices. Thus, tickets for the Glastonbury festival are 26% more expensive, if we compare the years 2022 and 2023.

At the same time, the number of British artists playing EU festivals is also decreasing. Best for Britain claims that the turnout of representatives from the UK has decreased by a third since Brexit. The British Government came up with 14 recommendations aimed at improving the trading reality of British citizens. These include visa recommendations and a few European programs, such as Youth Mobility Scheme. The EU is open to dialog and so 24 European states are now working on suggesting visa-free routes for the UK performers.

Glastonbury Festival

Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts is one of the major cultural events in Britain presenting music, dance, theater, circus and other art forms. It started as a counterculture in the 1960s. The event, heavily influenced by hippies, was initially supposed to be a meeting spot intended for the self-expression of people. The festival has taken place annually since 1970. Every year, it takes place on Worthy Farm, Pilton, Somerset and is considered to be the largest greenfield event of this sort. The location is meaningful as it holds 3000 years of history, being a place pilgrims would visit for centuries.

In the beginning of 1990s, with the reawakening of Britpop bands, and the discovery of dance and rave culture, the festival recorded a massive rise in popularity. In 2008, the 'classical' direction of the festival was enlarged: hip-hop was added to the traditional rock, which attracted even more people. During the 2010s, the Festival maintained high railings and the tickets were usually sold out in the first 30 minutes. Brexit has, however, adversely affected the future of the festival. In 2016 a lot of artists spoke up about the new international order on stage. For instance, John Donne recited a poem "No Man Is an Island."

In general, data shows that the number of EU musicians is gradually falling. In 2022 the changes amounted to 42%, in 2023 it progressed to 50%. For us, the shift in the representation is the most visible. Initially, the festival offered a scene for domestic artists only. With Britain entering the EU, the event gained more diversity among the European representatives. This step was crucial for the creation of a common European identity through culture and the organization of cultural exchange. Nowadays, the UK citizens feel isolated.

Today, the festival clearly lacks that diversity. In order to provide it, the organizers are opting for the mainstream singers from the USA. This started back in 2008 with the performance of Jay-Z, being quite the controversial decision. This strategy is also used to motivate people to come, even with the complications brought about by Brexit. This year the headliners of the festival are Dua Lipa, Coldplay, SZA and Shania Twain. And even if the first two are considered to be of a 'British' origin, SZA comes from the USA and Shania Twain is Canadian. All of them will perform on the Pyramid stage, which holds a lot of meaning. The pyramid appeared in 1971 and since then has become the crucial attribute of the festival's identity. Its shape symbolizes freedom of expression and the feeling of unity. It represents the spirit of the festival, which had always been based on inclusivity, diversity, and social activism.

While it may seem like a solution to the issue of diversity and cause more people to attend, it goes against the initial spirit of the festival, that is, advocating against the mainstream and providing a place for more liberal representation of people. This can be seen as an example of how American culture is overlapping British culture and how it is threatening one of the major goals of the festivals nowadays - the spread of British influence.

As a result, it is clear that the Glastonbury Festival may as well be the representation of a picture that all the British festivals share:

The numbers of European artists are going down.

Britain is not capable of utilizing soft power as efficiently any more.

The UK is losing money

American artists are becoming more influential than the British.

British people lose the sense of inclusiveness.

The prices of the tickets and additional services are rising.

Tourists are less willing to attend.

The level of diversity is going down.

The British music industry in danger

If we move back to 2016 and try to unpick how the UK music industry got to where it is today, we find that the current critical situation was preceded by successive crises that have not been adequately addressed by the government and carry signs of a lack of concern for the cultural sector in the UK.

Brexit itself has already substantially increased the cost of tours to continental Europe for concert promoters. The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic has caused not only the music industry to come to a halt completely, but also the loss of a huge number of jobs and festivals, while forcing large numbers of artists out of the industry. The subsequent post-covid comeback brought a much-needed boost to the cultural scene as a whole, however, the unresolved post-Brexit fallout (unavailable visas, lack of bilateral agreements, increased spending on European touring) gradually led to the current impasse. Instead of the expected simplification of administration and increased export of British culture abroad, we are now seeing the complete opposite. British music festivals of transnational importance, such as the Glastonbury Festival, are able to counter these negative effects, if only thanks to major spending cuts and skyrocketing prices. For smaller independent, multi-genre and counter-cultural festivals, however, these conditions are lethal.

