

10
AFTER THE
BREXIT
REFERENDUM

A SHRINKING POWER

AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL
ASSESSMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



REPORT
JUNE 2026

£75–100
billion

decrease in annual public sector revenues
assuming a 6%–8% decline in GDP per capita
and a constant population size



Instytut Sobieskiego
Lipowa 1a/20
00-316 Warsaw

sobieski@sobieski.org.pl
www.sobieski.org.pl

**A SHRINKING POWER
TEN YEARS AFTER THE BREXIT REFERENDUM:
AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Dr. habil. Arkady Rzegocki ORCID 0000-0002-8688-0365
Dr. Piotr Arak ORCID 0009-0009-4325-3220
Dr. Przemysław Biskup ORCID 0000-0002-2573-3046
Zuzanna Hebdzyńska
Dr. Aleksander Łaszek
Prof. Anand Menon ORCID 0000-0002-0304-6528
Dr. Julia Patorska

Translation: Zuzanna Hebdzyńska

©Copyright by Instytut Sobieskiego 2026
ISBN 978-83-68374-25-4

Design and production: Piotr Perzyna



A SHRINKING POWER

**TEN YEARS AFTER THE BREXIT REFERENDUM:
AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL
ASSESSMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Arkady Rzegocki (red.)

Piotr Arak

Przemysław Biskup

Zuzanna Hebdzyńska

Aleksander Łaszek

Anand Menon

Julia Patorska

A Report by the Sobieski Institute and Deloitte



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: BREXIT A DECADE ON	14
<hr/>	
2. THE IMPACT OF THE BREXIT DECISION ON ECONOMIC GROWTH	19
2.1 WHY DID THE COSTS OF BREXIT PROVE SO HIGH?	23
2.2 A WEAKER ECONOMY LOWERED LIVING STANDARDS AND THE SECURITY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM	26
2.3 CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ECONOMIC SECTION	28
2.4 BREXIT AND THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION POLICY	29
2.5 THE POST-BREXIT ECONOMY: HOW THE UNITED KINGDOM'S DEPARTURE FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION RESHAPED THE STRUCTURE OF TRADE AND THE MAP OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT	36
<hr/>	
3. THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE STATE AFTER BREXIT	53
3.1 BREXIT AS THE CULMINATION OF A LONG POLITICAL CRISIS	55
3.2 BREXIT AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM	56
3.3 BREXIT AND TERRITORIAL COHESION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM	59
3.4 SOVEREIGNTY AFTER BREXIT: BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND INTERDEPENDENCE	62
CONCLUSION	65
FINDINGS	66

4. POLISH–BRITISH RELATIONS, 2016–2026: FROM BREXIT TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP	68
4.1 INTRODUCTION	69
4.2 A DIFFICULT STARTING POINT	70
4.3 DIPLOMACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP	70
4.4 SECURITY AND DEFENCE – A NEW PILLAR OF PARTNERSHIP	71
4.5 UKRAINE AS A TEST OF THE PARTNERSHIP	72
4.6 COOPERATION BETWEEN THE DEFENCE INDUSTRIES	72
4.7 ECONOMIC COOPERATION	73
4.8 THE ROLE OF THE POLISH COMMUNITY	74
4.9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	78
<hr/>	
5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	79
CONCLUSION	83
<hr/>	
ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PUBLISHER	84

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The tenth anniversary of the 23 June 2016 referendum has brought the political, economic, and social consequences of Brexit back to the forefront of public debate. A full decade has now passed, allowing for an assessment of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union that moves beyond the immediacy of initial reactions and towards a more measured and nuanced evaluation.

This report argues that the United Kingdom did not suffer the collapse so widely predicted at the time; rather, it has undergone a process of gradual 'shrinking' – a permanent depression of its growth trajectory, a weakening of its position within the European economic system, and a transition from an influential actor within a major bloc to a middle power navigating the international order alone.

In response to this challenge, experts from the Sobieski Institute and Deloitte, together with the report's other contributors, offer an in-depth, multidimensional assessment of the aftermath of Brexit across its economic, political and social dimensions. The study seeks to capture in full the consequences of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union and concentrates on the following themes:

The economic dimension. To reduce the benefits of EU membership to subsidies alone is a fundamental error. The true foundation of growth – as the evidence plainly demonstrates¹ – lies not in financial transfers but in unimpeded access to the single market. The case of the United Kingdom illustrates this point precisely. As a net contributor to the EU budget, the country ought, in principle, to have gained financially from Brexit. However, the opposite occurred: having left a deeply integrated market, the British economy weakened significantly. This carries a salient lesson for Poland – one to bear in mind in particular now, as the country grows wealthier and its net position within the EU budget inevitably shifts.

A narrow focus on formal sovereignty can prove to be a trap. The British experience demonstrates that the recovery of a state's formal sovereignty does not release it from the dense web of global and regional interdependencies. Although the British

¹ Deloitte, *20 lat Polski w Unii Europejskiej – bilans korzyści gospodarczych*, Deloitte Polska, Warsaw 2024.

Parliament reclaimed the full range of its legislative powers, this theoretical freedom immediately collided with the realities of a deeply integrated economy. In practice, London's operational agency remains constrained by the need to preserve regulatory alignment with the EU market and by the rigidity of global supply chains. Moreover, the old European ties have been replaced by new external strategic dependencies, which successive governments have confronted without a coherent vision for the reshaping of the state. Leaving the European Union thus brought a reconfiguration of existing constraints rather than the promised restoration of control, exposing the profound divergence between formal sovereignty and the genuine capacity to pursue the state's own objectives.

Brexit did not resolve the problems of the provinces. Paradoxically, the regions that provided the strongest support to Brexit in 2016 have borne the heaviest burden of its economic consequences. There, the vote to leave was an expression of revolt by former industrial centres against the London mod of globalisation and against entrenched structural inequalities. Yet in place of the 'levelling up' promised by the government, these regions experienced a significant economic slowdown after the referendum. The loss of frictionless access to the EU market disrupted local supply chains, while the new domestic instruments – among them the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – proved considerably less generous than the EU structural funds from which those regions had previously benefited. Brexit, therefore, not only failed to solve the problem of the 'geography of discontent' but deepened it, with the old, industrial regions paying the highest price for the state's voluntary economic disintegration.

Brexit was, furthermore, delivered on the promise of regaining control of the borders, and it did subject EU citizens to the same points-based system as third-country nationals. Even so, it coincided with a *de facto* liberalisation of non-EU migration and with record net migration, reaching approximately 944,000 in the year ending March 2023.² What changed, however, was the national composition of those arriving in the United Kingdom – from predominantly European to predominantly non-European – a shift accompanied by a fall in the number of EU students and a rise in applications for international protection.

The 2016 referendum did not initiate a crisis of the political system; it was a failed attempt to resolve problems that had been accumulating for decades – the culmination of a long-running crisis of representation rather than its origin. Brexit accelerated the most far-reaching restructuring of the party system in a century: it eroded the Conservative–Labour duopoly and opened the political stage to anti-establishment movements. It also exposed tensions within a multinational state – in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The growing strength of parties beyond the traditional duopoly suggests that this crisis of representation, of which the referendum was just one of the symptoms, has not been overcome but has merely assumed new forms.³

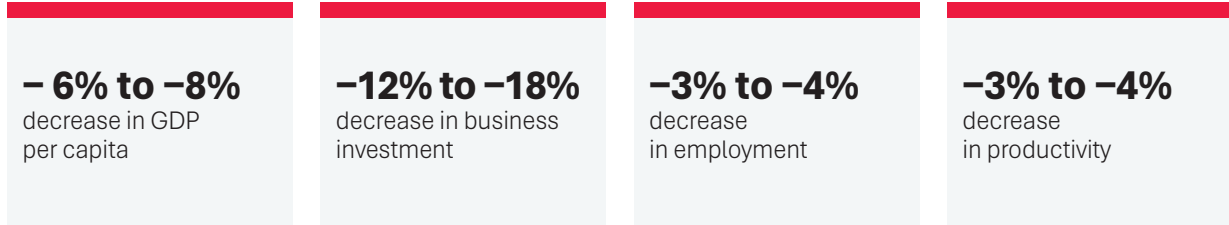
2 M. Sumption, B. Brindle, P.W. Walsh, *Net Migration to the UK*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

3 P. Biskup, *Wzrost poparcia dla partii antyestablishmentowych w Wielkiej Brytanii*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/wzrost-poparcia-dla-partii-antyestablishmentowych-w-wielkiej-brytanii>.

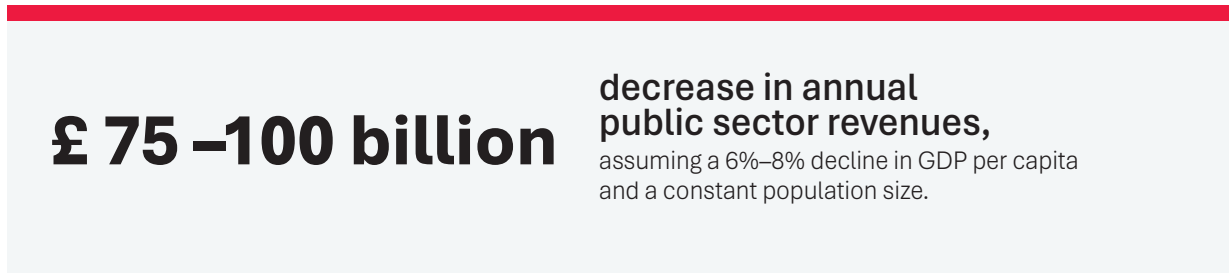
Despite its departure from the EU, the United Kingdom has remained one of the pillars of European security – as became especially clear in the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. From Poland’s perspective, the most unexpected outcome of the decade has been the deepening of Polish–British relations, which have turned into one of the closest strategic partnerships in Europe. It rests on a shared assessment of threats, on defence and industrial cooperation, and on a fundamental shift in the British perception of Poland – from a country associated mainly with migration to a key partner and co-architect of the continent’s security. The British experience demonstrates that departure from a deeply integrated market entails lasting costs, and that formal sovereignty does not free a state from economic interdependence in a heavily globalised world. Poland – bound to the single market far more tightly than the United Kingdom ever was – should consistently deepen European integration, pursue a pragmatic migration policy grounded in labour-market realities, and, in parallel, cultivate its strategic partnership with the United Kingdom as a durable element of its security policy. The debate over Poland’s place in the European Union ought not to be confined to the question of EU transfers alone.

BREXIT IN NUMBERS

ECONOMY: A DECADE AFTER BREXIT



Source: Bloom et al. (2025).



Source: Deloitte analysis, Chapter 2.

TRADE: EU AND NON-EU EXPORTS



Sources: Automotive Manufacturing Solutions (2025); International Accounting Bulletin (2024); Brexit FactBase (2026).

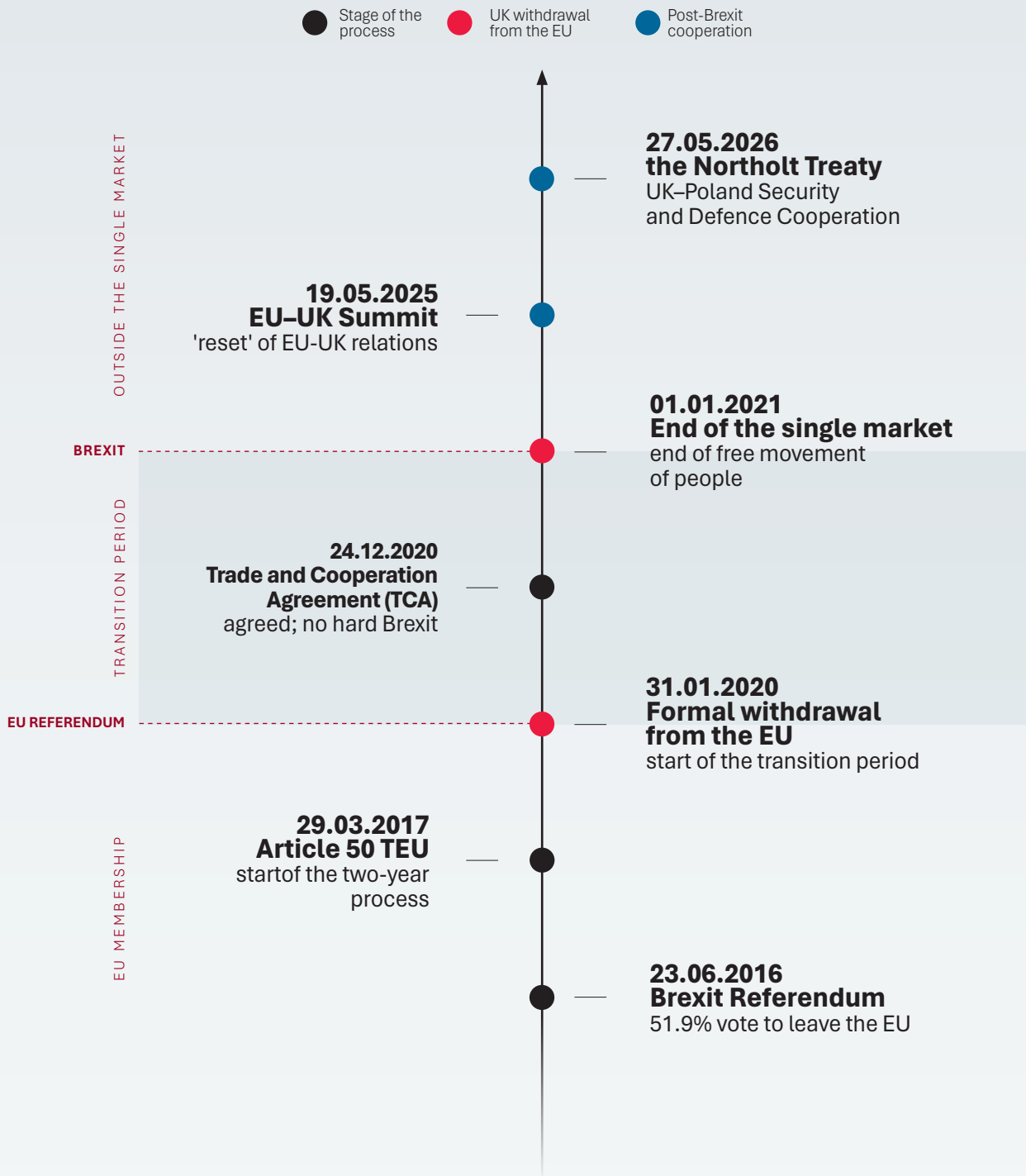
PEOPLE: EDUCATION AND MIGRATION



Sources: Bloom et al. (2025); Office for National Statistics (2021); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2024); Migration Observatory (2025). Authors' calculations.

BREXIT – FROM LEAVING THE EU TO FORMING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

KEY DATES: 2016–2026



Source: Authors' own analysis.

Prime Minister **David Cameron** announced a referendum on the country's membership in the European Union. In his speech, he called on voters to remain in the bloc.

5 January
1975

The first referendum in which the British electorate could vote against continued membership within the European structures – at the time, the European Economic Community (EEC). **Voters ultimately chose to remain within the European common market.**

23 January
2013

17 378 581 **8 470 073**

In favour of remaining within the European structures

In favour of leaving the European Union

2015

The Conservative Party won the general election, having pledged – among other things – to **hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union.**

NORTHERN IRELAND
55,8% | 44,2%

THE ROAD TO THE EU REFERENDUM

Brexit



Continued access to the Single Market is vital for British businesses and British jobs. Since 2004, Britain has been the destination for one in five of all inward investments into Europe.
And being part of the Single Market has been key to that success.

David Cameron, 'Bloomberg speech', 23 January 2013



WALES
47,5% | 52,5%

GIBRALTAR
95,9% | 4,1%



Turnout in the referendum reached **72.2%** of those eligible to vote,

of whom 51.89% voted to leave the European Union.

23 June
2016

The United Kingdom
left the European Union
at midnight
on 31 January 2020.

23 January
2020

31 January
2020

The Withdrawal Agreement Bill received Royal Assent from Queen Elizabeth II, passing into law as the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020.

On 29 January 2020,
the European Parliament approved
the **agreement by 621 votes to 49**,
with 13 abstentions.

SCOTLAND
62,0% | 38,0%

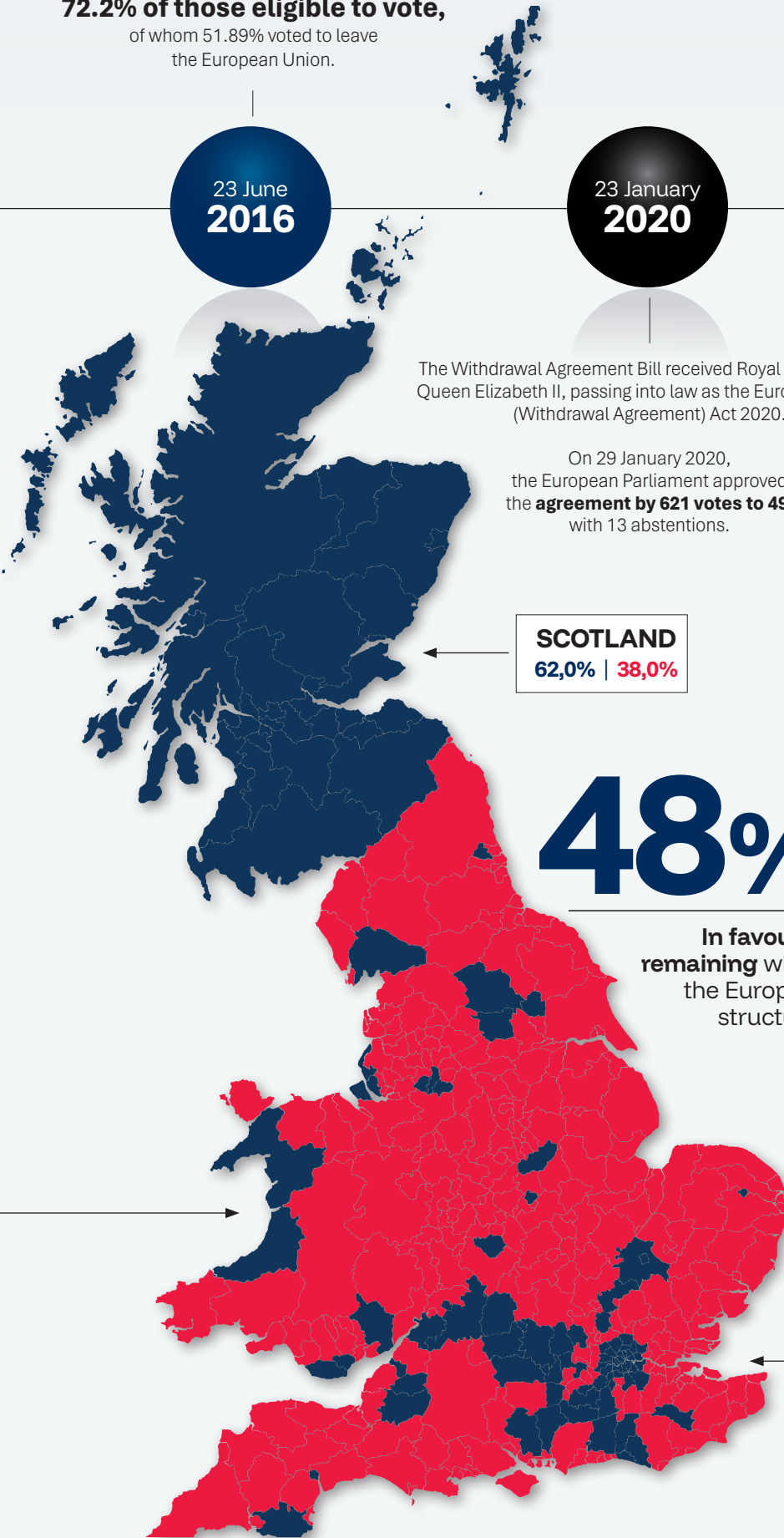
48%

In favour of
remaining within
the European
structures

52%

In favour of leaving
the European Union

ENGLAND
46,6% | 53,4%



1. INTRODUCTION: BREXIT A DECADE ON

Arkady Rzegocki



Ten years after the referendum of 23 June 2016, Brexit remains one of the most significant political, economic and geostrategic events in modern European history. For the first time, a Member State chose to leave the European Union, setting in motion a process that would change not only the future of the United Kingdom but also the way Europe thinks about integration, state sovereignty and its own place in the world. Today, a decade on from that turning point, a more measured and nuanced assessment of Brexit's effects is possible – one free from the emotion of the referendum campaign and from the political disputes that dominated British public debate for years.

The United Kingdom's experience is of particular importance for all European states, for Brexit was not only a political project but also a major economic, institutional and social experiment. Advocates of leaving the European Union promised to regain full control over borders, law and economic policy, and the creation of a new vision of 'Global Britain' – a more flexible and competitive state, active on the international stage. Opponents warned of a weakened British economy, of international marginalisation and of widening social divisions. A decade later, reality has proved more complex than either side predicted.

One of the most important lessons of the past decade is the evident absence of a coherent strategy defining the United Kingdom's position after leaving the European Union. Successive governments focused above all on delivering the withdrawal process itself, while a long-term vision of a new model of economic and political development remained ambiguous. In the end, the concept of a so-called hard Brexit prevailed, subordinating economic and regulatory questions to the political goal of regaining formal sovereignty.