Herefordshire's Nozstock festival and others

"When Standon Calling - the summer music festival during which 5 000 people descend on the Hertfordshire countryside to see headliners such as Bloc Party and Wolf Alice - announced this year would be postponed, it became the ninth festival for 2024 to cancel or call time for good." writes the UK's Guardian. The festival started as a small family event for close friends on a family farm in Hidden Valley, located near a dilapidated Tudor farmhouse. From this initial small country festival, Nozstock has grown into a giant with nine stages and guest artists from many musical genres such as reggae, indie-pop, alt/punk, folk-rock, or drum 'n' bass. More than 17,000 visitors are expected to attend this year's 26th and final edition. The event, still organized by the Nozstock family, is a victim of increased expenses, according to Nozstock. "Costs have doubled across the whole site and ticket prices can't double in-line with that."

According to AIF, 36 festivals were either folded completely or were postponed last year, adding to the 100 events that have disappeared since the peak in 2019, when there were 600 live music festivals in the UK. Festivals including Bluedot, Standon Calling and Barn on the Farm will not take place this year due to budget concerns, while NASS Festival, Leopollooza and Long Division shut down permanently after their 2023 editions. With rising costs, we can expect more cancellations, not just of music festivals across the UK. According to the current situation, not only the independent festival scene, but also the biggest music events of the British Isles are being negatively affected.

Five percent for festivals

FivePercentForFestivals is an initiative launched by The Association of Independent Festivals (AIF). The organization of over 200 independent music festivals in the UK is calling for the UK government to reduce the statutory tax. The initiative calls for lower VAT on music festival ticket sales from 20% to 5% for a temporary period of three years. According to the AIF, this short period of time will be sufficient to allow the music industry to recover. During this time, the gap between the ever-increasing costs of running events and the falling profits should even out. The Association also provides the example of almost 40 festivals canceled or suspended in the last 5 years.

Music creators

A Music survey released in the UK in September 2023 shows that eight out of ten Music Creators affected by Brexit say their earnings have plunged since the UK left the EU. A total of 1,461 British music creators responded to this survey. The research shows that the most affected are up-and-coming artists, with a lack of new opportunities for growth, partly due to a lack of cross-cultural exchange. Asked for their views on other adverse changes, these creators listed a number of other barriers to making music in the EU including administration costs (56%); transport costs (55%); shipping and logistics (54%); production costs (34%); carnets (32%); and cabotage (13%). Music exports are much lower compared to the potential level of exports provided that the UK remained in the EU. But culture cannot be measured solely on the basis of macroeconomic factors. Independent cultural groups, subcultures and countercultures in the music sector are essential for the formation of new music collectives. Britain's biggest music labels such as the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and The Who started as small independent bands and gradually grew to become some of the most important bands of the last century. The aforementioned crises have the worst impact on up-and-coming artists and it is questionable whether the British music industry will remain competitive with the current status quo.

The decline of the cultural breeding ground may prevent the emergence of new and innovative artists in the future. Using Herefordshire's Nozstock as an example, we can see that in the long term, festivals initiated by local residents and emerging artists are a major export of British soft power. A reduction in the interest of foreign performers in touring the UK limits the competitiveness of British soft power and undermines its potential for use in international relations and diplomacy.

- **Carnet** is an international customs document that simplifies customs formalities in the case of temporary use of goods across borders, i.e. temporary export and re-import (return) to the country of origin.
- **Cabotage** rules are types of trade or transport in coastal waters or airspace between two points within a country.



£1

£15

For every £1 of DIT's contribution, artists were able to generate £15 in export revenues

Export of the British music industry to EU countries

In the United Kingdom cultural diplomacy is lacking its power and the musicians and festivals are facing problems. But what about the festivals in the rest of Europe and the British musicians performing on them? After Brexit the situation with visas has become more complicated not only for people heading to the United Kingdom but also for the British. In comparison to pre-Brexit years 2017-2019, the amount of British acts decreased by 45% in the summer of 2023. The musicians are facing troubles from the beginning and they are even forced to cancel their concerts in Europe because of problems connected to Brexit. From the pragmatic point, for the organisers of the festivals it is much safer to contact a European band when they have little time than a British one. In the United Kingdom they need a lot of time to prepare, because of all the bureaucracy.

One of the big problems is that the government of the United Kingdom did not help the musicians even when they had the opportunity. In the year 2021 the European Union offered visa-free tours by musicians to all countries in the bloc. The government, however, refused this offer. Many famous musicians like Elton John, Noel Gallagher or Thom Yorke criticized the changes after Brexit and tried to support young performers in their case of touring the European Union.

This situation is helping neither the artists nor the government. For young artists it is important to have the option of performing on festivals abroad in Europe, so they can spread British culture and possibly help strengthen British cultural diplomacy and soft power. Nowadays, the United Kingdom is lacking cultural activities and it is mostly caused by Brexit.

Brexit is not only about sending entrepreneurs to Europe and the bureaucracy about the process. The European Union also helps financially with the festivals and this money is missing in the United Kingdom.

One of the organizations trying to help festivals and cooperating with them is the European Festivals Fund for Emerging Artists (EFFEA). It has 14 members, but the United Kingdom is not one of them. Another big project is Creative Europe which operates with a big load of dotation. The main goal of Creative Europe is to support the European audiovisual, cultural and creative sectors. It is one the first programs of the European Union with budget and funds which supports the cultural and audiovisual sector. The United Kingdom is not part of it.

The main problem of all of this is that the United Kingdom not only loses some funds from EU programs, but they are also losing contact with the European festivals. If it continues this way, British artists will not perform on European festivals and, corollary, British cultural diplomacy will lose an important source.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Developing a Transitional support package with a period ending after the bilateral agreements have been resolved: Unlike other sectors of the UK economy, the music sector has not been given long-term and systematic support in dealing with the consequences of Brexit. The government should provide a transitional support package to mitigate the impact on the music industry. This package should cover the gap between falling artist earnings and rising costs. Support should be a key pillar of the UK Government's actions to maintain a strong UK cultural sector. The implementation of transitional support need not simply be a matter of sending benefits, but should exist alongside temporary lower taxation (in the lines of the 5% For Festivals requirement created by the AIF). The period should not end before international bilateral agreements are settled.

Establish Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements to enable a pre-Brexit state: The government should move to simplify the current complex system of issuing travel visas and work permits. Currently, only 21 EU member states allow "certain kinds" of music touring without the need for a work permit or visa. Additional restrictions may also apply in individual countries, for example France requiring musicians to be employed in a state registered venue. Outside of these so-called 'extra' conditions, even today's agreements with the 21 countries mentioned above do not work sufficiently.

However, the number of actual visa-free trips varies from country to country and frequently falls far short of 90 in 180 days. Agreements also need to be established with the six remaining EU Member States and work permits negotiated for artists travelling to these countries. As well as multilateral agreements on a cabotage exemption for all trucks used for cultural events, a UK-EU cultural exemption on carnets and CITES, a visa waiver agreement for music workers who want to work in the EU on a short-term basis, and work on a cultural touring agreement covering cabotage, cultural exemption and visa waiver for geographical Europe (EU, UK, EFTA/EEA, Switzerland) (based on UK MUSIC).

Create Music Export Authority for small and medium-sized artists: The purpose of this export office would be to systematically boost music exports. The activities of the body would include consultation and expert assistance on visa and licensing issues in EU and US markets. Support would primarily be given to small and medium-sized artists who are most affected by the impact of Brexit and Covid. The Office should target new European audiences for these emerging artists and seek to systematically export the UK music industry. It should also help shape robust frameworks for copyright, licensing and enforcement in exporting countries.

This body could be modelled on similar agencies in Germany, France, Australia and Canada that are involved in advising artists on export logistics and strategy, helping them to expand into new markets and raise their profile. There is also the European Music Exporters Exchange, which is made up of 29 different national and regional bodies (UK MUSIC).

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