At the same time, the events of recent years show that even outside the structures of the European Union, the United Kingdom remains deeply tied to the continent. Growing cooperation on security, new forms of political coordination, and the debate over rejoining selected European programmes such as Erasmus+ – all indicate that a complete separation of the United Kingdom from Europe has never been possible.

Brexit, however, is not solely a story of economic costs, political tensions or the redefinition of British sovereignty. One of the most interesting – and least expected – outcomes of the past decade has been an unprecedented deepening of Polish–British relations. Contrary to the fears that surfaced after the referendum, the United Kingdom did not cease to be a key partner for Poland, and Poland became one of London’s most important allies in Europe. A shared view of European security, the role of NATO, the approach to Russia, and support for Ukraine has created the foundation for a new strategic partnership. In many areas, Polish–British relations are closer today than they were during the United Kingdom’s EU membership. It is precisely this phenomenon that should be counted among the most significant political outcomes of the post-Brexit era.

This report offers a comprehensive assessment of the first decade after Brexit. It combines economic, political, social and geostrategic perspectives, capturing both the British experience and its significance for Poland and Central Europe. Its aim is not merely to summarise the events of recent years but to draw wider conclusions about European integration, the functioning of contemporary democracies, and the challenges facing medium-sized states in an unstable international environment.

The report opens with an **Executive Summary** and a compilation of key data in the section **Brexit at a Glance**, presenting the principal economic, social and political indicators that illustrate the scale of the changes that have taken place in the United Kingdom since 2016.

The introduction – **Brexit a Decade On**– offers an overall assessment of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union and lays out the main research questions that frame the structure of the report.

The second chapter, **The Impact of the Brexit Decision on Economic Growth**, is devoted to the economic consequences of Brexit. It is written by **Julia Patorska**, **Dr Aleksander Łaszek** and the Deloitte team, who, drawing on extensive access to a wide range of data, analyse the impact of new trade barriers, regulatory changes, investment and developments in the labour market. The chapter discusses foreign trade and economic relations with the European Union, labour shortages, economic growth and investment, and how Brexit has affected the operations of businesses and corporations. A separate section by **Zuzanna Hebdzyńska**, a researcher specialising in European migration and asylum policy, addresses the migration paradox – the changes in the structure of migration and educational mobility following departure from the European Union. **Dr Piotr Arak**, chief economist of VeloBank and former director of the Polish Economic Institute, in turn analyses the public finances, the functioning of sectors particularly exposed to the effects of the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU, and the widening developmental disparities between London and the country’s other regions.

The third chapter, **The Political System and the State after Brexit**, prepared by **Dr Przemysław Biskup** of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, focuses on the transformation of the British political system. The author analyses changes in the party system, the durability of the new political divisions, the tensions surrounding Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the practical dimension of recovered sovereignty. The chapter shows that Brexit emerged as not only a project concerning relations with the European Union but also as an event that profoundly reshaped the British state itself.

The report also draws on the contribution of Prof. Anand Menon, director of the British think tank UK in a Changing Europe, who examines the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, interrogating both the architecture of Brexit itself and the post-Brexit environment in which the British state now operates.

The fourth chapter, **Polish–British Relations, 2016–2026: From Brexit to Strategic Partnership**, prepared by **Prof. Arkady Rzegocki** – former Ambassador of the Republic of Poland in London and subsequently in Dublin, and former Head of the Polish Foreign Service – traces the development of relations between Warsaw and London after 2016. The chapter discusses the building of the strategic partnership; political, military and economic cooperation; the significance of the Polish diaspora in the United Kingdom; and the changes in social mobility following the departure from the EU. It shows that, despite the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, Polish–British relations have entered a new and exceptionally dynamic phase of development.

The report closes with **Key Recommendations**, prepared jointly by experts of the Sobieski Institute. In this section, the authors seek to offer a concise answer to the question of what the United Kingdom has become after Brexit, and what lessons its experience holds for Poland, Central Europe and the European Union as a whole. The recommendations highlight the numerous challenges associated both with the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU and with crises unconnected to it, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine. They are addressed to political decision-makers as well as to the business and expert communities.

We have been able to bring together an exceptional body of contributors representing a range of communities – academic, analytical and expert – from both sides of the English Channel. One of the contributors, Prof. Anand Menon, director of the renowned British think tank – UK in a Changing Europe, provided his expertise to the report. He analysed the situation in the United Kingdom following the Brexit referendum, examining both the architecture of Brexit itself and the post-Brexit environment.

All of them combine scholarly achievement with practical experience gained in public administration, diplomacy, international institutions, the financial sector and research organisations. As a result, the report unites analytical rigour with a practical view of political and economic processes.

The publication is the product of a collaboration between the Sobieski Institute and Deloitte, bringing together the experience of one of Poland's foremost research institutes in international affairs with the expertise of specialists in economic and regulatory analysis. Deloitte – one of the world's oldest audit firms – was founded in London in 1845, just as Britain ushered in the era of free trade by repealing the Corn Laws. It is the consequences of that order, nearly two centuries on, that this report sets out to examine.

We hope this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, experts, entrepreneurs and all those invested in the future of Europe, the United Kingdom's place in the world, and the next chapter of Polish–British relations.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE BREXIT DECISION ON ECONOMIC GROWTH

Julia Patorska, Aleksander Łaszek



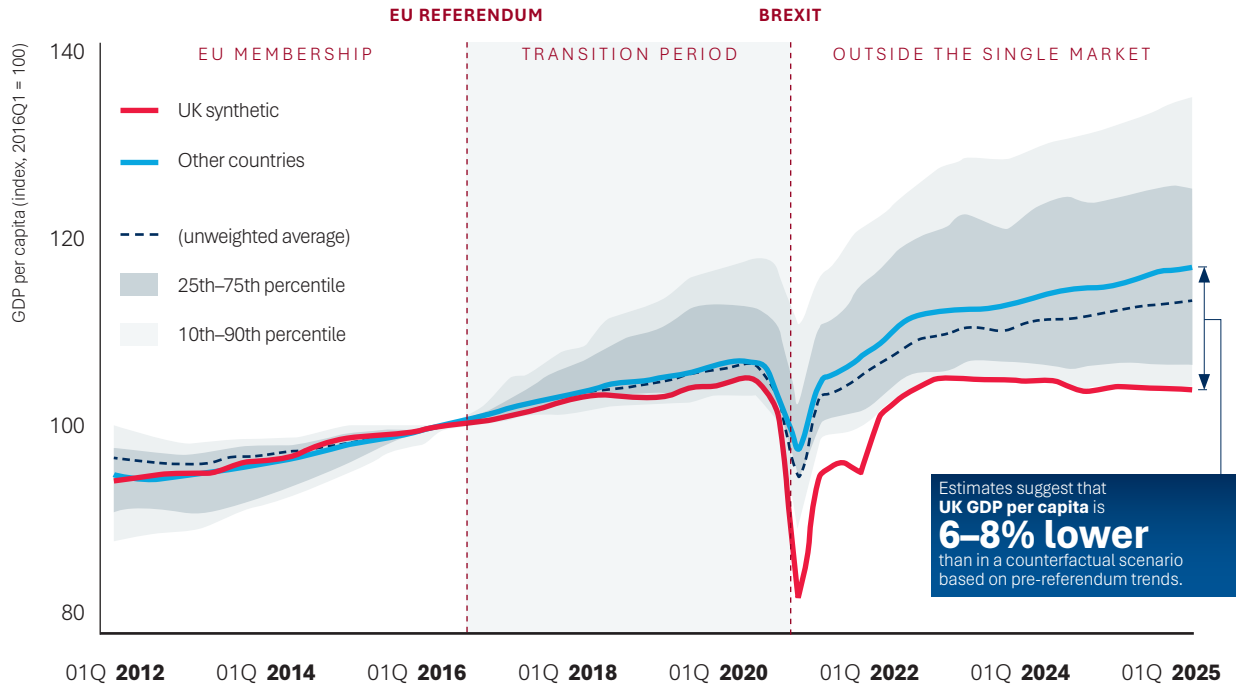
Ten years on, the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union has left it poorer by between 6% and 8%. Before 2016, the United Kingdom had been one of the most dynamic large economies in the European Union; however, over the following decade, its growth slowed significantly, and it began to fall behind other developed countries. To quantify the scale of this effect, Bloom et al.⁴ compared the United Kingdom’s growth before and after Brexit with that of thirty-three highly developed countries. Their benchmarks ranged from a simple arithmetic average to more sophisticated measures accounting for the size of economies and trade links, as well as a synthetic ‘doppelgänger’ of the United Kingdom, constructed from the data of other countries so as to track its pre-2016 path. Whichever approach was used, the results were similar: British growth slowed substantially, and after ten years, GDP per capita is 6%–8% lower than it would have been had pre-referendum trends continued.

The Brexit decision was a clear turning point. The approach adopted by Bloom et al.⁵ naturally raises the question of the extent to which pre-2016 trends can be credibly extrapolated over the subsequent decade. In the present case, however, such an extrapolation appears well justified. First, comparing the UK’s GDP growth with that of other countries allows factors affecting the world economy as a whole to be taken into account. Second, as we show below, firm-level microeconomic evidence corroborates the existence of a negative effect. Third, the referendum result came as a surprise, forcing firms to change the way they operated. Crucially, the key moment here is not the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union itself but the referendum: from that point on, firms were already factoring a UK outside the Union into their decisions.

4 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*, NBER Working Paper, no. 34459, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge (MA) 2025, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w34459>.

5 Ibid.

GDP PER CAPITA CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON COMPARISON WITH A COUNTERFACTUAL NO-BREXIT SCENARIO



The forecasts made during the debate over the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union proved highly accurate. The negative effects of Brexit come as no surprise.

Economists are often said to be very good at explaining why their forecasts did not come true – a reflection of the still limited accuracy of macroeconomic prediction. While forecasting in many fields, from the weather to sports results, has improved considerably over the past few decades, no comparable progress is visible in economics⁶. This stems, among other things, from the many simultaneous and hard-to-predict factors that affect the economy, from wars to technological change, politics and regulation. Moreover, firms and households continuously adjust their behaviour to changing forecasts. The accuracy of economists’ forecasts in the case of Brexit reflects the fact that the decision affected fundamental and well-understood channels of economic growth, particularly international trade, specialisation, and extensive value-chain integration.

⁶ See, eg. N. Silver, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail – but Some Don’t*, New York 2012; P.E. Tetlock, D. Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, New York 2015.

It was the scale of the negative consequences that proved surprising. Of the eleven formal *ex ante* analyses the International Monetary Fund carried out in 2016 on the impact of what was then only a potential Brexit on the UK economy, eight pointed to a strongly negative impact, two to a moderately negative one, and one to a positive impact.

The average of the forecasts assumed a fall in the UK's GDP of about 4%.⁷ A factor that was probably underestimated was the complex and time-consuming negotiation of the terms of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, which introduced an uncertainty that amplified disruptions to international trade.

Forecasts assuming a positive impact of Brexit on the UK economy rested on implausible assumptions. Although most studies pointed to negative effects of leaving the Union, some authors also spoke of potential net benefits⁸. Those results, however, rested on very strong assumptions of unilateral tariff elimination by the United Kingdom and of deregulation, ignoring the political economy and the nature of the forces driving Brexit, among which at least two very different camps converged. Some supporters of leaving the EU hoped for deregulation and a more open economy, which, in theory, might have brought certain benefits. At the same time, however, many Brexit supporters sought a more isolationist United Kingdom that would 'protect' its domestic market and home-grown firms – which in practice meant less competition and slower productivity growth. It is now clear that British policy after 2016 was closer to the second of these options. Crucially, although the European Union is a significant source of regulation, some of the least well-designed and most growth-inhibiting rules originate in national legislation. In the United Kingdom, one of the principal constraints to development is a restrictive planning regulation that limits housing supply, contributing to high house prices and reduced affordability. The consequence is a deterioration in the built environment, slower urban development, and reduced labour mobility. These are fundamentally domestic policy challenges that withdrawal from the European Union was not capable of addressing.

7 International Monetary Fund, *United Kingdom: Selected Issues*, 'IMF Staff Country Reports' 2016, no. 2016/169, Washington (DC) 2016.

8 Eg. P. Minford, *Understanding UK Trade Agreements with the EU and Other Countries*, Cardiff Economics Working Papers, no. E2016/1, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff 2016.

2.1 WHY DID THE COSTS OF BREXIT PROVE SO HIGH?

Rising uncertainty and restricted access to the EU single market translated into slower GDP growth after Brexit. Once the referendum results were announced, British firms had no clarity about the future shape of domestic regulation or the terms of access to the single market. As a result, they suspended some investment and curtailed their expansion abroad. As the terms governing access to the EU market became clearer, the adverse effects of higher tariffs and other non-tariff barriers to single-market participation increasingly began to materialise.

The negative macroeconomic effects of Brexit are visible in both macro- and microeconomic data. Bloom et al.⁹ supplement the macroeconomic analysis with a microeconomic dimension, drawing on data from the Decision Maker Panel (DMP) – a survey designed specifically to capture firms’ uncertainty surrounding the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU in all its complexity and across its full time span. As early as the first years after the referendum, almost 40% of firms cited Brexit as one of the three main sources of uncertainty.

In the most recent study, DMP data were used to construct a synthetic index of firms’ pre-referendum exposure to the EU across six dimensions: exports, imports, employment of EU workers, the importance of EU regulation, the share of EU directors, and EU ownership. This index was then combined with accounting data from the FAME database, enabling a *difference-in-differences* method with firm and time fixed effects. This allowed the authors not only to assess whether firms more exposed to the EU recorded weaker growth in investment, employment and productivity after 2016, but also to identify, in part, the channels through which those effects were transmitted – mounting uncertainty, expected falls in sales, and managerial time absorbed by preparations for regulatory and trade change.¹⁰

Investment was among the areas most affected by Brexit. The fall in investment stemmed above all from the fact that firms lost clarity about the future business environment, particularly with regard to their relationship with the EU. Not knowing what tariffs, regulations or administrative barriers would apply, many businesses held back or scaled down new projects. In practice, firms deferred investment until the outlook became clearer. This was particularly evident among businesses with greater exposure to the EU market, for which the risks associated with changes in trading arrangements were highest. Bloom et al.¹¹ estimate that, in macroeconomic terms, business

9 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, S. Chen, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, G. Young, *Brexit and Uncertainty: Insights from the Decision Maker Panel*, ‘Fiscal Studies’ 2018, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 555–580.

10 Ibid.; N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

11 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

investment was around 18% lower by 2025 than in a no-Brexit scenario, while micro-economic estimates point to a fall of around 12% by the 2023/24 financial year. Earlier analyses reached similar conclusions: Springford estimated that by the second quarter of 2022 the level of investment in the United Kingdom was around 11% lower than in a counterfactual ‘doppelgänger’¹², while Haskel and Martin¹³ found that after the referendum business investment in the United Kingdom essentially came to a halt, with a range of comparative methods suggesting that a significant part of this weakness was indeed linked to Brexit.

The impact of Brexit on trade materialised both through the years of uncertainty preceding the change of trade regime and through the rise in non-tariff barriers after 2021. Dhingra and Sampson stress that between 2016 and 2020, Brexit acted above all as a shock to expectations and uncertainty about the future UK–EU economic relationship, influencing firms’ decisions even before the new trade rules took effect.¹⁴ Crowley, Exton and Han, in turn, show that uncertainty about future access to the EU market constrained the entry of British firms into export markets in the very first months after the referendum, an effect that intensified over time.¹⁵ Once the Trade and Cooperation Agreement took effect, the trade consequences became more direct: Freeman et al. estimate that leaving the single market and the customs union led to an immediate and lasting fall in goods trade with the EU, reducing the United Kingdom’s total exports by 6.4% and imports by 4.4% within the first two years, with smaller firms hit particularly hard.¹⁶

Productivity declined mainly at the within-firm level, and to a lesser extent through a less favourable allocation of resources between firms. Bloom et al. estimate that by 2025 labour productivity in the United Kingdom was around 3–4% lower than in a no-Brexit scenario, while microeconomic results point to a fall of around 3.4% in private-sector total factor productivity by 2023/24.¹⁷ From a macroeconomic perspective, Broadbent et al. interpret the post-referendum adjustments as the economy’s response to information about a future slowdown in productivity growth in the tradable-goods sector, which helps explain the weakening of growth, investment and consumption after 2016.¹⁸

12 J. Springford, *The Cost of Brexit to June 2022*, Centre for European Reform, London 2022, https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/insight_JS_costbrexit_21.12.22.pdf.

13 J. Haskel, J. Martin, *How Has Brexit Affected Business Investment in the UK?*, Economics Observatory, Bristol 2023, <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/how-has-brexit-affected-business-investment-in-the-uk>

14 S. Dhingra, T. Sampson, *Expecting Brexit*, CEPR Discussion Paper, no. 16970, Centre for Economic Policy Research, Paris–London 2022, <https://cepr.org/publications/dp16970>.

15 M.A. Crowley, O. Exton, L. Han, *Renegotiation of Trade Agreements and Firm Exporting Decisions: Evidence from the Impact of Brexit on UK Exports*, Cambridge Working Papers in Economics no. 1839, Faculty of Economics, University of Cambridge, Cambridge 2018, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.27669>

16 R. Freeman, M. Garofalo, E. Longoni, K. Manova, R. Mari, T. Prayer, T. Sampson, *Deep Integration and Trade: UK Firms in the Wake of Brexit*, CEP Discussion Paper No. 2066, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science, London 2024, <https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/126762/>; N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

17 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

18 B. Broadbent, F. Di Pace, T. Drechsel, R.J. Harrison, *The Brexit Vote, Productivity Growth, and Macroeconomic Adjustments in the U.K.*, ‘Review of Economic Studies’ 2024, vol. 91, issue 4, DOI:10.1093/restud/rdad086.

Microeconomic accounts, by contrast, emphasise channels such as reduced investment in intangible assets and technology, weaker innovation, higher organisational costs, and the diversion of managerial time to Brexit preparations, which weakened productivity directly at the firm level.¹⁹

Brexit also caused a fall in employment, although on a smaller scale than in the case of investment. Bloom et al. estimate that the level of employment in the British economy was around 4% lower by 2025 than in a remain scenario, while microeconomic results point to a fall of around 3% for the economy as a whole by the 2023/24 financial year.²⁰

More broadly, the IMF had warned even before the referendum that leaving the EU could weigh on the labour market through weaker trade, lower investment and poorer growth prospects²¹, while Dhingra and Sampson conclude *ex post* that the main channels of Brexit's impact were higher import prices, lower investment and slower growth in real wages and GDP – consistent with a picture of weakened demand for labour.²² The analysis by Bloom et al. shows that firms with greater exposure to the EU market experienced weaker employment growth following the referendum than firms with less exposure²³.

A comparison of the macro- and microeconomic results leads to the conclusion that Brexit had a broad, multi-channel and lasting negative impact on the British economy. The new estimates by Bloom et al. point to a higher and more durable cost than some earlier *ex post* assessments had suggested, although the direction of the effect remains consistent with earlier institutional forecasts and the later empirical literature.²⁴ In this sense, the most recent research reinforces rather than overturns the earlier consensus, according to which the economic costs of Brexit were distributed across trade, investment, productivity, prices and – indirectly – the labour market.²⁵

19 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, S. Chen, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, G. Young, *Brexit and Uncertainty: Insights from the Decision Maker Panel*; N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

20 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

21 International Monetary Fund, *United Kingdom: Selected Issues*.

22 S. Dhingra, T. Sampson, *Expecting Brexit*.

23 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

24 Ibid.; International Monetary Fund, *United Kingdom: Selected Issues*.

25 S. Dhingra, T. Sampson, *Expecting Brexit*; B. Broadbent, F. Di Pace, T. Drechsel, R.J. Harrison, *The Brexit Vote, Productivity Growth, and Macroeconomic Adjustments in the U.K.*

the scaling back of operations and changes in the structure of employment.³¹ A similar conclusion is reached by Forster-van Aerssen and Spital³², who note that Brexit contributed to a fall in labour supply in the United Kingdom and thereby weakened its long-term growth potential.

In the long run, it is slower productivity growth that will constrain the pace of real-wage growth. The Office for Budget Responsibility (2025) assumes that the current model of trade relations between the United Kingdom and the EU will reduce the long-run productivity of the British economy by around 4% relative to a remain scenario, and that both exports and imports will be around 15% lower than in the counterfactual.³³ This lower level of productivity is consistent with the estimates of Bloom et al.³⁴

According to the Office for National Statistics, average weekly earnings in the United Kingdom stood at £749 in March 2026, equivalent to around £39,000 gross a year. On this basis, the estimated negative impact of Brexit on wages is around £1,500 gross a year.

Slower economic growth also reduced public-sector revenue. Public-sector revenue in the United Kingdom amounts to just under 40% of GDP. Assuming, for simplicity, that Brexit did not change the size of the population but only lowered GDP per capita by 6%–8%, this implies lower public-sector revenue of £75–100 billion a year. Of course, a lower GDP also often means lower spending – though these are hardly desirable effects (for example, lower public-sector wages or lower pensions). To place the scale of the lost revenue in context, it is worth recalling that the slogan of the ‘Vote Leave’ campaign was £350 million a week for the NHS. This was meant to reflect the scale of the savings achievable by leaving the European Union, to be channelled into the health service. Without entering into a discussion of the accuracy of that figure, on an annual basis, it would amount to £18 billion. To use a more current comparison, the cost of a modern frigate (Type 26), of which the Royal Navy is short, runs to around £1.2 billion.

31 *Why Has Non-EU Migration to the UK Risen?*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2023.

32 K. Forster-van Aerssen, T. Spital, *The Impact of Brexit on UK Trade and Labour Markets*.

33 *Brexit Analysis*, Office for Budget Responsibility, London 2025, <https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/the-economy-forecast/brexit-analysis/>.

34 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

2.3 CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ECONOMIC SECTION

- **The single market fosters faster economic growth.** As early as the eighteenth century, Adam Smith wrote about the benefits of specialisation, and in the nineteenth David Ricardo demonstrated the gains from international trade. The EU single market and the four freedoms associated with it are a practical realisation of those ideas. A range of empirical and theoretical work has estimated the benefits of joining the EU.³⁵ The United Kingdom has, unfortunately, confirmed their findings by demonstrating the reverse process – leaving the single market, raising trade barriers, and incurring the negative effects associated with both.
- **Poland is far more integrated into the single market than the United Kingdom ever was.** This is a result both of geography – an island, unlike Poland, which is closely tied to Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – and of economic structure, given the greater importance of industry in the Polish economy. As early as 2014, Højbjerg et al. estimated that more than 4 million jobs in Poland were tied to exports to the EU market, against slightly more than 2 million in the United Kingdom.³⁶ As a share of total employment, this was more than 20% in Poland and less than 10% in the United Kingdom. More recent estimates for Poland indicate that this figure has already risen to more than 5 million.³⁷ This means that the trade shock associated with a reorganisation of supply chains would be far greater in Poland and would directly affect a far larger number of workers.
- **The debate around the European Union is too often reduced to the inflow of EU funds.** In the light of the available research, it is the single market, not EU funds, that is the main mechanism driving the growth of acceding countries.³⁸ The example of the United Kingdom confirms that a country that was a net contributor to the EU budget became poorer, rather than richer, after leaving the European Union. This is worth bearing in mind, since as Poland grows wealthier, its net fiscal position vis-à-vis the EU budget will gradually shift.

35 See: N.F. Campos, F. Coricelli, L. Moretti, *Institutional Integration and Economic Growth in Europe*, 'Journal of Monetary Economics' 2019, vol. 103, pp. 88–104, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmoneco.2018.08.001>;

J. 't Veld, *The Economic Benefits of the EU Single Market in Goods and Services*, 'Journal of Policy Modeling' 2019, vol. 41, issue 5, s. 803–818, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2019.06.004>.

36 L. Højbjerg, J.R. Munch, M.E. Stæhr, *The Economic Impact of the EU Single Market on Member States*, Copenhagen Economics, Copenhagen 2014.

37 *20 lat Polski w Unii Europejskiej – bilans korzyści gospodarczych*, Deloitte Polska, Warsaw 2024.

38 *Ibid.*

2.4 BREXIT AND THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION POLICY

Zuzanna Hebdzyńska

2.4.1 AN UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE OF BREXIT

Migration was one of the most important factors shaping the outcome of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. The salience of the issue increased significantly over the period: whereas only around 5% of the public considered it highly significant in 1994, 56% of respondents identified it as an important concern by 2015.³⁹ Contrary to the expectations of a large proportion of Brexit supporters, the period that followed the referendum was marked by a pronounced rise in net migration to the United Kingdom⁴⁰ – even though one of the central arguments of the campaign to leave the European Union had been the need to ‘take back control’ of the country's borders.

This chapter examines the mechanisms through which Brexit, advocated in part as a means of strengthening control over migration, brought an end to the free movement of EU citizens and enabled a redesign of the immigration system that ultimately facilitated increased inflows of non-EU nationals.

2.4.2 MIGRATION, EUROSCEPTICISM AND THE 2016 REFERENDUM

The EU enlargements of 2004 and 2008 marked a turning point in the formation of contemporary migration flows to the United Kingdom. These accessions opened the British labour market to citizens of, among others, Poland and Romania, and the question of migration moved from the periphery of public debate to its very centre. Slogans about ‘taking back control’ of the borders and beliefs about migrants’ impact on the country's economic situation gained traction. Research indicates that support for Brexit was higher in areas experiencing more rapid demographic and ethnic change, suggesting that perceptions of social transformation had a significant effect on voting behaviour.⁴¹ It is particularly noteworthy that the rising salience of migration in public debate occurred under conditions of relatively broad British autonomy in shaping migration policy. Even as an EU member state, the United Kingdom maintained a Points-Based System applicable to third-country nationals; it remained outside the Schengen Area, which meant that it retained the ability to carry out border controls on EU citizens and, under Protocol No. 21 to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, it held

39 L. Richards, M. Fernández-Reino, S. Blinder, *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>.

40 M. Sumption, B. Brindle, P.W. Walsh, *Net Migration to the UK*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

41 M.J. Goodwin, C. Milazzo, *Taking Back Control? Investigating the Role of Immigration in the 2016 Vote for Brexit*, ‘The British Journal of Politics and International Relations’ 2017, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 450–464, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117710799>.

an opt-out allowing it to decline selected EU legal acts in the area of freedom, security and justice – including those relating to migration and asylum.⁴²

2.4.3 THE RECONFIGURATION OF MIGRATION AFTER BREXIT

Immediately before the referendum, migration to the United Kingdom was dominated by citizens of EU member states, who accounted for 59–77% of all arriving non-British nationals.⁴³ Although policy towards EU citizens did not change until January 2021, their share began to fall immediately after the referendum. Net migration from the EU itself turned negative in March 2021, meaning that more EU citizens left the United Kingdom than arrived. This can be linked to the substantial restriction of free movement and of EU citizens’ access to the British labour market.⁴⁴

While Brexit likely contributed to this decline, it does not fully explain it. Analysts at the Migration Observatory point out that EU migration reached an unusually high level in the period immediately preceding the referendum – one that, regardless of the outcome of the vote, was unlikely to have been sustained in subsequent years. Part of the subsequent fall should therefore be read as a return to more typical levels, rather than solely as a direct consequence of the regulatory changes associated with the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU⁴⁵.

In 2021, EU citizens became subject to the same migration procedures as non-EU nationals – that is, to the Points-Based System. In this context, net migration of EU citizens fell, while the inflow of non-EU migrants rose. Following the introduction of the new system, net migration to the United Kingdom reached 944,000 in the year ending 31 March 2023.⁴⁶

42 S. Blaakman, *The Brexit Paradox: How Leaving the EU Led to More Migration*, PE 772.910, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, Brussels–Strasbourg 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)772910](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)772910).

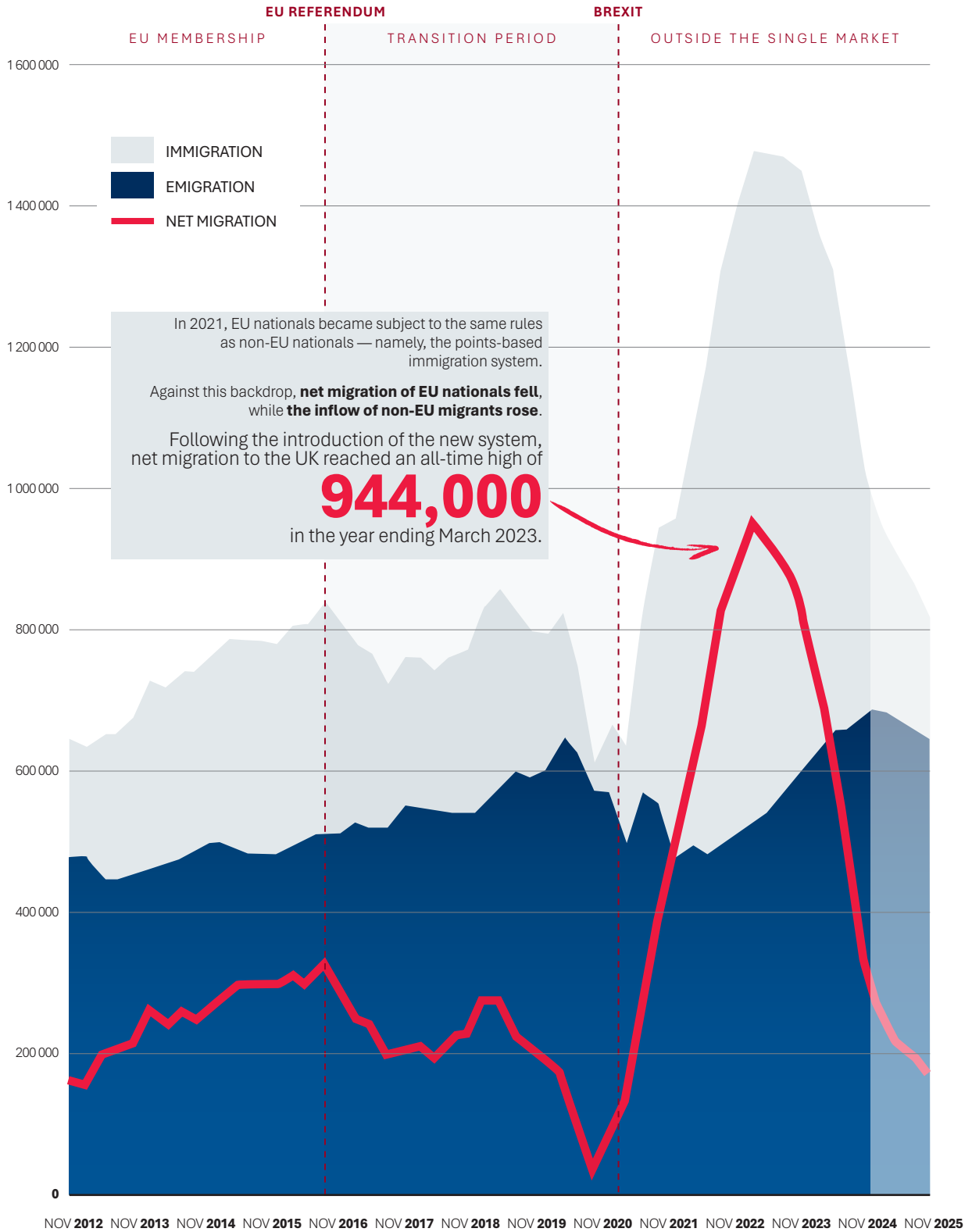
43 M. Sumption, B. Brindle, P.W. Walsh, *Net Migration to the UK*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

LONG-TERM NET MIGRATION



Source: Borders and Immigration data from the Home Office, Registration and Population Interactions Database from the Department for Work and Pensions, and International Passenger Survey from the Office for National Statistics; obtained from: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2025.

The scale of this increase stemmed above all from several concurrent processes:

1. a rise in the number of international students;
2. an increase in the number of visas granted on humanitarian grounds;
3. an increase in the number of work visas granted in the health and social care sector;
4. the expansion of opportunities to remain in the United Kingdom after completing one's studies.⁴⁷

2.4.4 NET MIGRATION – RECORD HIGHS AND SUBSEQUENT FALLS

After the 2016 referendum, net migration of EU citizens began to decline steadily, even though the formal rules of free movement remained unchanged until 2021. The fall itself began before the end of the transition period and resulted from a combination of overlapping economic, political and social factors – among them an improving economic situation in Southern Europe, a fall in the value of the pound that translated into lower real earnings, political instability, and a perception of mounting hostility towards EU migrants.⁴⁸ This decline accelerated after the introduction of the new migration system in 2021. Net migration from the EU fell to 21,000 in the year ending March 2021 and 51,000 in the year ending December 2022⁴⁹. By 2025, net migration of EU citizens was estimated at 42,000, while the number of EU+ citizens arriving in the United Kingdom fell from 173,000 (December 2021) to 76,000 (December 2025)⁵⁰.

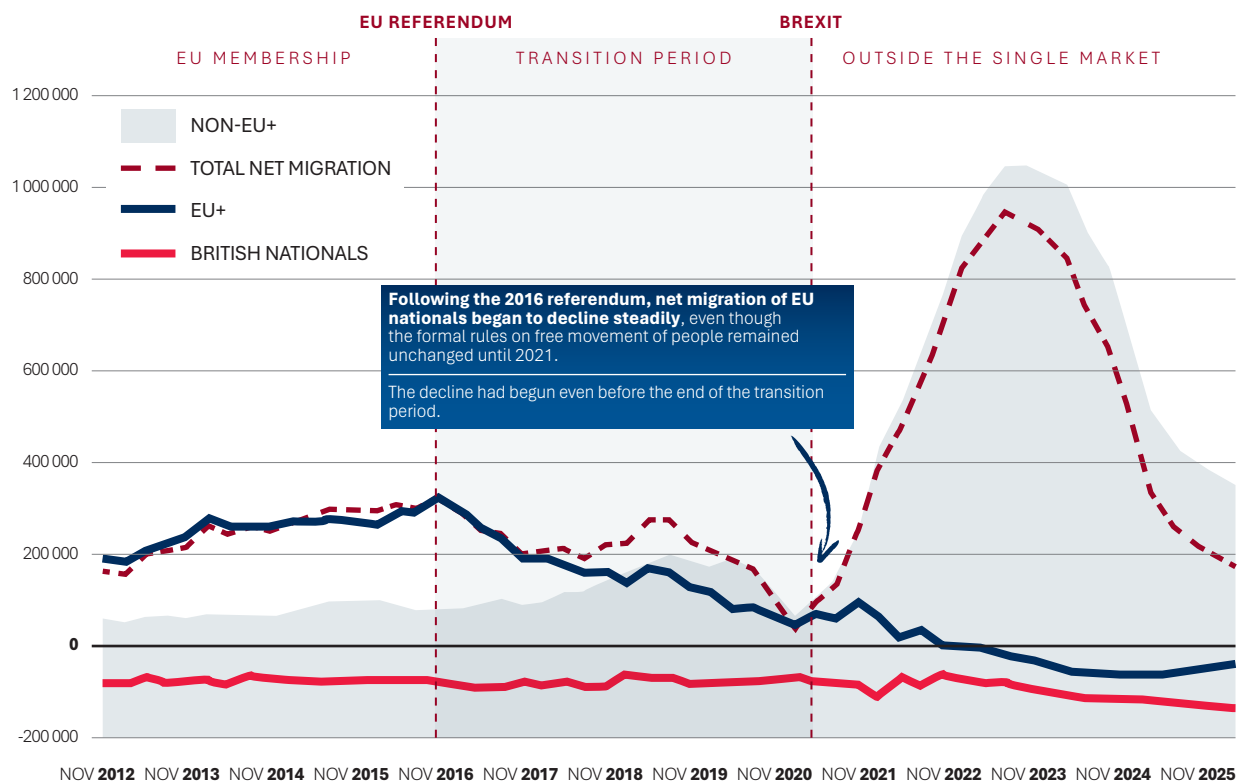
47 M. Sumption, B. Brindle, P.W. Walsh, *Net Migration to the UK*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

48 S. Blaakman, *The Brexit Paradox: How Leaving the EU Led to More Migration*.

49 M. Sumption, B. Brindle, P.W. Walsh, *Net Migration to the UK*.

50 *Long-term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending December 2025*, Office for National Statistics, Newport 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2025>.

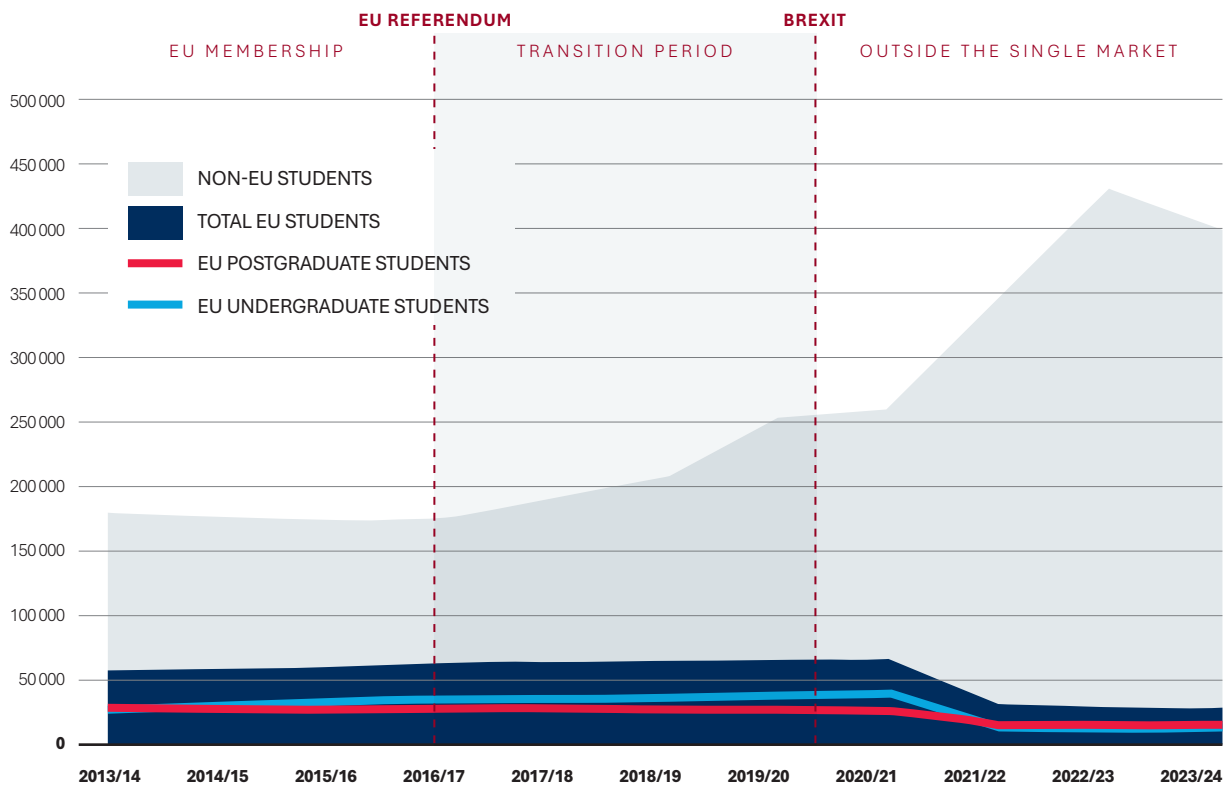
LONG-TERM NET MIGRATION OF NON-EU+, EU+ AND BRITISH NATIONALS



Source: Borders and Immigration data from the Home Office, Registration and Population Interactions Database from the Department for Work and Pensions, and International Passenger Survey from the Office for National Statistics; obtained from: Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2025.

The effects of the new order were especially visible in higher education. The number of EU students beginning their studies in the United Kingdom fell by 51%, largely as a result of higher tuition fees: once EU students lost their ‘home fee’ status, undergraduate fees rose from a uniform cap of £9,250 a year to a range of between £11,400 and £32,000 (academic year 2021/2022). Among non-EU students, the trend was the opposite – their numbers rose markedly between 2020 and 2023.⁵¹

NEWLY ENROLLED STUDENTS AT UK UNIVERSITIES, BY DOMICILE AND ACADEMIC YEAR



Source: Migration Observatory (2025) based on HESA Higher Education Student Statistics, 2021/22 academic year.

51 M. Cuius, *EU Students in the UK after Brexit*, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, Oxford 2025, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-students-in-the-uk-after-brexit/>.

2.4.5 THE CONSEQUENCES OF BREXIT FOR ASYLUM POLICY

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU also affected the functioning of the asylum system. This period coincided with a significant rise in the number of applications for international protection: in 2024, 84,200 applications were made – the highest figure since 2002 – covering some 108,000 people.⁵² From 2010, the number of asylum applications had been rising at a moderate pace, but from December 2020, its growth began to accelerate sharply.⁵³ A further structural consequence of Brexit was the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Dublin framework. As a result, from 31 December 2020 onward, it could no longer transfer asylum seekers to the first EU member state responsible for examining their claims.⁵⁴

2.4.6 PROSPECTS FOR DEEPER EU–UK MIGRATION COOPERATION

Since the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the two sides have developed their migration and asylum policies within separate institutional frameworks, and cooperation has been largely sectoral and ad hoc.⁵⁵ Even so, both the Union and the United Kingdom have signalled an interest in closer cooperation on migration and the provision of international protection.⁵⁶ The United Kingdom also lost European funding (the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund – AMIF), the purpose of which was to support asylum seekers and the organisations working on their behalf.⁵⁷

A commitment to rebuilding relations and deepening cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom emerged from the summit of 19 May 2025, at which both sides set out to expand cooperation across a range of areas – including combating people-smuggling, improving information-sharing, and managing external borders. Both sides also expressed a willingness to develop youth-exchange schemes enabling study, volunteering and short-term work.⁵⁸ The foregoing analysis suggests that Brexit did not result in a substantial reduction in migration to the United Kingdom. Instead, it coincided with a liberalisation of migration policy and a shift in the national composition of migrant inflows.

Bringing EU citizens within a single Points-Based System and restricting their freedom of movement formally increased the British authorities' control over migration flows; yet that control produced a paradoxical result. Those who had championed 'taking back control' of the borders were confronted with the institutional reality of such a policy, the effects of which initially proved the opposite of what they had expected.

52 *How Many People Claim Asylum in the UK?*, w: *Immigration System Statistics, Year Ending December 2025*, Home Office, London 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk>.

53 Ibid.

54 *UK Withdrawal from the EU and Its Implications on Asylum*, in: *EASO Asylum Report 2021*, European Union Agency for Asylum, Valletta 2022, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021/236-uk-withdrawal-eu-and-its-implications-asylum>.

55 A. Orav, *EU–UK Cooperation on Migration and Asylum*, PE 759.615, European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, Brussels–Strasbourg 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)759615](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2024)759615).

56 *UK Withdrawal from the EU and Its Implications on Asylum*, in: *EASO Asylum Report 2021*.

57 Ibid.

58 *EU–UK Summit, 19 May 2025*, Council of the European Union, Brussels 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/05/19/>.

The reconfiguration that took place after Brexit was not without consequences for the diasporas living in the United Kingdom – in particular the Polish community, whose changing legal status and patterns of mobility are analysed in Chapter 4.

Note

The data presented here are based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) statistics. It should be kept in mind, however, that the term ‘immigrant’ functions both as a statistical category and as a term in public debate, which can give rise to interpretive discrepancies between the definitions used by public institutions and their popular understanding.

2.5 THE POST-BREXIT ECONOMY: HOW THE UNITED KINGDOM’S DEPARTURE FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION RESHAPED THE STRUCTURE OF TRADE AND THE MAP OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Piotr Arak

In June 2016, advocates of leaving the European Union promised the British public that they would ‘take back control’ of borders, regulations, the budget and the economy. Ten years after the referendum, enough evidence has accumulated to allow a meaningful assessment of its consequences. Notably, the British economy did not collapse, as the most pessimistic economists predicted in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. There was no ‘day after’ recession; the pound did not become an exotic currency; the City of London did not emigrate to Frankfurt. And yet – and this is the essence of this chapter – Brexit has proved one of the most expensive economic-policy experiments in post-war European history.

Bloom et al., in a study combining macroeconomic data with the Bank of England’s Decision Maker Panel, estimated that by 2025 Brexit had reduced the United Kingdom’s GDP per capita by 6–8%, investment by 12–18%, employment by 3–4%⁵⁹, and productivity by 3–4%. These are effects that accumulated slowly and were not apparent in the immediate aftermath of the start of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU.

Brexit did not trigger a collapse but set in motion a process of lasting decline in the United Kingdom’s productivity and in its weight within the European economic system – the result of rising transaction costs, weakened integration with the single market, and deepening regional inequalities. The United Kingdom moved from a ‘gateway to

59 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

Europe' model to that of a 'large but more isolated market.' London remained a global city, but the United Kingdom ceased to be a European economic hub to the extent that it had been before 2016. The European Union lost both a prominent advocate of economic competitiveness and access to a highly liquid capital market through which European firms had raised capital from global investors.

2.5.1 PUBLIC FINANCES: A MORE EXPENSIVE, SLOWER AND MORE INDEBTED STATE

THE BREXIT DIVIDEND THAT NEVER WAS

The famous referendum-campaign slogan promised £350 million a week for the NHS. It became one of the most-cited examples of political marketing of the twenty-first century. In practice, no structural savings materialised. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has consistently maintained, in its forecasts, the assumption that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), in force since January 2021, reduces the United Kingdom's long-term productivity by 4% relative to remaining in the EU, chiefly through the rise in non-tariff barriers to trade with the EU.⁶⁰

Springford, reviewing the OBR's forecasts nine years after the referendum, concluded that this estimate had not been overstated. A four-per cent fall in productivity translates into around £40 billion of lost tax revenue for the budget over 2019–2024 – a period in which the government raised taxes by £100 billion. A significant part of the fiscal tightening of recent years was a consequence of Brexit, rather than of deliberate state policy.⁶¹

LOWER GROWTH = A WEAKER TAX BASE

Weaker productivity means lower state revenue. IMF data (World Economic Outlook, April 2026) show that the United Kingdom's public-sector deficit reached 6.1% of GDP in 2024 – the third largest among 43 advanced economies, behind only Israel (–8.1%) and the United States (–7.9%), and five times the average for this group of countries (–1.2% of GDP). Significantly, the UK's deficit remained at this level not in the year of the pandemic shock, but four years after it had ended, when most European economies had returned to fiscal discipline close to pre-pandemic levels.

The scale of the deterioration is even clearer when one looks at public-debt data. Between 2019 and 2024, the UK's gross public debt rose by 15.0 percentage points of GDP – from 84.9% to 99.9%. That is an increase of more than twice the average for advanced economies (+6.7 pp) and almost five times that of the euro area (+3.4 pp). Among the G7, only Canada's debt rose more strongly (+19.9 pp), for other structural reasons, along with France's (+15.0 pp), which is likewise grappling with a structural deficit problem. Germany increased its debt by just 3.5 pp, Italy by 0.8 pp, and Japan by 8.2 pp.

60 *Brexit Analysis*, Office for Budget Responsibility, London 2025, <https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/the-economy-forecast/brexit-analysis/>.

61 J. Springford, *Testing the OBR's Brexit Assumptions: A Nine-Year Retrospective*, Constitution Society / Federal Trust, London 2025, <https://www.federaltrust.org.uk/publications/testing-the-obr-brexit-assumptions>.

THE FISCAL TRAP OF THE POST-BREXIT STATE

After Brexit, the British state became at once more expensive and less flexible. Debt-servicing costs rose from £39 billion (1.7% of GDP) in 2019–2020 to £106 billion (3.6% of GDP) in 2024–2025⁶², and the yield on ten-year UK government bonds is now the highest in the G7. Brexit is not the sole cause of this state of affairs – the pandemic and the energy crisis added their share – but it is the factor that affects the British economy asymmetrically by comparison with other European states. The euro area, which went through the same external shocks, closed 2024 with an average debt of 86.6% of GDP and a deficit of 3.1%, while the UK posted the equivalent figures of 99.9% and 6.1%.

UK PUBLIC DEBT COMPARED WITH OTHER G7 ECONOMIES, 2016–2025

YEAR	UK	USA	Japan	Germany	France	Italy	Canada	Advanced economies (average)
2016	87,3	107,4	202,1	68,3	98,1	134,2	92,5	102,5
2017	86,1	106,4	203,1	64,0	98,8	133,7	91,0	100,4
2018	85,6	107,7	203,7	60,8	98,5	134,2	90,8	100,0
2019	84,9	108,8	206,3	58,7	98,2	133,9	90,1	100,9
2020	104,8	132,6	228,8	68,0	114,9	154,4	118,1	119,3
2021	103,4	125,0	222,7	67,9	112,8	145,8	112,6	112,9
2022	97,5	119,1	227,8	64,4	111,4	138,4	103,5	107,9
2023	98,9	120,0	220,3	62,3	109,6	133,9	105,1	107,0
2024	99,9	122,3	214,5	62,2	113,2	134,7	110,0	107,6
2025	102,3	123,9	206,5	62,9	116,0	137,1	113,5	108,0

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2026.

62 *Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2025*, Office for Budget Responsibility, London 2025, <https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-march-2025/>.

2.5.2 VULNERABLE SECTORS: WHEN THE BORDER RETURNED TO THE ECONOMY

As it turned out, the greatest cost of Brexit is not tariffs – under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), goods remained tariff-free – but regulatory and logistical friction. Every consignment crossing the English Channel now requires documents, declarations of origin and veterinary certificates. Trade continues, but it costs considerably more. And, crucially, this additional cost is not a one-off: it becomes embedded in the structure of the economy, altering relative prices, investment decisions and, ultimately, the country's trade position.

TWO BRITISH ECONOMIES: THE POLARISATION OF TRADE

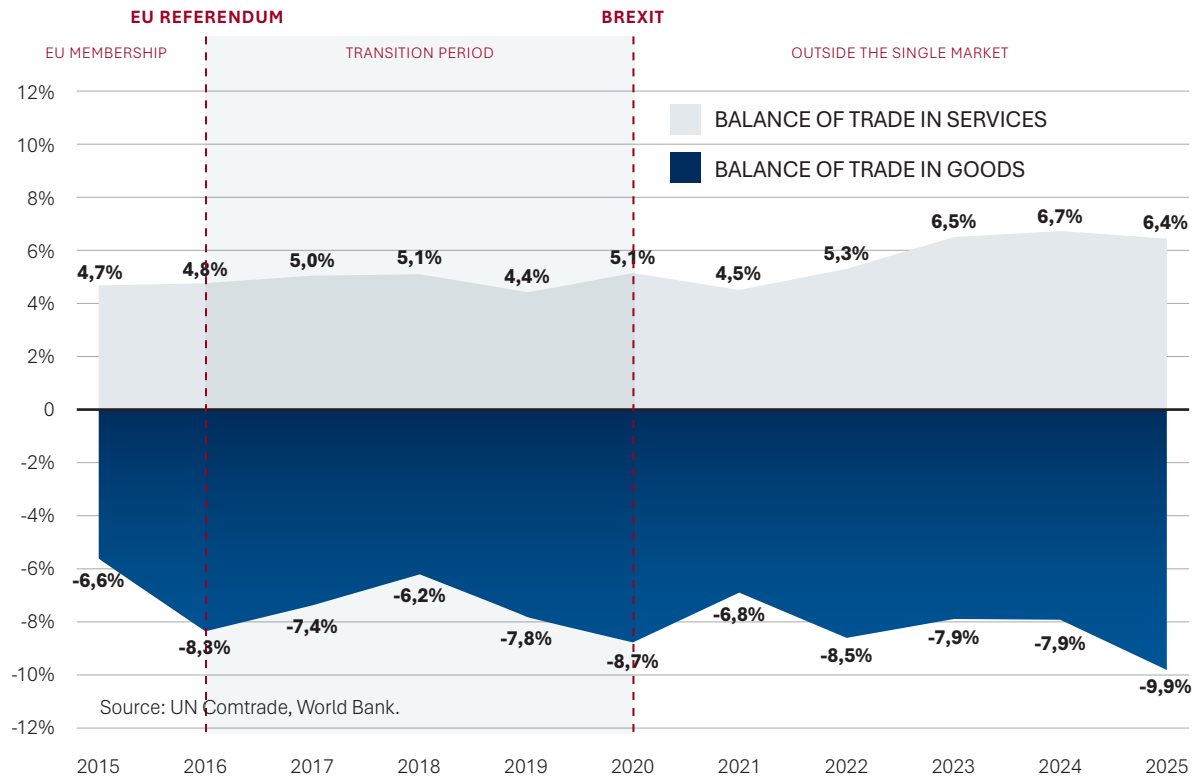
The most comprehensive picture of Brexit's effect on trade emerges only when goods and services are viewed together. UN Comtrade data from the World Bank show that, between the referendum year (2016) and 2025, British goods exports rose by 38% in nominal terms – from \$411.5 billion to \$566.4 billion – while services exports rose by 87%, from \$358.9 billion to around \$670 billion. This divergence of trajectories lies at the heart of the structural change that has taken place in the UK economy since Brexit. The United Kingdom has not ceased to be a trading power – it has ceased to be a goods power. The goods-trade balance worsened by \$170 billion over the decade (from a deficit of \$225 billion to one of \$395 billion), while the services surplus improved by \$124 billion (from \$131 billion to \$255 billion)⁶³.

The TCA, signed in December 2020 and in force since January 2021, abolished tariffs on goods but introduced a full regime of regulatory controls, declarations of origin and sanitary procedures for goods. For services – which flow digitally, by telephone or through bank accounts – no such apparatus of control ever existed. Brexit therefore struck disproportionately hard at the goods sector, while largely sparing services. Without the near-90% rise in services exports, the UK's trade balance in 2025 would have been far worse than the actual \$140 billion, and perhaps close to the British record set during the currency crisis of 1976.

This also means that the traditional tool of economic policy – weakening the currency to stimulate exports – has, in the UK's case, ceased to work as it once did. The pound weakened significantly after the referendum (from \$1.49 in June 2016 to around \$1.25 on average in 2021–2024), but this did not produce an explosion in British goods exports. Non-tariff barriers proved a stronger constraint than price competitiveness.

63 The UK's goods-trade balance worsened from –8.3% of GDP in 2016 to –9.9% of GDP in 2025, while the services surplus rose from +4.8% to +6.4% of GDP. The scale of this divergence – around 1.6 percentage points of GDP in each direction – corresponds to a value of about \$65 billion a year, shifted between sectors of the British economy. In the overall balance, despite the nominal deterioration from –\$94 billion to –\$140 billion, the ratio to GDP returned to its pre-referendum level (–3.5% in 2016 and –3.5% in 2025) – but only at the cost of an above-average rise in services exports, which offset the losses on the goods side.

UK TRADE, 2016–2025 (%)



GOODS TRADE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION – A LASTING EROSION

Data from the UK Parliament and analyses by Brexit FactBase show that the sharpest deterioration was in the UK’s trade with the EU, rather than its trade with the world as a whole. In 2024, the total value of UK trade was £1.797 trillion, of which 46% was with the EU, and the trade deficit with the EU reached £92 billion. Brexit FactBase (2025), in turn, indicates that the trade deficit with the EU stood at 3.6% of GDP in 2024 and was markedly larger than in the pre-Brexit period. The Office for National Statistics (2026)⁶⁴ further confirms that in 2025 the United Kingdom’s combined deficit in trade in goods and services was £21.8 billion – on exports of £923.3 billion and imports of £945.1 billion.

It is also symptomatic that exports of goods to non-EU countries did not make up for the loss of the EU market. Brexit therefore did not redirect British exports to other markets; rather, it reduced the total export base in the goods sector. In 2024, British goods exports to the EU were 16% lower than in 2018 (a fall of £35 billion), while goods exports to non-EU countries fell by 8% (£18 billion). Total UK exports of goods and services in 2024 were 4.5% higher than in 2018, but the combined value of goods exports fell by 12% – confirming that Brexit reduced the overall export base in the goods sector.

64 Office for National Statistics, *UK Trade: December 2025*, Newport: Office for National Statistics, 12 III 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/bulletins/uktrade/december2025>.

THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY – THE LOSS OF APPEAL AS AN EXPORT PLATFORM

The British automotive industry was a textbook example of the ‘gateway to Europe’ strategy. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher promoted the UK as a place from which Japanese manufacturers could export tariff-free across the entire European Economic Community. Honda in Swindon, Nissan in Sunderland, Toyota in Derbyshire – all these investments made sense as part of the single market. Locating in the UK meant tariff-free access to a market of almost 500 million, and the country gained middle-class jobs in industrial regions whose deindustrialisation had begun a decade earlier.

Brexit dismantled this model. Production of passenger cars in the United Kingdom fell from 1.67 million units in 2016 to 779,584 in 2024, and further to 717,371 in 2025. In 2025, the United Kingdom dropped out of the world’s top ten car producers, losing a position it had held continuously for decades. The initial swings in investment were equally large: after announcements of £2.5 billion in 2015, the value of annual investment commitments in the British automotive sector fell to £1.66 billion in 2016 and £1.1 billion in 2017 – a year-on-year fall of 34%. After a brief rebound in 2023, when a record £20 billion of investment was announced (mainly for the transition towards EVs), the value of investment fell again in 2024, to £3.5 billion.

Nissan in Sunderland is the starkest example of this defensive evolution. In 2016 the company declared that it would produce two models (the X-Trail and the Qashqai) in the United Kingdom; in 2019 it reversed its decision on the X-Trail; in 2021 it announced a £1 billion investment in EV36Zero; in 2023, it added £2 billion for three electric models; and in 2025 it added a further £50 million for a powertrain plant with Jatco. All these investments were undertaken defensively, under pressure from the TCA’s rules of origin and the threat of 10% tariffs on electric vehicles. Stellantis, for its part, closed the Vauxhall plant in Luton in 2025, cutting British production of vans from 105,000 (2024) to 31,000 units.

Car exports from the UK to the EU fell by 24.3% year-on-year in 2024, while exports to the US rose by 38.5%. This was a partial and imperfect compensation: the EU remains the largest market, with a 55.4% share of UK⁶⁵ car exports, but the dynamics are clearly negative. Significantly, a reverse shift occurred in parallel in trade in electric vehicles: the value of EV exports from the EU to the UK rose from £4.6 billion in 2019 to £24 billion in the year ending June 2025 – an increase of 424%. Brexit did not cause the United Kingdom to stop buying European cars; it did, however, cause it to stop being a place where they are made.

65 UK Car Production Drops in First Half of 2024; SMMT, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, 25 VII 2024, <https://www.smmmt.co.uk/2024/07/uk-car-production-drops-in-first-half-of-2024/>.

The problem of rules of origin proved particularly acute in the EV segment. The requirement for a specified share of local components – 45% of a vehicle’s value from 2024, 55% from 2027 – collided with a simple fact: battery cells are produced mainly in Asia, and British gigafactories are only now being built. This means that electric cars produced in the UK may be subject to 10% tariffs when exported to the EU, while the global competition from Chinese EV manufacturers is becoming an existential challenge for the European automotive industry.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD – ENORMOUS NON-TARIFF COSTS

The Food and Drink Federation, in its 2024 Trade Snapshot report, states that the volume of food exports from the UK to the EU in 2024 was 6.37 billion kg, 34.1% lower than in 2019.⁶⁶ Global UK food exports in 2020–2024 were 19.8% lower than the 2015–2019 average, while over the same period Germany, Italy and the Netherlands increased their export volumes.⁶⁷ This shows directly that the fall is not a global trend – it is a specifically British, post-Brexit problem.

The cause is mundane: the absence of veterinary and phytosanitary certificates, the absence of free movement of seasonal workers, and compliance costs that became prohibitive for small producers. Small British cheesemakers – of which there were hundreds in Yorkshire and Devon – simply stopped exporting to the EU, not because their products were uncompetitive, but because the ‘paperwork’ cost more than the value of the consignment. The first quarter of 2021, when the TCA came into force, brought a 47% fall in food and drink exports to the EU⁶⁸; the dairy sector then lost two-thirds of its cheese exports to the EU. Exports of Scottish salmon to France – one of Britain’s premium goods on the European market – faced, for the first two years after Brexit, delays that made it impossible to trade a product of limited shelf life.

The asymmetry between the UK and the EU in food trade is striking. In 2024, the value of food imports into the UK reached a record £63.1 billion, of which £44.7 billion came from the EU (+3.3% year-on-year) – because EU exporters benefit from looser controls than British firms attempting to export to the EU. The sector comprises 12,500 firms; the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) consistently points out that it is SMEs that are most burdened by certification costs.⁶⁹

66 *Mind the Gap: FDF Calls for a Strategic Approach to EU Trade, as New Data Reveals Widening Food and Drink Trade Gap*, Food and Drink Federation, London 2025, <https://www.fdf.org.uk/dfd/news-media/press-releases/2025/2024-trade-snapshot/>; *FDF Trade Snapshot 2024*, Food and Drink Federation, London 2025, <https://www.fdf.org.uk/dfd/resources/publications/trade-reports/dfd-trade-snapshot-2024>.

67 S. Butler, *UK Food and Drink Exports to EU Down 34% Since Brexit ‘Due to Red Tape’*, ‘The Guardian’, 13 III 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/mar/13/uk-food-and-drink-exports-to-the-eu-down-34-since-brexit>.

68 *Brexit Pain for UK Financial Hub Is Just Beginning: Study*, Al Jazeera, 16 IV 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/4/16/brexit-pain-for-uk-financial-hub-is-only-just-beginning-study>.

69 *Mind the Gap: FDF Calls for a Strategic Approach to EU Trade, as New Data Reveals Widening Food and Drink Trade Gap*.

The sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement between the UK and the EU, signed in May 2025 at the first UK–EU summit since Brexit, is intended partly to reverse this.⁷⁰ The agreement provides for the dynamic alignment of British food regulation with that of the EU – which is itself a tacit admission that the decade-long experiment in ‘regulatory autonomy’ in food turned out too costly. In practice, the UK is returning to EU rules in one of the very sectors in which leaving the single market was supposed to deliver the greatest freedom.

LOGISTICS AND PORTS – DOVER IS STILL HOLDING ON

In 2017, the Port of Dover handled a record 2.6 million lorries a year – around 17% of the value of all of the United Kingdom’s goods trade. In January 2021, after the TCA took effect, outbound traffic fell to 67% of its 2020 level, and to 85% in February. In 2023, the port recorded a rise to 2.2 million heavy goods vehicles, an 8% year-on-year increase, but this growth mainly reflected a post-pandemic rebound and a restructuring of seasonality; net traffic remained sensitive to operational congestion caused by Operation Brock⁷¹ and by the new border controls. According to an analysis by the University of Hamburg, the costs of supply chains handled through Dover rose, after Brexit, by between 4.8% and 19.4% depending on the scenario, while firms’ safety stocks increased by as much as 71%.⁷²

Some of the goods flows formerly handled by the UK shifted directly to the Rotterdam–Antwerp–Hamburg axis. The growth of container flows in Dutch and Belgian ports after 2021 outpaced the European average, while Felixstowe and Southampton recorded declines in traffic. The United Kingdom lost part of its function as a transshipment hub, which was felt in employment in the logistics sector of south-east England. Kent, once a beneficiary of trade with the EU, became its victim.

THE CITY OF LONDON – THE BANKERS’ BLUFF

Contrary to the apocalyptic forecasts of 2016, which spoke of the loss of 75,000 jobs in the City, there was no mass exodus. According to the think tank New Financial⁷³, by 2021, more than 440 financial firms had moved part of their operations out of London: Dublin attracted 135 firms, Paris 102, Luxembourg 93, Frankfurt 62 and Amsterdam 48; together with these firms, around £900 billion of banking assets were relocated.⁷⁴ EY, in its Brexit Tracker (2022), clarified that by that point around 7,000 financial-sector jobs had actually been relocated from London – far below the original forecast of 12,000.⁷⁵ Among the beneficiaries, the largest gains went to Paris (2,800 jobs), Frankfurt

70 UK–EU Summit, Briefing Paper no. CDP-2025-0108, House of Commons Library, London 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0108/>.

71 It is a British traffic management system in the county of Kent, implemented to prevent traffic congestion on routes leading towards the Port of Dover and the Eurotunnel terminal in Folkestone.

72 L. Ke, Q. Liu, K. Han, W. Zhang, *The Impact of Brexit on Supply Chain Cost and Ro-Ro Traffic at Dover*, ‘Maritime Policy & Management’ 2024, vol. 51, issue 7, pp. 1350–1366.

73 *Brexit & the City: The Impact So Far*, New Financial, London 2021, <https://newfinancial.org/brexit-and-the-city-the-impact-so-far/>.

74 *Brexit Pain for UK Financial Hub Is Just Beginning: Study*.

75 EY Financial Services Brexit Tracker: Movement within UK Financial Services Sector Stabilises as New Opportunities Emerge, EY UK Newsroom, London, 28 III 2022, https://www.ey.com/en_uk/news/2022/03/ey-financial-services-brexit-tracker-2022.

(1,800) and Dublin (1,200).⁷⁶ The transfer of assets amounted to £1.3 trillion.⁷⁷ Over the long run, Brexit may affect 35,000 jobs in the City – either relocated or created in the EU rather than in London.⁷⁸ In January 2026, New York overtook London as the world’s most attractive financial centre in the global Z/Yen Global Financial Centres Index – for the first time in decades.⁷⁹

What, then, did the United Kingdom lose? Not workers, but functions. At the same time, employment in the City rose to around 615,000, above its 2016 level, thanks mainly to insurance, fintech and data analytics.⁸⁰ The clearing of euro-denominated derivatives gradually shifted to Paris and Frankfurt; trading in the shares of EU companies moved from London to Amsterdam as early as January 2021, with Amsterdam overtaking London in the daily volume of trading in derivatives.⁸¹ The City remained large, but it became more global and less European. This partly explains why financial and business services are the only segment of the British economy in which exports rose after Brexit: Asian, US and Middle Eastern markets partly compensated for the loss of the European client base. It is a lower-margin trade, but it effectively offsets, in the macro data, the cost of Brexit on the goods side.

The quantitative data confirm this. The value of UK exports of financial services and related professional services rose by 56% between 2016 and 2023, reaching a record £174.3 billion – of which financial services in the strict sense (insurance and financial activity) accounted for 62% of the increase, and professional services (legal, advisory and accounting) for 38%.⁸² In 2024, the United Kingdom remained the world’s largest net exporter of financial services, with a trade surplus of \$127 billion – and, together with related professional services, £119.1 billion, more than Singapore, Switzerland and Luxembourg combined (TheCityUK, 2026). This growth, however, was achieved against the geopolitical logic of Brexit, not because of it. The EU’s share of UK financial-services exports fell from 40% in 2017 to 31% in 2024, while exports to the US, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Singapore rose by 78% between 2017 and 2023, against 29% for EU countries.⁸³ Brexit did not block the growth of financial-services exports – it could not, because services flow digitally and require no customs clearance. This supports the hypothesis that Brexit had a negative effect on goods exports while leaving services exports largely unaffected. This does not imply that financial services benefited from Brexit. Rather, growth was driven by a reorientation towards non-European markets to compensate for reduced access to the European market. That shift is itself indicative of the costs involved: activity that had previously been concentrated within the EU

76 EY *Brexit Tracker Finds 7,000 Finance Jobs Have Left London for EU*, Investing.com, 28 III 2022, <https://www.investing.com/news/economy/ey-brexit-tracker-finds-7000-finance-jobs-have-left-london-for-eu-2793464>.

77 EY *Financial Services Brexit Tracker: Movement within UK Financial Services Sector...*

78 *City Statistics Briefing: Employment Growth in Financial and Professional Services*, City of London Corporation, London, 13 II 2026, <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/supporting-businesses/economic-research/research-publications/city-statistics-briefing>.

79 Business Standard, *Brexit Impact? New York Overtakes London as World’s Top Financial Centre*, 17 I 2026.

80 *City Statistics Briefing: Employment Growth in Financial and Professional Services*, City of London Corporation.

81 P. Stafford, *Amsterdam Ousts London as Europe’s Top Share Trading Hub*, ‘Financial Times’, 11 II 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/3dad4ef3-59e8-437e-8f63-f629a5b7d0aa>.

82 A. Bardalai, *Financial and Related Professional Services Exports: A Deeper Dive into Growth Trends*, TheCityUK, London, 21 X 2024, <https://www.thecityuk.com/news/financial-and-related-professional-services-exports-a-deeper-dive-into-growth-trends/>.

83 A. Bardalai, *UK–EU Financial Services Exports: Which Countries Are Most Prominent?*, TheCityUK, 19 VIII 2024, <https://www.thecityuk.com/news/uk-eu-financial-services-exports-which-countries-are-most-prominent/>.

single market had to be redirected towards more distant and often more challenging markets. It is therefore plausible that growth would have been stronger in the absence of the regulatory barriers and trade frictions created by Brexit.

THE SME SECTOR – BREXIT’S BIGGEST LOSER

The asymmetry between large corporations and small firms is perhaps the most important lesson of Brexit. Large firms adapted – they hired lawyers, opened offices in Dublin, reconfigured their supply chains. Small firms simply withdrew from exporting. The number of British SMEs exporting solely to the EU fell by 19% in 2024: from 17,800 to 14,300.⁸⁴ This is the latest instalment of a trend present since the first year after Brexit: 23,000 SMEs withdrew from exporting to the EU in 2018–2020, and a further 16,000 in 2021–2024.⁸⁵ In total, around 39,000 firms chose to give up cross-border trade rather than navigate the new bureaucracy.

Kren and Lawless⁸⁶ have shown that this effect is statistically significant and specific to SMEs: large firms adapted, smaller ones gave up. It is a regulatory paradox: Brexit, which was politically meant to protect ‘small British firms’ from the Brussels bureaucrat, in practice imposed disproportionate compliance costs on them, while allowing global corporations to retain structural flexibility through subsidiaries in Ireland or the Netherlands.

Over the long run, this selection translates into a structural impoverishment of the British export economy. The SME sector historically accounted for around 30% of the value of British exports, so its withdrawal from cross-border trade means a reduction of the export base, lower diversification and greater vulnerability to demand shocks. It is a cost that does not appear in the quarterly data, but accumulates over decades.

TWO ECONOMIES, ONE COUNTRY

The trade data for the decade after the referendum form a coherent story. Brexit did not destroy British foreign trade – it changed its structure. Goods are losing; services are gaining. Large firms adapted; small ones withdrew. London remained a global city, but its specialisation shifted from Europe to the world. Industrial regions lost investment, part of which moved to Slovakia, Spain and France. This is an economy that still works, but on different terms and with a reduced capacity to absorb external shocks – the strongest evidence of which is the deterioration of the overall trade balance, from –\$94 billion in 2016 to –\$140 billion in 2025, despite a near-90% rise in services exports.

Brexit also showed that, for medium-sized European economies, there is no neutral path between full integration and full exit. The United Kingdom tried to create a third way and found it in services, but at the cost of withdrawing a significant part of its goods economy from the European circuit. After a decade, that cost can now be estimated.

84 *Trade Downturn Continues to Ease: UK Export Shifts*, International Accounting Bulletin, 14 III 2024, <https://www.internationalaccountingbulletin.com/news/trade-downturn-continues-to-ease-in-february/>; Brexit FactBase, 2026.

85 Brexit FactBase, 2026.

86 J. Kren, M. Lawless, *How Has Brexit Changed EU–UK Trade Flows?*, ‘European Economic Review’ 2024, vol. 161, art. 104634, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2023.104634>.

2.5.3 REGIONAL DIVERGENCE: LONDON AND THE REST OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

THE GEOGRAPHY OF DISCONTENT AS A MECHANISM OF BREXIT

Brexit was a revolt of the regions against an economic model concentrated around London. Voters in Sunderland, Stoke and Boston voted to ‘take back control’ because they felt that the globalisation to which London held the key had passed them by. What McCann called the ‘geography of discontent’⁸⁷ was a real statistical phenomenon. By 2010, the United Kingdom was among the developed economies with the highest level of regional inequality in GDP per capita – greater than the differences between the eastern and western Länder of Germany, despite the legacy of the GDR, and greater than the divide between the north and south of Italy.⁸⁸ In 2019, gross value added (GVA) per worker in the ‘rest of the UK’ was just 71% of the level recorded in London and the South East – lower than in Germany (80%) and Italy (78%). The levelling-up policy pursued to date has not led to a lasting and systematic narrowing of regional disparities. Brexit did not prove a panacea for this problem.⁸⁹

LONDON WON – RELATIVELY

The City remained a global financial centre (although in January 2026 New York overtook London in the Global Financial Centres Index – for the first time in decades).⁹⁰ The technology sector in Shoreditch and King’s Cross is growing. Professional services – lawyers, consultants – all continue to generate value added at a level unattainable for the rest of the country. London’s GDP per capita in 2023 was £69,077, against £28,583 in north-east England: a ratio of 2.4:1.⁹¹ The scale of regional disparities in the United Kingdom has risen markedly over the past century. In 2021, London’s GDP per capita exceeded the national average by 76%, while in the North East it was 37% below it; by comparison, in 1921 these deviations were +37% and –27% respectively.⁹² Regional inequalities in the twenty-first century are thus deeper than in the period preceding the two world wars.

87 P. McCann, *Perceptions of Regional Inequality and the Geography of Discontent: Insights from the UK*, ‘Regional Studies’ 2020, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 256–267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1630758>.

88 A. Stansbury, D. Turner, E. Balls, *Tackling the UK’s Regional Economic Inequality: Binding Constraints and Avenues for Policy Intervention*, M-RCBG Associate Working Paper no. 198, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge (MA) 2023, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/publications/awp/awp198>.

89 *State of the North 2024: Charting the Course for a Decade of Renewal*, IPPR North, Manchester 2024, <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/state-of-the-north-2024>.

90 *Brexit Impact? New York Overtakes London as World’s Top Financial Centre*, Business Standard, 17 I 2026, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/brexit-impact-new-york-overtakes-london-as-world-s-top-financial-centre-126011700123_1.html.

91 *Employee Earnings in the UK: 2025*, Office for National Statistics.

92 *Transforming the UK Economy Requires a Transformed Regional Policy*, British Academy, London, 16 IX 2024, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/transforming-the-uk-economy-requires-a-transformed-regional-policy/>.

But note: London won relatively. In absolute terms, growth remains below the level projected under a counterfactual scenario of continued EU membership. McCann and Ortega-Argilés point out that London, too, suffered slightly, owing to its exposure to uncertainty in the financial-services sector and its dependence on EU workers.⁹³ Moreover, the State of London Report 2025⁹⁴ confirms that real GVA per hour worked in London fell by 2.7% between 2019 and 2022, while across the country as a whole it rose by 2.5%. London remained the most productive city, but it ceased to drive national productivity and is itself beginning to lose it. Earlier research by Chen, Los, McCann, Ortega-Argilés, Thissen and van Oort⁹⁵ had forecast that it would not be London but the industrial regions (Cumbria, the Midlands, Wales) that would suffer most from Brexit – and so it happened.

THE MAP OF GROWTH RATES: WHERE BREXIT HURTS MOST

Office for National Statistics data on regional GDP per capita make it possible to measure the United Kingdom's regional disparities. Between 2016 and 2023 – a period encompassing the referendum, two years of pre-Brexit uncertainty, the pandemic, the entry into force of the TCA and the energy crisis – average GDP per capita in the UK rose by 30.5% in nominal terms, from £30,180 to £39,400. Yet this average masks a radical inequality in the pace of growth.

Six in ten regions grew slower than the national average. Specifically, of the 348 counties with complete data for 2016 and 2023, 207 (that is, 59%) recorded growth below 30.5%, and 141 (41%) above it. This is a statistical asymmetry, which means that the UK average is 'pulled upwards' by a relatively narrow group of counties with exceptional growth rates, while most of the country lags behind.

This is most clearly drawn among the 'Red Wall' towns – those constituencies in northern England and the Midlands that traditionally voted Labour, overwhelmingly backed Brexit in 2016, and in 2019, on a wave of levelling-up promises, switched to the Conservatives. Seven years after the referendum, the data leave little room for optimism: Hartlepool, emblematic of the Leave vote, where 70% of voters backed leaving the EU, recorded GDP-per-capita growth of just 14.0% – less than half the UK average. Sunderland, the town where the first referendum result was announced as a signal of Brexit's victory, grew by 18.7%. The town of Boston in Lincolnshire, the location with the highest Leave vote (75.6%), grew by 22.0%. Stoke-on-Trent, the historic heart of the Potteries and a quintessential Red Wall city, barely caught up with the average, achieving growth of 35.0%. Blackpool, Middlesbrough and County Durham all hovered close to or below the national average.

93 P. McCann, R. Ortega-Argilés, *The UK Regional Economy and the Uneven Impacts of Brexit*, UK in a Changing Europe, London 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/reports/the-uk-regional-economy-and-the-uneven-impacts-of-brexit/>.

94 London Datastore, *The State of London Report 2025*, London 2025, <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/state-of-london-report-2025>.

95 W. Chen, B. Los, P. McCann, R. Ortega-Argilés, M. Thissen, F. van Oort, *The Continental Divide? Economic Exposure to Brexit in Regions and Countries on Both Sides of the Channel*, 'Papers in Regional Science' 2018, vol. 97, issue 1, pp. 25–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12334>.

WHERE Brexit

Brexit was a revolt of the regions against a growth model centred on London and the South East. In Sunderland, Stoke and Boston, the vote to "take back control" reflected a widespread sense that globalisation – to which London appeared to hold the key – had largely bypassed them.

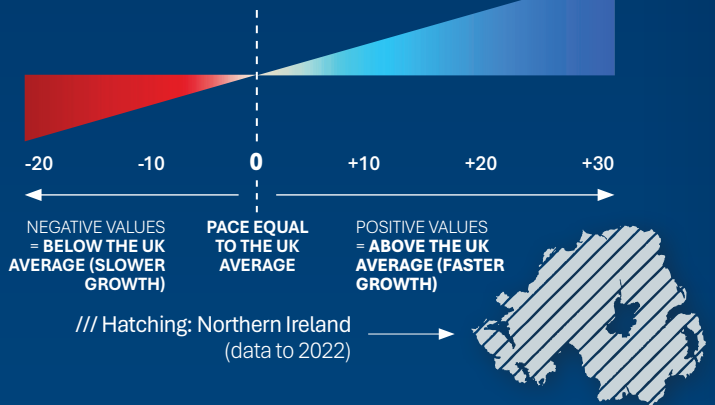
Brexit, however, has not proved a panacea: the underlying regional imbalance persists (IPPR North, 2024).

Six in ten local authority areas grew slower than the national average.

Of 348 areas, **207** (59%) recorded growth below 30.5%, while **141** (41%) recorded growth above it.

The distribution is highly uneven: the average is pulled upwards by a relatively narrow group of exceptionally fast-growing areas, leaving most of the country below the headline rate.

Deviation from the UK average (percentage points)



LONDON

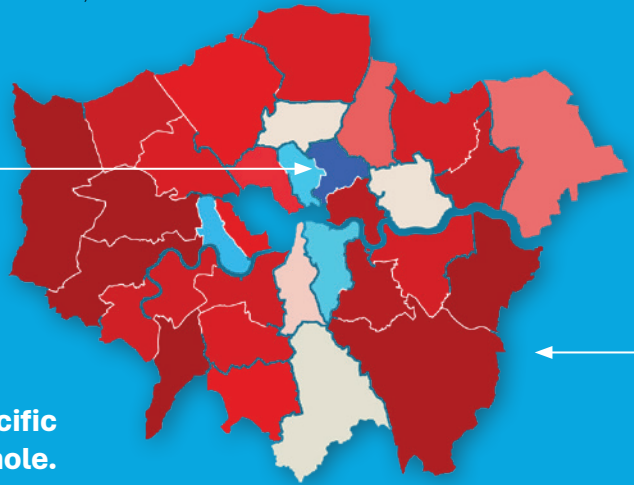
Greater London – 31 boroughs (City of London and Westminster excluded)

Most London boroughs grew slower than the UK average.

Only Hackney (central; the darkest blue) considerably outpaced it.

Hounslow, Hillingdon, Ealing and Bexley recorded negative or near-zero growth.

This substantially complicates the "London won Brexit" narrative – it was specific places that prospered, not London as a whole.



Source: authors' own analysis based on Office for National Statistics (2025), Regional economic activity by gross domestic product, UK: 1998 to 2023.

HITS HARDEST

POST-BREXIT REGIONAL DISPARITIES



Foto: Ben Sheard / Cabinet Office, OGL 3, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=83764351>

Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson's "levelling up" agenda was intended as the Conservatives' answer to a widespread sense of neglect across the regions beyond London and the South East. Yet in its analysis "Levelling Down", the New Economics Foundation calculated that **UK households had become £1,300 a year poorer in real terms than in 2015** – the very period the agenda was meant to transform.



£1,300 a year poorer in real terms than in 2015

Cornwall illustrates the scale of the shortfall. Between 2010 and 2018 the region received an average of £50 million a year from the EU; under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) it now receives £44 million a year (The Post, 2022).

Cornwall Council has estimated that, **had the UK remained in the EU, the region would have received around £100 million a year – more than double the amount under the new arrangement.**

In practice, the replacement has delivered considerably less than was promised to the UK's poorest regions.

Figures are in current prices (£). The City of London and Westminster are excluded as outliers. Scotland and Wales: the median across 32 and 22 local authorities respectively (2016–2023). Northern Ireland: the median across 11 local authorities (2016–2022; no data for 2023).

GRAFIKA:



NOWEMEDIA24.PL
PIOTR PERZYNA

The winners proved to be places that either already held a strong structural position or benefited from specific local shocks. Rushmoor in Hampshire (home to the Aldershot military base) doubled its GDP per capita (+103.5%); Hackney, a London borough, grew by 97.1% thanks to the continuation of the property-and-technology boom; Manchester, thanks to a decade of targeted metropolitan investment, grew by 55.9% – the most among the large post-industrial cities. Glasgow (+42.8%), Liverpool (+40.1%) and Leeds (+39.8%) also exceeded the average. The problem, then, is not ‘the North’ as such, but a particular development model of medium-sized and small towns, based on traditional industry, that has stalled.

A glance at the map confirms the observation that Stansbury, Turner and Balls⁹⁶ formulated in figures: inequalities in the United Kingdom are not a ‘North–South divide’ in the classic sense, but rather a ‘Greater London corridor versus the rest of the country,’ with narrower enclaves of growth around certain regional centres. The map shows the contrast between London and the South East (in blue shades – growth around or above the average) and North East England, Wales, Cumbria and Lincolnshire (distinct shades of red – growth well below the average). Scotland, which aggregates to a median of +29.9%, sits just below the average – confirming that regional convergence in the UK has stalled and, in many places, gone into reverse.

Moreover, most London boroughs grew slower than the UK average. Only Hackney (in the centre, the darkest blue) markedly outpaced it. Hounslow, Hillingdon, Ealing and Bexley, in fact, had negative or near-zero growth. This significantly complicates the narrative that ‘London won Brexit’: specific places won, not the whole of London.

LEVELLING UP AS AN UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Boris Johnson’s levelling-up policy was meant to be the Conservatives’ answer to the provinces’ sense of having been left behind. Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney sum it up as a mixture of already-familiar policies alongside aspirations in the field of industrial and R&D policy.⁹⁷ The New Economics Foundation, in its analysis *Levelling Down*⁹⁸, indicated that households in the UK had become £1,300 a year poorer in real terms compared with 2015 – that is, from precisely the period the policy was meant to improve. A programme dubbed ‘levelling up’ coincided with a general deterioration in living standards, the deeper causes of which were Brexit, austerity, COVID-19 and the energy crisis.

96 A. Stansbury, D. Turner, E. Balls, *Tackling the UK’s Regional Economic Inequality: Binding Constraints and Avenues for Policy Intervention*.

97 A. Pike, A. Rodríguez-Pose, J. Tomaney, *Post-Brexit Regional Policy in England: Exploring ‘Levelling Up’ in Practice*, ‘Regional Studies’ 2023, vol. 57, issue 11, pp. 2218–2230, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2150834>.

98 *Levelling Down: Households Are Down £1,300 a Year Since 2015*, New Economics Foundation, London, 11 XII 2023, <https://neweconomics.org/2023/12/levelling-down-households-are-down-1300-a-year-since-2015>.

The fundamental failure of the levelling-up policy had three dimensions. First, a mismatch of scale. Regional-policy programmes amounted to minor adjustments and ad hoc funding that masked the effects of disinvestment, austerity and slow private-sector growth.⁹⁹ Second, a structural gap left by EU funds. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), launched in 2022 with a budget of £2.6 billion over three years (reaching a target of £1.5 billion a year in 2024/2025), was formally meant to replace funds from EU cohesion policy, but in practice distributed less per capita in many regions. Eight of the ten areas losing most from the new arrangement are in northern England; Tees Valley lost around £19 per capita a year. Analysis by IPPR North (2022)¹⁰⁰ further showed that inflation had created a ‘hole’ of £560 million in the funds of the Levelling Up Fund and the UKSPF by 2025/2026, because the government did not index the allocations in response to rising prices. Third, the centralisation of control. The UKSPF, unlike EU funds, is managed centrally from London. This met with a critical reaction from the devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), which saw the new mechanism as an attempt to strip them of their autonomy.¹⁰¹

A concrete illustration of the scale of the divergence is Cornwall. In the period 2010–2018, the region received on average £50 million a year from the EU’s structural funds; under the UKSPF it received £132 million for 2022–2025 – that is, £44 million a year.¹⁰² Cornwall Council estimated that, had the United Kingdom remained in the EU, the region would have received around £100 million a year, more than twice as much as under the new arrangement. Cornwall and West Wales were the most favoured beneficiaries of the new fund, which means that the other regions received relatively less.¹⁰³ In practice, Britain’s poorest regions received support that fell markedly short of the expectations built up by the political promises surrounding the replacement of EU funds.

As a result, the regional programmes of 2022–2025 did not halt the advancing stratification. The British state withdrew from part of its responsibility for regional convergence, handing it over to institutions with fewer resources than those that had previously administered EU funds.

99 J. Madders, Successive Tory Governments Have Abandoned Workers, ‘New Statesman’, 3 V 2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/economic-growth/regional-development/devolution/2024/05/justin-madders-shadow-minister-business-employment-rights-levelling-up-labour-economic-growth>.

100 *State of the North 2024: Charting the Course for a Decade of Renewal*, IPPR North, Manchester 2024, <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/state-of-the-north-2024>.

101 *The UK Shared Prosperity Fund*, Briefing Paper no. CBP-8527, House of Commons Library, London 2022, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8527/CBP-8527.pdf>.

102 *Cornish MPs Commission Independent Research Debunking Claims Cornwall Will Receive Half of Its Replacement EU Funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund*, The Post, 23 IV 2022, <https://www.thepost.uk.com/article/cornish-mps-commission-independent-research-debunking-claims-cornwall-will-receive-half-of-its-replacement-eu-funding-from-the-uk-shared-prosperity-fund>.

103 *IFS Response to UK Shared Prosperity Fund*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, 13 IV 2022, <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/ifs-response-uk-shared-prosperity-fund>; *The UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Regional Development Funding Allocations*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, 11 V 2022, <https://ifs.org.uk/tags/government-spending>.

2.5.4 CONCLUSIONS: BREXIT AS THE COST OF GEOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENTATION

A decade after the referendum in which the British decided to leave the European Union, five concluding observations can be drawn.

- 1.** **First**, Brexit was the largest case of voluntary economic disintegration by a developed state in the twenty-first century. No other advanced economy has deliberately decided to leave the largest trading bloc with which it was fully integrated. It was a decision reversing forty-seven years of economic integration and goods trade, taken by democratic vote.
- 2.** **Second**, the costs did not appear in the form of a collapse, but of many years of stagnation in productivity, investment and trade. Bloom, Bunn, Mizen, Smietanka and Thwaites identify four channels of transmission: a lasting rise in uncertainty weighing on investment; lower expected demand; a fall in within-firm productivity through reduced innovation and IT investment; and a redistribution from more productive, export-oriented firms to less productive ones.¹⁰⁴
- 3.** **Third**, the hardest hit were sectors dependent on cross-border integration and regions that were already weaker. This reflects the structural inequality of the costs: those with fewer resources bore the higher relative costs. Chen et al.¹⁰⁵ described this earlier: Cumbria, the industrial regions of the Midlands and Wales – all dependent on cross-border trade within their supply chains – suffered most. In London's case, thanks to economic diversification, the losses were smaller, though it too was not spared, as can be seen in the weak performance of some boroughs.
- 4.** **Fourth**, London retained its status as a global city but did not pull the whole economy upwards. The United Kingdom remains the most regionally unbalanced economy among the large European countries. The OECD ranks British regional inequality fourth among 29 comparable member countries, with the fourth-largest increase in the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁶ In 2025, London's GDP per capita remains almost 2.5 times higher than in the North East – which, on the scale of comparable economies, is an anomaly.
- 5.** **Fifth**, Brexit shows that, in a world of large economic blocs – the EU, the US, China – middle powers lose their advantages by operating outside the common market. The United Kingdom is today a larger but lonelier economy. The attempt to rebuild relations through the so-called reset of May 2025 – the SPS agreement, the joint talks on emissions trading, the discussion of a return to Erasmus+ – is a tacit acknowledgement that those who, in 2016, warned of the consequences of leaving the single market were right.¹⁰⁷

104 N. Bloom, P. Bunn, P. Mizen, P. Smietanka, G. Thwaites, *The Economic Impact of Brexit*.

105 W. Chen et al., *The Continental Divide? Economic Exposure to Brexit in Regions and Countries on Both Sides of the Channel*.

106 *OECD Regions and Cities at a Glance: United Kingdom*, OECD Publishing, Paris 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/regional-statistics-UK.pdf>.

107 Statistics on UK-EU Trade, House of Commons Library, London 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7851/>.

3. THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE STATE AFTER BREXIT¹⁰⁸

Przemysław Biskup



Brexit is most often analysed through the lens of its economic consequences and the United Kingdom's international standing. A decade after the referendum, however, it is now clear that its most long-lasting consequences are political and constitutional in nature. At issue is less the substance of policy than the mechanisms of decision-making, the legitimacy these command, and the very definition of the political community. The 2016 referendum did not inaugurate a crisis of the political system; rather, it was a failed attempt to resolve problems that had been mounting for decades. In this context, the role of European integration is especially significant – as a process that gradually undermined the stability of the traditional Westminster model and generated party divisions and tensions between the elites and part of society. In parallel, the devolution that developed since the late 1990s deepened the conflicts between the centre and the other constituent parts of the state.

From the standpoint of an analysis of the British political system, Brexit was above all an attempt to bring about fundamental changes concerning political representation and the democratic legitimacy of the process of European integration. This chapter argues that Brexit brought about fundamental changes in the party system, in the ideas and narratives shaping public debate (politics), rather than in the substance of public policy (policy). The United Kingdom is approaching the largest restructuring of its party system since the early twentieth century. Disputes over the integrity of the state have sharpened, and the way sovereignty is understood has changed. At the same time, the recovered competences have served chiefly to continue earlier trends. This chapter analyses these processes along three dimensions: the impact of Brexit on the party system and the stability of governments; its consequences for the integrity of the state; and the scope of real freedom of action following the recovery of formal sovereignty.

108 In preparing this chapter, the author drew on research conducted as part of the project 'Cooperation, Integration and Sovereignty in the Anglosphere: Prospects for the Development of AUKUS and CANZUK', funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the Science for Society II programme.

3.1 BREXIT AS THE CULMINATION OF A LONG POLITICAL CRISIS

The first clear manifestation of the British dispute over Europe was the referendum of 1975, called on the initiative of the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson (two years after accession to the European Communities). Its purpose was to preserve the unity of the Labour Party by transferring responsibility for decisions on European matters to the electorate.¹⁰⁹ It set a precedent for the use of referendums to settle political conflicts that could not be resolved within the traditional two-party system.

Beginning with the dispute over the Maastricht Treaty, which threatened to bring down John Major's Conservative government, each successive stage of European integration deepened the divisions within the Conservative Party and, to a lesser extent, within the Labour Party, while also undermining the democratic legitimacy of the whole process. Since the dispute over the 2004 Constitutional Treaty, the demand for a referendum on the European question has become a permanent feature of political debate. The moment at which European integration finally turned from a question of foreign policy into a conflict over sovereignty, democracy and identity was the adoption in 2011 – in response to an earlier Conservative manifesto commitment – of the European Union Act, which established an obligation to hold a referendum in the event of any significant change to EU law.

The greatest beneficiary of these processes was the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Initially, a marginal grouping focused on the demand to leave the EU, it gradually transformed into a broader movement of opposition to the political establishment. Its victory in the 2014 British elections to the European Parliament was the first instance in more than a century of a party from outside the Conservative–Labour duopoly winning a nationwide election.¹¹⁰ UKIP's success revealed the scale of a crisis of political representation that the main parties were no longer able to absorb.

It is in this context that the speech given by the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron at the Bloomberg headquarters in January 2013, in which he announced a referendum on British membership of the EU, should be interpreted. His reform programme envisaged enhancing the EU's competitiveness, greater flexibility of integration, the repatriation of certain competences, and the strengthening of the democratic legitimacy of the EU's decision-making process – and, should comprehensive EU reform fail, the renegotiation of the terms of British membership.¹¹¹ Unlike Harold Wilson in 1975, however, Cameron was acting under conditions of a deep crisis of representation, in which the traditional parties were losing the capacity to manage new social divisions.

109 V. Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit: Towards a British Constitution*, I.B. Tauris, London 2019.

110 R. Ford, M. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, Routledge, London 2014, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315775111>.

111 D. Cameron, EU Speech at Bloomberg, Bloomberg London, 23 I 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>.

3.2 BREXIT AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

3.2.1 THE EROSION OF THE TRADITIONAL TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

Brexit brought about the deepest restructuring of the British party system in decades. The left–right divide was partly displaced by the conflict between supporters and opponents of Brexit, which evolved into a broader dispute over sovereignty, identity and globalisation. No new equilibrium has emerged, however, and a decade after the referendum, the political landscape remains more fragmented and less predictable than before 2016.

For most of the twentieth century, the British political system rested on the dominance of the Conservative Party (the Tories) and the Labour Party. Brexit exposed the limitations of this model. Under Cameron’s leadership, the Conservative Party advanced a liberal-conservative programme that accepted the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union as a settled feature of the political landscape.

The 2016 referendum drove the collapse of this strategy. In 2019, Boris Johnson marginalised the party’s pro-European wing, transforming the Conservatives into an unambiguously pro-Brexit party.¹¹²

The Labour Party found itself, between 2013 and 2026, in an equally difficult position. Its traditional electoral coalition encompassed both metropolitan supporters of European integration and the more Eurosceptic voters of the post-industrial regions of northern England and Wales. Jeremy Corbyn attempted to preserve the party’s unity through strategic ambiguity on Brexit. This strategy proved ineffective and led to the loss of part of the electorate to the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives.¹¹³ The process of withdrawal from the EU accelerated the shift from class politics to identity politics, further weakening the Westminster model, which had rested on stable social coalitions.¹¹⁴

3.2.2 THE FIRST PHASE OF BREXIT – THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION

The general election of December 2019 was the culminating moment of the first phase of Brexit, when an attempt was made to organise the process within the framework of the traditional two-party system. A key factor was the electoral strategy of Boris Johnson’s government, built around the slogan ‘Get Brexit Done.’ Three years of post-referendum deadlock, exacerbated by the inconclusive result of the 2017 general election, created strong electoral demand for a definitive resolution of the Brexit issue. Johnson successfully presented himself as a politician capable of breaking the parliamentary deadlock and delivering the outcome of the referendum.¹¹⁵

112 P. Biskup, *Brexit jako narzędzie strategii politycznej Borisa Johnsona*, ‘Biuletyn PISM’ 2019, no. 136 (1884), 4 X 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Brexit_jako_narzedzie_strategii_politycznej_Borisa_Johnsona.

113 P. Biskup, *Brytyjski system partyjny a negocjacje w sprawie Brexitu*, ‘Biuletyn PISM’ 2019, no. 26 (1774), 20 II 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Brytyjski_system_partyjny_a_negocjacje_w_sprawie_brexitu_.

114 M. Goodwin, C. Milazzo, *UKIP: Inside the Campaign to Redraw the Map of British Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198708957.001.0001>.

115 P. Biskup, *Przyszłość Brexitu w świetle kampanii wyborczej do Izby Gmin*, ‘Biuletyn PISM’ 2019, no. 167 (1915), 28 XI 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Przyszlosc_brexitu_w_swietle_kampanii_wyborczej_do_Izby_Gmin_.

In the Conservatives' 2019 victory, a significant role was played by Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, which had been built on a substantial part of UKIP's assets. Farage's decision to refrain from standing candidates against incumbent Conservative MPs reduced the risk of fragmenting the pro-Brexit vote, even though the party itself failed to win any seats. Although it secured no parliamentary representation, the Brexit Party exerted substantial influence on the political landscape. It strengthened Johnson's position within the Conservative Party, reinforced the cohesion of the Leave electorate, and eased the electoral realignment of some traditional Labour voters towards the Conservatives.¹¹⁶

The 2019 election delivered the Conservatives' largest victory since Margaret Thatcher and appeared to mark the emergence of a new political majority. The coalition Johnson built, however, rested more on shared support for Brexit than on a durable community of social interests. The most spectacular effect of the election was the breaching of the so-called Red Wall – a belt of traditionally Labour constituencies in northern England and the Midlands. For the first time in generations, a substantial part of the working-class electorate backed the Conservatives. This was made possible by combining Brexit issues with a narrative of national identity, cultural security and criticism of the political elites.¹¹⁷

3.2.3 THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

The Conservatives' triumph proved short-lived. After formal withdrawal from the EU, the salience of the Brexit conflict began to decline. At the same time, problems associated with inflation, the cost of living, the state of public services and economic stagnation mounted, compounded by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and then by the energy-price crisis linked to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The Conservative leadership crisis following Johnson's departure – including the record-short premiership of Liz Truss and the managerial governing style of Rishi Sunak – combined with the difficult economic situation, produced a sharp fall in support for the party.¹¹⁸

The 2024 general election did not, however, mark a return to the pre-referendum model. Although it delivered a decisive victory for the Labour Party under Keir Starmer, smaller parties also strengthened their position, including the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and Reform UK, which evolved out of the Brexit Party. Labour's victory reflected, to a significant extent, the mechanics of the majoritarian electoral system. The party secured around 62% of the seats on around 34% of the vote – the lowest level of nationwide support for an election-winning party in roughly a century. The result was a substantial parliamentary majority built on a relatively narrow electoral base.¹¹⁹ At the same time, the election deepened the Conservative Party's internal crisis.

116 P. Biskup, *Zdecydowane zwycięstwo konserwatystów w Wielkiej Brytanii*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2019, no. 177 (1925), 17 XII 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Zdecydowane_zwyciestwo_konserwatystow_w_Wielkiej_Brytanii_.

117 R. Ford, M. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*.

118 P. Biskup, *Początek walki o schedę po Johnsonie – wybory lidera Partii Konserwatywnej*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2022, no. 188 (2600), 13 VII 2022, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/poczatek-walki-o-schede-po-johnsonie-wybory-lidera-partii-konserwatywnej>; P. Biskup, *Brytyjska scena polityczna na rok przed wyborami parlamentarnymi*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2023, no. 204 (2824), 14 XII 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/brytyjska-scena-polityczna-na-rok-przed-wyborami-parlamentarnymi>; P. Biskup, *Rząd Rishiego Sunaka – ostatnia szansa torysów*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2023, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/rzad-rishiego-sunaka-ostatnia-szansa-torysow>.

119 P. Biskup, *Zwycięstwo Partii Pracy w wyborach do Izby Gmin*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/zwyciestwo-partii-pracy-w-wyborach-do-izby-gmin>.

3.2.4 THE SECOND PHASE OF BREXIT – CHALLENGING THE WIDER EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Between 2022 and 2026, British politics entered a second phase of Brexit. Its principal feature became the gradual shift of political conflict from the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU to a broader dispute over the constraints imposed on the British state by European and international institutional frameworks. Whereas the first phase of Brexit was dominated by the divide between supporters of remaining in and of leaving the EU (Remain versus Leave), in the second phase, increasing importance has been attached to the conflict between parties identified with the political establishment and anti-establishment parties that question the effectiveness and legitimacy of the existing institutional order.

The greatest beneficiary of this change has been Reform UK, which evolved from a party originally focused on delivering Brexit into a broader protest movement against the political elites, high immigration and the effects of globalisation. At the same time, on the opposite side of the political spectrum, the Greens grew in importance, attracting voters disillusioned with the Labour Party. As a result, the traditional two-party model gave way to a more pluralistic and less stable party system. The growing importance of parties from outside the traditional duopoly indicates that the crisis of political representation, of which the Brexit referendum was one manifestation, has not been resolved but has assumed new forms.¹²⁰

A significant element of this transformation is the changing focus of debates over sovereignty. In the first phase of Brexit, the principal symbols of the constraints on British autonomy were the EU institutions – in particular the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the EU, and the principle of the primacy of EU law. In the second phase, a similar role came to be played by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the European Court of Human Rights, and other international mechanisms limiting the state's freedom of action, especially in the area of migration and asylum policy. Demands to limit the influence of these institutions on the British legal order arise ever more frequently, and some political circles openly advocate the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the ECHR system. The debate over 'taking back control' has shifted from the level of European integration to that of the wider – European and global – institutional order.¹²¹

120 P. Biskup, *Wzrost poparcia dla partii antyestablishmentowych w Wielkiej Brytanii*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/wzrost-poparcia-dla-partii-antyestablishmentowych-w-wielkiej-brytanii>.

121 P. Biskup, *Równoczesny kryzys brytyjskich konserwatystów i laburzystów*, 'Komentarz PISM' 2025, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/rownoczesny-kryzys-brytyjskich-konserwatystow-i-laburzystow>.

3.3 BREXIT AND TERRITORIAL COHESION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

3.3.1 RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CENTRAL AND DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS

Brexit increased the United Kingdom's formal autonomy vis-à-vis the European Union, but also highlighted the constraints inherent in the British multinational state. One of the main slogans of the Brexit campaign was 'Take Back Control', understood above all as the United Kingdom's recovery of competences in the fields of legislation, immigration and economic policy. In practice, however, withdrawal from the EU set in motion a new constitutional conflict, concerning the division of competences between the British central authorities and the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Before Brexit, many areas covered by devolution – such as agriculture, fisheries, environmental protection and regional development – functioned within the framework of common European regulation. Although these competences formally belonged to the autonomous administrations, their exercise was harmonised by EU law, which was often accepted in the constituent parts of the state more readily than solutions imposed by Westminster.

Brexit opened the politically sensitive question of how powers previously exercised at the EU level should be allocated, laying bare the differing political preferences of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.¹²²

The autonomous administrations argued that the competences repatriated from the EU should be transferred automatically to the devolved administrations. Boris Johnson's government, however, took the position that preserving the coherence of the internal market required the establishment of common regulatory frameworks for the whole state. The dispute ultimately led to the creation of the Common Frameworks system and the adoption of the UK Internal Market Act 2020. By introducing principles of mutual recognition and non-discrimination, the Act limited the scope for devolved administrations to adopt divergent regulatory standards.¹²³

At the same time, the Common Frameworks that were developed became a mechanism for coordinating public policy between the centre and the constituent parts of the state, in practice strengthening the role of the central government at the expense of the devolved administrations.¹²⁴ As a result, the British union state is being transformed into a more complex and conflict-prone arrangement, founded on the tension between the principle of the sovereignty of the British Parliament and the autonomy of the devolved administrations.¹²⁵

122 P. Biskup, *Decentralizacja Wielkiej Brytanii wobec połączonych wyzwań pandemii i Brexitu*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2020, no. 210 (2641), 7X 2020, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Decentralizacja_Wielkiej_Brytanii_wobec_polaczonych_wyzwan_pandemii_i_brexitu; M. Keating, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom: Fractured Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864370.001.0001>; N. McEwen, *Intergovernmental Relations after Brexit* 'Political Quarterly' 2023, vol. 94, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13218>.

123 N. McEwen, *Intergovernmental Relations after Brexit*.

124 T. Horsley, *The UK Internal Market and Devolution after Brexit*, 'Public Law' 2025.

125 M. Kenny, J. Sheldon, *Union at the Crossroads: Can the British State Handle the Challenges of Devolution?*, Biteback Publishing, London 2021.

3.3.2 THE PROSPECTS FOR SCOTLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Scotland. Of all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, Brexit had the strongest impact on the constitutional debate in Scotland. This stemmed from the specific character of the political scene there, which – following the victory of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 2007 elections to the Scottish parliament – was organised around the conflict between supporters and opponents of independence.¹²⁶ The Scottish independence referendum of 2014 ended in victory for those favouring continued membership of the United Kingdom, by 55% to 45%. One of the most important arguments of the pro-Union camp was the claim that only remaining in the United Kingdom would guarantee Scotland continued EU membership. The Brexit referendum of 2016 undermined this argument. While a majority of British voters opted to leave the EU, in Scotland 62% of those voting supported remaining.¹²⁷ The SNP's existing national narrative was supplemented by a democratic argument: since Scotland had been taken out of the EU against the will of its own majority, it should have the opportunity to determine its constitutional status afresh.¹²⁸

Brexit did not, however, produce a breakthrough on Scottish independence. Despite periodic rises in support for independence, no stable majority emerged. The salience of the constitutional question was constrained by socio-economic problems and by the weakening of the independence movement's leadership. In this context, the national elections of May 2026 were significant: the SNP retained its dominant position, but second place went to Reform UK, with the Labour Party – historically commanding in Scotland – falling to third place and the Conservatives marginalised. This arrangement reflected a growing polarisation of the political landscape between the independence current and an anti-establishment but pro-British one, weakening the traditional unionist parties while pointing to the possibility of a consolidation of the unionist movement around Reform UK.

Wales. Wales developed the process of devolution more gradually than Scotland. The Welsh parliament, established in 1999, acquired further competences in stages, but Welsh nationalism remained considerably weaker than its Scottish counterpart. Plaid Cymru was for a long time an important but limited regional force, while the dominant position was held by the Labour Party.¹²⁹ The socio-economic specificity of Wales was also significant. Many parts of the country had an economic structure similar to that of northern England, in which problems associated with deindustrialisation and regional inequalities played a greater role than constitutional questions. For this reason, a majority of Welsh voters supported Brexit¹³⁰, despite the significant benefits flowing from European funds. After 2016, the political scene began to fragment. Plaid Cymru

126 M. Keating, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom: Fractured Union*.

127 Ibid.

128 P. Biskup, *Perspektywa szkockich wyborów krajowych a wyzwania Brexitu i pandemii*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2021, no. 78 (2276), 7 V 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Perspektywa_szkockich_wyborow_krajowych_a_wyzwania_brexitu_i_pandemii;

P. Biskup, *Wpływ wyborczej porażki laburzystów na kampanię niepodległościową w Szkocji*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2021, no. 94 (2292), 1 VI 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wplyw_wyborczej_porazki_laburzystow_na_kampanie_niepodleglosciowa_w_Szkocji.

129 R. Wyn Jones, *The Welsh Political Barometer and the Future of Welsh Politics*, Cardiff University, Cardiff 2020.

130 H.D. Clarke, M. Goodwin, P. Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316584408>.

reinforced its autonomist narrative, while Reform UK won over anti-establishment voters. These changes did not, however, feed through into a significant rise in support for independence. Brexit accelerated the debate on decentralisation and the governance of the state. The elections to the Welsh Parliament (the Senedd) in May 2026 confirmed this trend. Plaid Cymru's historic victory and Reform UK's second place signal a further weakening of the traditionally dominant parties.

Northern Ireland. The most complex territorial consequences of Brexit occurred in Northern Ireland. This stemmed from the specific character of the local political system, which, since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, has rested on the mandatory power-sharing of the unionist and nationalist communities within national autonomy. For most of the period since the agreement was concluded, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the radically republican Sinn Féin played the dominant roles, while the moderate parties gradually lost ground.¹³¹ Brexit undermined this system, even though a majority of voters in the province had opted to remain in the EU. The question of maintaining an open land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was one of the fundamental issues in the Brexit negotiations.¹³²

The United Kingdom faced the task of reconciling three objectives: protecting the EU single market, avoiding a 'hard border' on the island of Ireland, and preserving the territorial integrity of the state. This question was regulated by the Ireland and Northern Ireland Protocol to the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement, but the customs border in the Irish Sea created under it – between Northern Ireland and Great Britain – triggered a prolonged crisis of the autonomous government. As a result, part of the Protocol's provisions were significantly amended by the Windsor Framework of 2023. Under this instrument, Northern Ireland remained part of the British customs territory and of the British regulatory area for services, but became part of the EU single market for goods. The Windsor Framework also introduced two types of crossing at the Irish Sea customs border – respectively for British goods circulating within the UK internal market and for goods traded with the Republic of Ireland and other EU member states.¹³³ In practice, the province retained open access to both the British market and the EU single market. The Windsor Framework also introduced a veto mechanism for the national parliament (the Stormont Brake) over certain EU regulations, but it did not remove the fundamental constitutional tension regarding the democratic deficit in relation to EU regulation. At the same time, Brexit accelerated changes on the local political scene. In the 2022 Assembly election, Sinn Féin became the largest party in Northern Ireland for the first time, while the Alliance Party significantly increased its support, benefiting from growing voter fatigue with the traditional unionist–nationalist divide.

131 K. Hayward, *What Brexit Means for Northern Ireland*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2021.

132 P. Biskup, *Granica zewnętrzna UE w negocjacjach na temat Brexitu* 'Biuletyn PISM' 2018, no. 115 (1688), 14 VIII 2018, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Granica_zewn_trzna_UE_w_negocjacjach_na_temat_brexitu; P. Biskup, *Brytyjski system partyjny a negocjacje w sprawie Brexitu*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2019, no. 26 (1774), 20 II 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Brytyjski_system_partyjny_a_negocjacje_w_sprawie_brexitu_; P. Biskup, *Brytyjski kryzys polityczny jako bariera dla ratyfikacji porozumienia ws. Brexitu* 'Biuletyn PISM' 2019, no. 54 (1802), 23 IV 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Brytyjski_kryzys_polityczny_jako_bariera_dla_ratyfikacji_porozumienia_ws_brexitu_.

133 K. Hayward, *Northern Ireland: Demographics and Divisions* (December 6, 2021). Brexit Institute Working Paper Series No 19/2021, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3979022> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3979022>.

3.4 SOVEREIGNTY AFTER BREXIT: BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

3.4.1 FORMAL VERSUS OPERATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

In public debate, Brexit is sometimes presented as the inevitable result of British Euroscepticism. This interpretation, however, oversimplifies the actual course of events. For most of the period after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, successive British governments sought not so much to leave the EU as to reform it and the terms of British membership. The fullest expression of this approach was Cameron's aforementioned Bloomberg speech. In its light, Brexit can be interpreted as the result of the failure of the project to reform the Union. At the same time, the Vote Leave campaign slogan 'Take Back Control' was deliberately ambiguous, enabling the mobilisation of different groups of voters and becoming, after the referendum, a central element of disputes over the meaning of sovereignty and the future shape of the British state.¹³⁴ The United Kingdom recovered full institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the EU through the triggering of the procedure under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union and the conclusion of the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement, as well as the conclusion with the EU of the 2020 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).¹³⁵ The most important constitutional consequences of Brexit included the abolition of the primacy of EU law, departure from the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU, the recovery of control over migration policy, and the ability to conduct an independent trade policy and to shape economic regulation autonomously. From the standpoint of classical sovereignty theory, this was the largest constitutional change in the United Kingdom since accession to the European Communities in 1973.

This process, however, exposed an important difference between formal and operational sovereignty. Although Westminster recovered the full range of its legislative competences, this did not automatically lead to greater policy autonomy. Under conditions of deep economic and strategic interdependence, the United Kingdom's real agency remains subject to significant constraints: access to the EU market requires the maintenance of regulatory compatibility; global supply chains limit the scope for radical policy change; and the growing importance of external partners, especially the United States, creates new dependencies.¹³⁶ At the same time, the recovery of a broad range of competences was not used to carry out a far-reaching overhaul of public policy, because successive governments failed to put forward a coherent vision of a new model for the development of the state. As a result, Brexit represented a reconfiguration of external constraints rather than a complete 'taking back of control', demonstrating that formal sovereignty does not necessarily translate into the practical capacity to pursue political and economic objectives.

134 B. Wellings, *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2019, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526130983>.

135 P. Biskup, *Model Brexitu w świetle porozumienia UE–Wielka Brytania*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2021, no. 3 (2201), 8 I 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Model_brexitu_w_swietle_porozumienia_UE_Wielka_Brytania_; P. Biskup, *Koniec początku? Relacje unijno-brytyjskie sto dni po Brexicie*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2021, no. 65 (2263), 20 IV 2021, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/koniec-poczatku-relacje-unijno-brytyjskie-sto-dni-po-brexicie>.

136 A. Menon, J. Portes, *The Economics of Brexit*, UK in a Changing Europe, London 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/publications/the-economics-of-brexit/>; T. Sampson, *Brexit and the UK Economy*, 'Annual Review of Economics' 2024, vol. 16, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-082222-065831>.

3.4.2 FROM EUROPEAN INTEGRATION TO MANAGING INTERDEPENDENCE WITH THE EU ACROSS PUBLIC POLICY

Technology policy. One of the few areas in which the United Kingdom retains significant potential for strategic divergence, particularly with regard to genetic research, artificial intelligence, and the regulatory framework governing technology and financial start-ups. Here, the United Kingdom possesses not only an extensive research base but also a regulatory culture characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon states, founded on a greater acceptance of risk than in the EU. Since its establishment in 2025, the UK–US Technology Partnership (TPD) has provided a framework for cooperation in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technologies, cybersecurity and investment security, complemented by a significant investment programme.¹³⁷ If this cooperation is deepened, the United Kingdom will gradually bring its regulatory arrangements closer to the American model, at the expense of compatibility with the EU's. This would be the first example since Brexit of recovered autonomy being used to build a genuinely different model of economic development. At the present stage, however, it is difficult to determine the extent to which this potential will be realised.

Vaccine policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom opted for its own procedures for the approval of vaccines and the conclusion of purchase contracts. This enabled the rapid authorisation of all major COVID-19 vaccines, the development and production of a domestically developed vaccine through a partnership between the British government, the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca, and the earlier rollout of a vaccination programme than in most EU member states. These actions were one of the few examples of the direct use of recovered regulatory autonomy.¹³⁸

Migration policy. One of the principal arguments of Brexit supporters was the need to regain control over migration. Formally, this objective was achieved: free movement of persons was replaced by a national points-based system, and EU citizens lost their privileged access to the British labour market. This did not, however, lead to a reduction in the inflow of migrants. On the contrary, between 2022 and 2025, the number of legal immigrants reached record levels. What changed was the geographical composition of migration, shifting in favour of immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East at the expense of EU states.¹³⁹ This means that recovered sovereignty was used above all to alter the mechanisms of migrant selection, rather than to reduce the scale of migration substantially. At the same time, the United Kingdom became one of the principal initiators of the debate over revising the application of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in the area of migration and asylum policy. This discussion focuses in particular on the constraints that the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) places on deportations and on measures to combat illegal migration. On the British right, a growing consensus holds that the current Convention framework constrains the effectiveness of border control. As a result, some political

137 P. Biskup, *Partnerstwo technologiczne między Stanami Zjednoczonymi a Wielką Brytanią*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/partnerstwo-technologiczne-miedzy-stanami-zjednoczonymi-a-wielka-brytania>.

138 P. Biskup, *Wdrażanie i wyzwania dyplomacji szczepionkowej UE*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2021, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wdrażanie_i_wyzwania_dyplomacji_szczepionkowej_UE.

139 P. Biskup, *Pobrexitowe paradoksy legalnej imigracji do Wielkiej Brytanii* 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/pobrexitowe-paradoksy-legalnej-imigracji-do-wielkiej-brytanii>.

actors have begun to advocate the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the ECHR. Any implementation of these demands would directly expose the United Kingdom to a breach of the commitments it undertook towards the EU in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Climate policy. Some Brexit supporters presented leaving the EU as an opportunity to deregulate the economy. In practice, successive governments maintained ambitious climate targets and pursued a policy of decarbonisation. The United Kingdom remained one of the leaders of European climate policy, and its climate-neutrality targets were often more ambitious than the EU's minimum requirements.¹⁴⁰ Ambitious climate targets were developed in particular during Johnson's premiership, when the United Kingdom sought to play the role of a global leader of the energy transition. After an attempt to partially revise them during the Truss and Sunak governments, the Starmer government returned to the most ambitious active decarbonisation policy in Europe.

Security policy. An even greater degree of continuity was evident in security and defence policy. The basis of British strategy remained NATO, the relationship with the United States, and an active military presence in Europe. The Integrated Review for 2021–2023 set out a vision of 'Global Britain', but its implementation was constrained by financial factors and successive international crises, in particular the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine.¹⁴¹ These circumstances, however, facilitated the negotiation of a new UK–EU understanding after Labour took office in 2024. In May 2025, a political agreement on a strategic partnership between the United Kingdom and the EU was concluded, marking a significant step towards stabilising the bilateral relationship, especially in the fields of security, foreign policy and cooperation in selected sectors, including energy. It confirmed a trend towards a more pragmatic approach to EU–UK relations following a period of tension, without altering their fundamentally intergovernmental character. The agreement nevertheless still requires implementation through legally binding sectoral arrangements.¹⁴²

140 P. Biskup, *Brytyjska transformacja klimatyczna wobec wyzwań społeczno-gospodarczych i bezpieczeństwa*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/brytyjska-transformacja-klimatyczna-wobec-wyzwan-spolesczno-gospodarczych-i-bezpieczenstwa>.

141 P. Biskup, *Zwycięstwo Partii Pracy w wyborach do Izby Gmin*, 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/zwyciestwo-partii-pracy-w-wyborach-do-izby-gmin>.

142 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, Cabinet Office, London 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>; HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*, Cabinet Office, London 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>; P. Biskup, *Brytyjska strategia globalna: wielość priorytetów przy ograniczonych środkach* 'Biuletyn PISM' 2024, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/brytyjska-strategia-globalna-wielosc-priorytetow-przy-ograniczonych-srodkach>.

CONCLUSION

Ten years after the referendum, Brexit should be regarded above all as an event that permanently changed the British political system. Its most important consequences to date concern not so much the substance of public policy as the manner in which interests are represented, political conflict is organised, and the institutions of the state function. The 2016 referendum did not bring to an end the crisis of representation and legitimacy that had been mounting for decades; rather, it opened a new stage in its development.

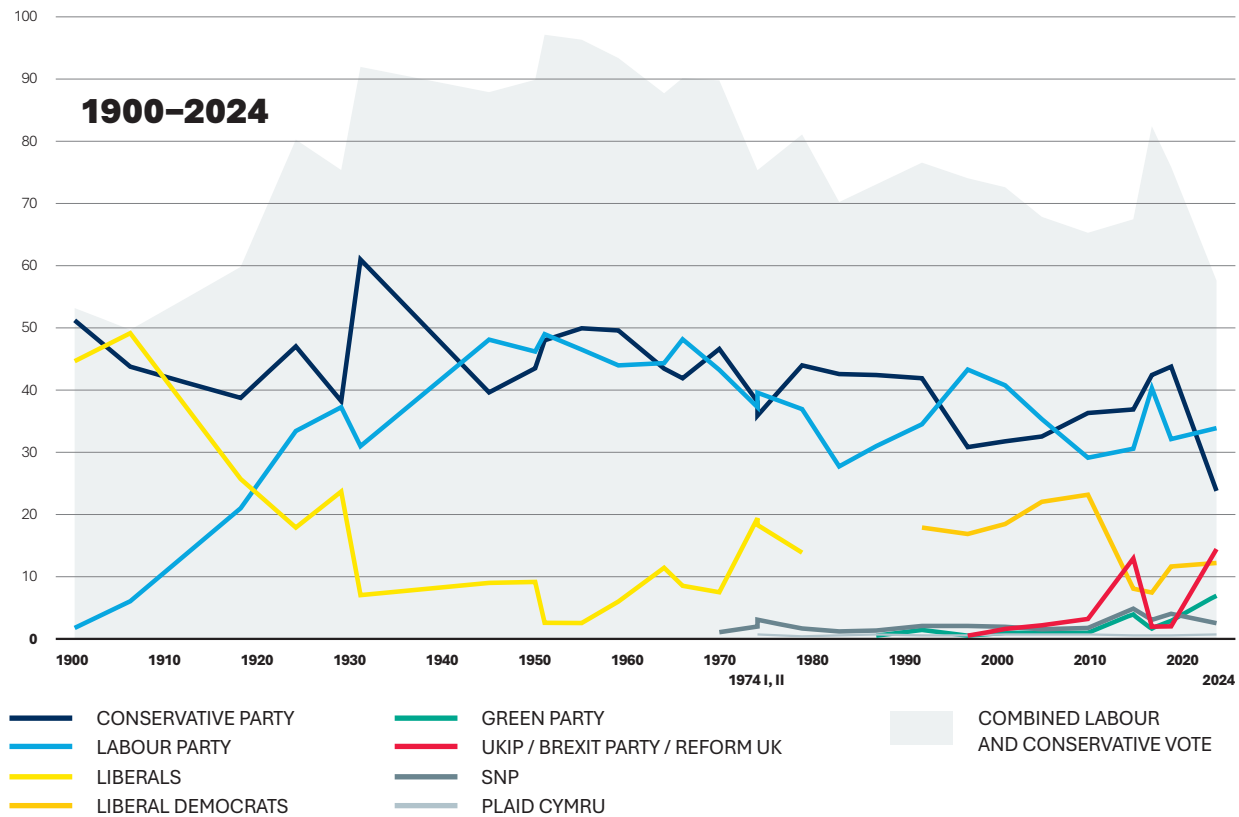
Brexit accelerated the restructuring of the party system, weakening the traditional dominance of the Conservative and Labour parties and creating space for the rising importance of parties outside the historical duopoly. At the same time, it changed the nature of political disputes. The conflict over EU membership gradually gave way to a broader debate over the limits of the state's autonomy, the effects of globalisation, and the relationship between citizens and the political elites.

The process of withdrawal from the EU also revealed structural tensions within the British union and heightened the salience of disputes over the division of competences, the sources of political legitimacy, and the relationship between the centre and the constituent parts of the state. As a result, the question of territorial integrity remains one of the most important long-term challenges facing the British political system.

The United Kingdom recovered full formal autonomy vis-à-vis the EU, but this did not produce an equally significant increase in the state's freedom of action. Under conditions of deep economic, regulatory and strategic interdependence, Brexit signified above all a change in the nature of dependencies, rather than their complete removal.

From this perspective, leaving the European Union can be regarded as a process that transformed British *politics* to a far greater extent than it did British public *policy*. Ten years after the referendum, its most enduring legacy remains not a new economic or institutional model, but a lasting transformation of the way political representation, sovereignty and the political community are defined in the United Kingdom.

VOTE SHARE OF THE MAJOR UK PARTIES



Sources: House of Commons Library, UK Election Statistics: 1918–2023; Electoral Calculus, Election History Since 1900. Data: vote share (%). For 1974, both general elections are shown (February and October). The UKIP / Brexit Party / Reform UK series combines the successive parties of the Eurosceptic right.

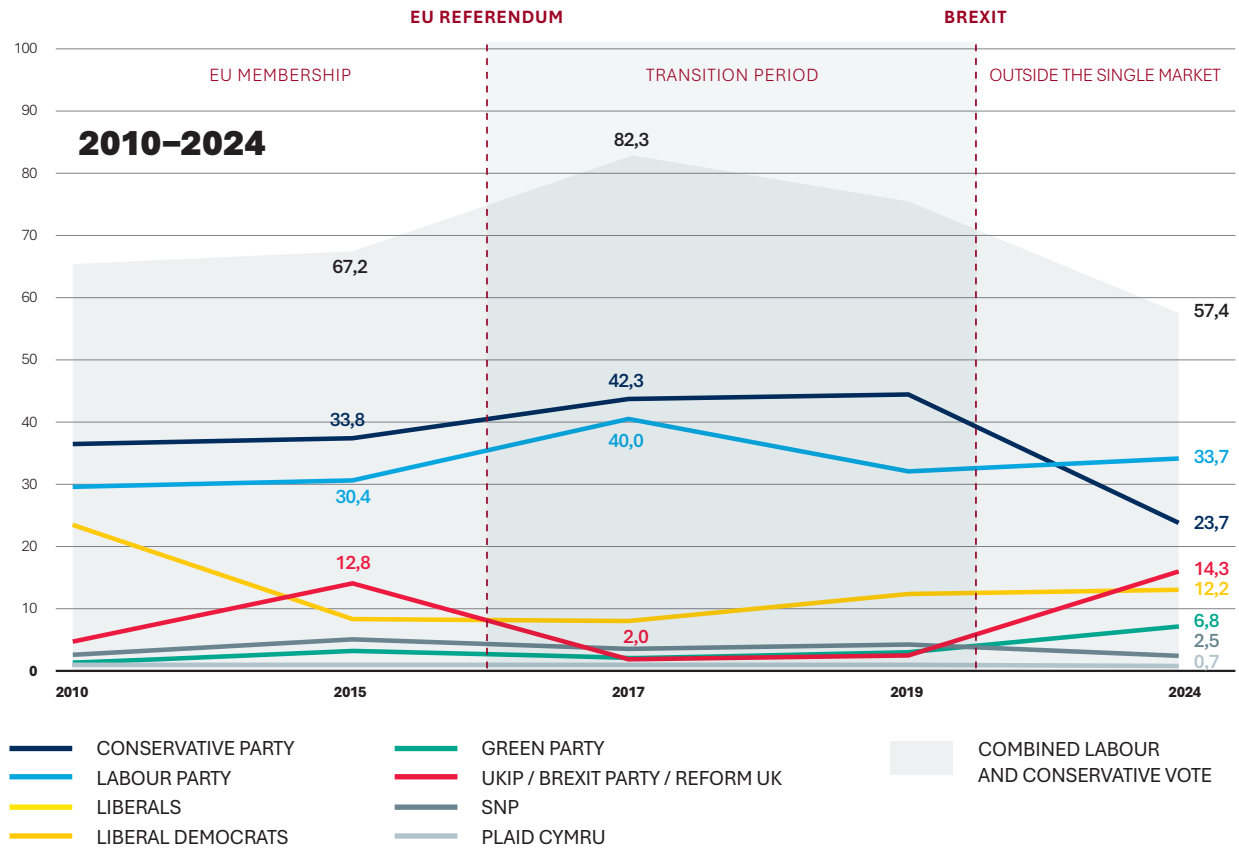
FINDINGS

Brexit was, above all, a process of institutional and political restructuring rather than one of public-policy change. It altered the logic of representation, legitimacy and political competition, but it led to far fewer fundamental changes in public policy. Its most long-lasting effects concern the functioning of the political system, rather than specific sectoral arrangements.

The 2016 referendum was the culmination of a longstanding crisis of representation. The conflict over European integration had been mounting for decades, exposing the limitations of the Westminster model under conditions of growing social, cultural and territorial diversity.

The party system underwent a deep reconfiguration. The divide between supporters of leaving the EU and of remaining within it temporarily weakened the salience of the traditional left–right axis, encouraging the formation of new electoral coalitions and the rising importance of parties from outside the historical Conservative–Labour duopoly.

VOTE SHARE OF THE MAJOR UK PARTIES



Source: House of Commons Library, „UK General Election Results 1918–2024“; Electoral Calculus, „Election History Since 1900“.

Brexit accelerated the political differentiation of the constituent parts of the state. It reinforced distinct political dynamics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, deepening the debate over the future model of relations between the centre and the devolved administrations.

Recovered formal sovereignty did not translate into full freedom of action for the state. Despite regaining institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the EU, the United Kingdom continues to operate under conditions of strong economic, regulatory and strategic interdependence, which limits the range of available political choices.

Brexit exposed the internal tensions of the union state. Disputes over the division of competences following withdrawal from the EU showed that sovereignty and political legitimacy are understood differently in different parts of the United Kingdom.

The most enduring effect of Brexit is the weakening of traditional patterns of political representation. Ten years after the referendum, British politics remains more fragmented, more territorially differentiated and more susceptible to the emergence of new political actors than it was before 2016.

4. POLISH-BRITISH RELATIONS, 2016-2026: FROM BREXIT TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Arkady Rzegocki



4.1 INTRODUCTION

The referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union of 23 June 2016 marked one of the most significant turning points in post-war European history. For Poland, the outcome of the referendum represented a distinct challenge. The United Kingdom was one of Warsaw's most important political and economic partners, one of the leading advocates of NATO and EU enlargement to Central Europe, and a country home to one of the largest Polish diasporas.¹⁴³ Concerns naturally arose regarding the future of the bilateral relationship, the rights of Polish citizens residing in Britain, and Poland's place in British European policy after Brexit.

Ten years on, it is clear that Brexit created not only problems and challenges but also opportunities, many of which were successfully exploited. What is more, Polish–British relations have become one of the paradoxes of the post-Brexit era. While a substantial part of the ties binding the United Kingdom to Europe weakened or were redefined, cooperation between Poland and the United Kingdom rose to a new level. There was a deepening of political cooperation, the development of strategic dialogue, an unprecedented rapprochement in the field of security and defence, and a marked change in the perception of Poland among British elites and the wider public.

The central argument of this chapter is that **Brexit did not weaken Polish–British relations but rather contributed to their transformation into one of the closest strategic partnerships in Europe. At the same time, the years 2016–2026 saw a fundamental shift in the British perception of Poland—from a country associated chiefly with migration to a state regarded as a key political, military and economic partner, and one of the pillars of European security.**

143 Główny Urząd Statystyczny, *Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach czasowej emigracji z Polski w latach 2019–2024*, informacja sygnałowa, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warsaw 2025, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosci/informacja-o-rozmiarach-i-kierunkach-czasowej-emigracji-z-polski-w-latach-2019-2024,18,3.html>.

4.2 A DIFFICULT STARTING POINT

To assess the scale of this transformation, it is necessary to recall the initial situation. In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, knowledge of Poland in the United Kingdom remained limited. For a significant part of British society, Poland was, above all, the country of origin of a large community of migrants who had arrived following the European Union's enlargement in 2004. Although Poles were generally seen as hard-working, well-educated and well-integrated, their presence became part of a broader debate on migration that played a significant role during the referendum campaign.

Migration from Central and Eastern Europe became a prominent theme in political debate, where it was often presented as evidence of diminished border control and as a rationale for leaving the European Union. Poland thus found itself at the centre of one of the most emotive political debates in the modern history of the United Kingdom.

Differences also existed in the perception of Russia. Poland—after earlier experiences, the Chechen wars, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, and the annexation of Crimea and the aggression against Ukraine in 2014—regarded Russia as the principal threat to European security. In the United Kingdom, the change in perception unfolded gradually. Despite mounting tensions, London remained an important centre of activity for Russian financial elites, and the presence of Russian capital was not widely perceived as a strategic problem.

The shift came about gradually. The assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal, and the growing number of Russian influence operations, cyberattacks and attempts to interfere in the democratic processes of Western states led to a fundamental change in the attitude of the British political and security establishment.¹⁴⁴ As a result, the United Kingdom began to reach strategic conclusions similar to those Poland had been articulating for many years.

4.3 DIPLOMACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

One of the most important factors in the success of Polish–British relations was the active and consistent diplomatic policy of both states. The establishment in January 2016 of the Quadriga format—bringing together the foreign and defence ministers of Poland and the United Kingdom—was of particular significance. Although this initiative predated the Brexit referendum, it provided a durable framework for subsequent strategic dialogue.

After the referendum, both states consistently developed bilateral cooperation through regular intergovernmental consultations, strategic dialogue and frequent contacts at the political level. With hindsight, it is clear that Warsaw and London deliberately sought to build a relationship extending beyond the framework of the United Kingdom's

144 D. Allan, I. Bond, *A New Russia Policy for Post-Brexit Britain*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/01/new-russia-policy-post-brexit-britain>.

cooperation with the European Union. In November 2016, during the first intergovernmental consultations, Prime Ministers Beata Szydło and Theresa May announced in London the beginning of a strategic partnership¹⁴⁵.

A significant achievement was the safeguarding of citizens' rights. Following the referendum, the protection of the interests of the more than one million Poles residing in the United Kingdom became one of the principal priorities of Polish diplomacy. As a result of a substantial information campaign, Poles—initially the nationality least likely to register—became the group that initially made the most effective use of the EU Settlement Scheme, obtaining settled or pre-settled status.¹⁴⁶ This made it possible to mitigate one of the main potential negative effects of Brexit.

A symbol of Poland's lasting commitment to developing relations with the United Kingdom was also the opening of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Belfast—the first and only consulate general of a European Union member state in Northern Ireland. This decision carried both practical and political significance, underscoring the strategic character of Polish–British relations.

4.4 SECURITY AND DEFENCE – A NEW PILLAR OF PARTNERSHIP

The greatest development in the relationship, however, occurred in the field of security and defence. Over the past decade, Poland and the United Kingdom have achieved an exceptionally high level of strategic convergence. Both states increasingly came to regard one another as key partners in ensuring European security. In addition to the annual Quadriga meetings, the annual intergovernmental consultations played an important role. In 2017, the Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation was signed.¹⁴⁷ The so-called Northolt Treaty, signed in May 2026 in Uxbridge, beside the Battle of Britain Bunker in the London Borough of Hillingdon, provides an additional framework for the strengthened strategic partnership.

Cooperation to date has focused primarily on military ties, intelligence sharing, cyber-security, countering hybrid threats and the protection of critical infrastructure. Particularly important has been cooperation within NATO and joint efforts to strengthen the Alliance's eastern flank.

Poland and the United Kingdom were also among the first states to recognise the scale of the threat posed by Russia's revisionist policy. As a result, even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both countries were expanding cooperation aimed at strengthening the resilience of Europe, including Ukraine, to Russian actions.

145 *PM and Prime Minister Beata Szydło Statements: 28 November 2016*, the transcript, Prime Minister's Office, London, 28 XI 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-and-prime-minister-beata-szydlo-statements-28-november-2016>.

146 *EU Settlement Scheme: Applications*, House of Commons Library, London 2021, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/eu-settlement-scheme-applications-figures-in-final-month/>.

147 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Poland on Defence and Security Cooperation*, Cm 9673, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b55d83040f0b633971217fe/TS_3.2018_Poland_Defence_Cm_9673.pdf.

4.5 UKRAINE AS A TEST OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 became a defining moment for contemporary Polish–British relations. Poland and the United Kingdom were among the states that, even before the outbreak of the war, had warned of the possibility of a full-scale invasion. More importantly, both countries shared the conviction that Ukraine could defend itself effectively and that it should be provided with immediate military assistance.

Across many European states, scepticism prevailed at the time, both regarding the scale of the threat and the prospects for Ukrainian resistance. Warsaw and London took a different stance. As a result, they became leading organisers of international support for Ukraine—supplying arms, training soldiers, supporting sanctions against Russia and mobilising international partners.

The war did not create the Polish–British partnership, but it confirmed its significance and durability. It also demonstrated that the two states had developed a shared strategic culture and a similar assessment of the most important challenges to European security.

4.6 COOPERATION BETWEEN THE DEFENCE INDUSTRIES

Cooperation between the defence industries of the two countries is also becoming increasingly important. Rising defence expenditure, the need to rebuild the production capacity of NATO states, and the lessons of the war in Ukraine have created new opportunities for collaboration.

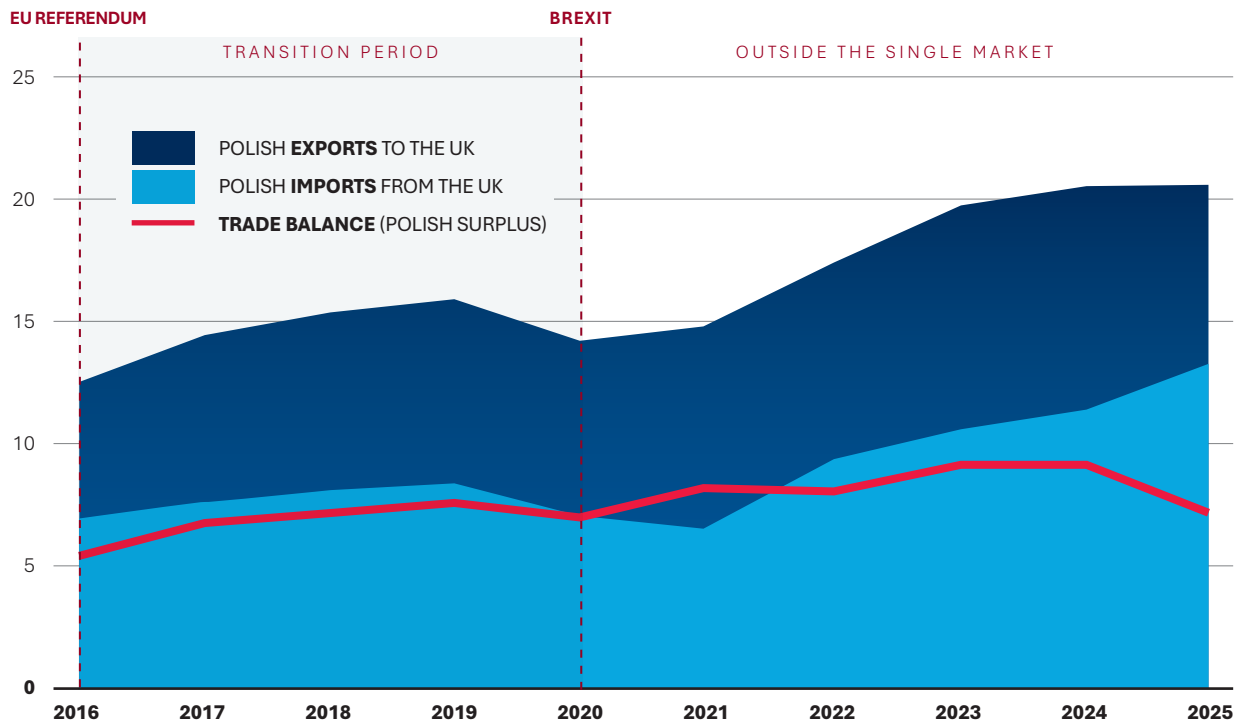
Poland and the United Kingdom possess complementary industrial potential. Particularly strong prospects exist in the production of ammunition, the development of air and missile defence systems, unmanned technologies, cybersecurity and dual-use technologies. Among the most recent examples of cooperation are the Narew and Miecznik programmes.¹⁴⁸ Cooperation between the defence industries carries significance extending beyond the economic dimension. It is becoming an element in building the long-term strategic resilience of Europe and strengthening NATO's deterrence capabilities.

148 Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, *Brytyjskie wojska inżynieryjne będą wspierać polskich żołnierzy na granicy*, Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, Warsaw, 18 XI 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/brytyjskie-wojska-inzynieryjne-beda-wspierac-polskich-zolnierzy-na-granicy>.

4.7 ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Despite the new barriers arising from Brexit, economic cooperation has retained considerable dynamism. Poland remains one of the United Kingdom’s most important economic partners in Central Europe, while the United Kingdom continues to be a significant source of investment and technology. As a result of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom ceased to be Poland’s second-largest trading partner after Germany. Nevertheless, bilateral trade recovered from the disruption caused by the pandemic and has since reached successive record levels. Poland’s exports have increased substantially in recent years¹⁴⁹, and the United Kingdom remains the fourth-largest destination for Polish exports.¹⁵⁰

POLAND – UNITED KINGDOM TRADE IN GOODS [£ BILLION]



Source: Office for National.

149 Department for Business and Trade, *Trade and Investment Factsheet: Poland*, Department for Business and Trade, London 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-and-investment-factsheets-partner-countries>.

150 British Polish Chamber of Commerce, *The Potential of Polish-British Economic Cooperation*, Warsaw 2025, <https://bpcc.org.pl/report-the-potential-of-polish-british-economic-cooperation/>.

Sectors associated with new technologies, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, energy and the defence industry are now acquiring particular significance. Economic relations are increasingly based on partnership, driven less by differences in levels of development than by the complementarity of capabilities. In recent years, Polish investment in the UK has begun to assume growing importance. Tele-Fonika and Fakro have, for example, been joined by InPost. For several years now, the British Polish Chamber of Commerce (BPCC) has advised not only British firms investing in Poland, but also Polish firms investing in the United Kingdom.

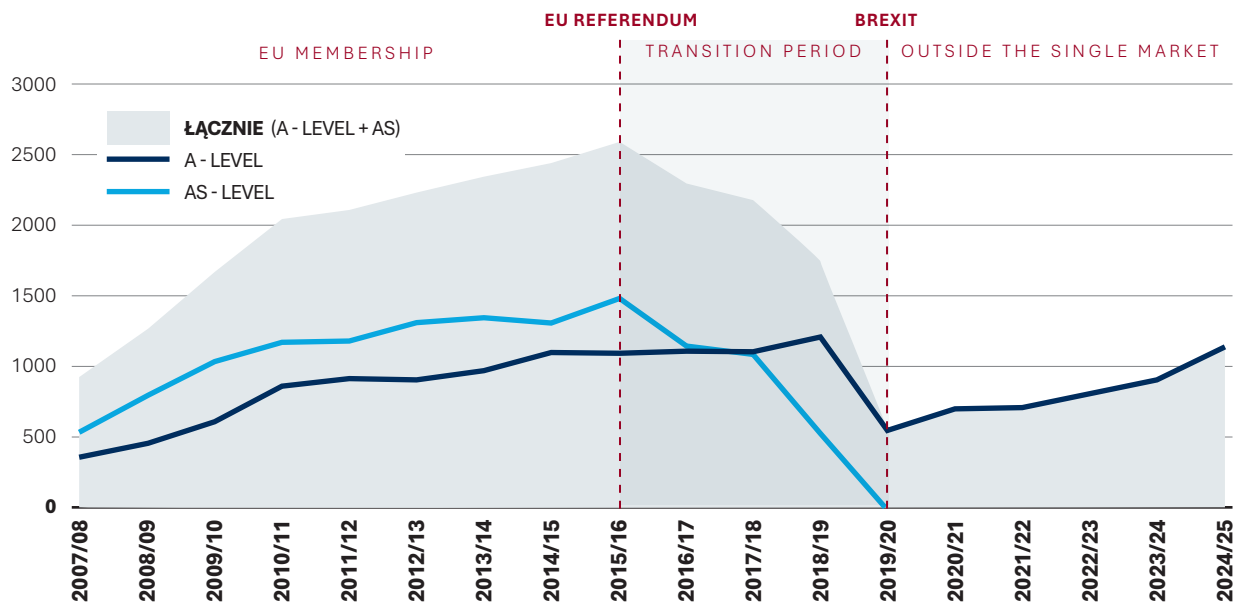
4.8 THE ROLE OF THE POLISH COMMUNITY

A significant element in the transformation of Polish–British relations was the evolution of the role of the Polish community (Polonia). The Polish community in the United Kingdom has ceased to be perceived solely through the lens of migration. Increasingly, it serves as a bridge between societies, supporting economic, scientific, cultural and political cooperation.

The growing number of Polish entrepreneurs, academics, experts, local government officials and members of the independent professions participating in British public life contributes to building a positive image of Poland and strengthening people-to-people relations.

The trajectory of interest in learning Polish in the United Kingdom is a testament to both the durability and the institutionalisation of the Polish presence in the country. The number of candidates sitting Polish A-level and AS-level examinations rose from around 900 in the 2007/2008 school year to almost 2,600 at its peak in 2015/2016. The subsequent decline may have resulted both from the reform separating AS-level from A-level and from the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than from any weakening of the Polish community itself.

NUMBER OF A-LEVEL AND AS ENTRIES IN POLISH, 2007/08–2024/25



* The data covers entries for AQA examinations in Polish.
The decline in AS entries after 2019/20 reflects the decoupling of AS from A-level.

Source: Authors' own analysis based on AQA data, Exam results statistics – A-level, June editions, 2007–2025.



Graphics: NOWEMEDIA24.PL
PIOTR PERZYNA

4.8.1 CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF POLAND

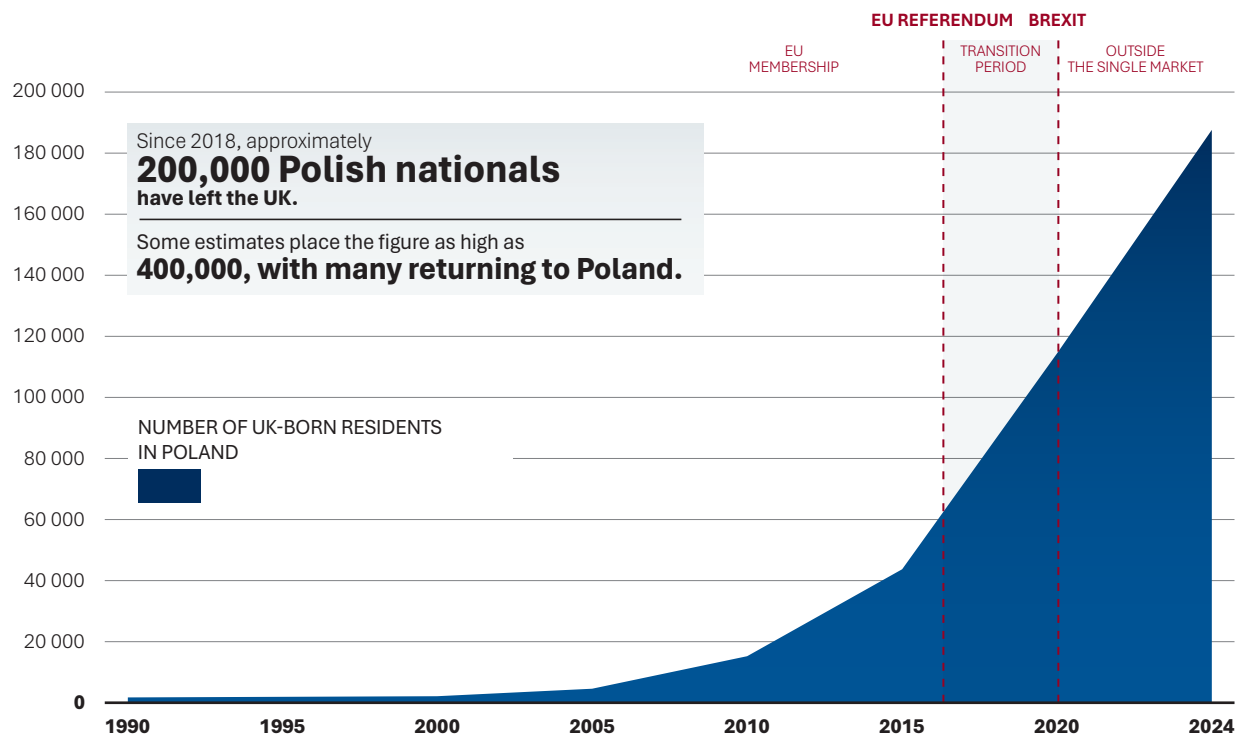
The most lasting change of the past decade may, however, prove to be the transformation in the British perception of Poland. As recently as 2016, Poland was associated chiefly with migration and Central and Eastern Europe. Ten years later, it is increasingly seen as a state playing a key role in European security—a ‘humanitarian power’ that provided effective assistance to Ukraine and to refugees, and an example of remarkable economic success.

In this regard, the activities of Polish public diplomacy, the engagement of the Polish community, the development of academic cooperation and initiatives such as Polish Heritage Days have been of considerable importance. British expert circles, Polish–British friendship organisations, scholarly publications, and cultural projects devoted to Poland are also playing an increasingly significant role.

In parallel, interest in shared history has grown. Themes such as the Battle of Britain, No. 303 Squadron, the contribution of Polish cryptologists to breaking the Enigma cipher, and the participation of the Polish Armed Forces in the Allied victory during the Second World War are increasingly present in British consciousness. Shared historical memory is becoming an additional foundation for the contemporary partnership.

The rise in Poland’s standing and the breakthrough in the perception of Poles and Poland in the UK occurred over the past decade despite a significant decline in the number of Polish immigrants. It is estimated that around 200,000 Polish citizens¹⁵¹ have left the United Kingdom since 2018—though larger figures, of up to 400,000, are sometimes cited—the majority of whom chose to return to Poland. UN data, in turn, estimate the number of British citizens living in Poland at 185,000.¹⁵² Even on the assumption that a large proportion holds dual citizenship, this figure is impressive and probably exceeds the celebrated migration of some 30,000 Scots to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the seventeenth century.

UK-POLAND MIGRATION: UK-BORN RESIDENTS IN POLAND: 1990–2024

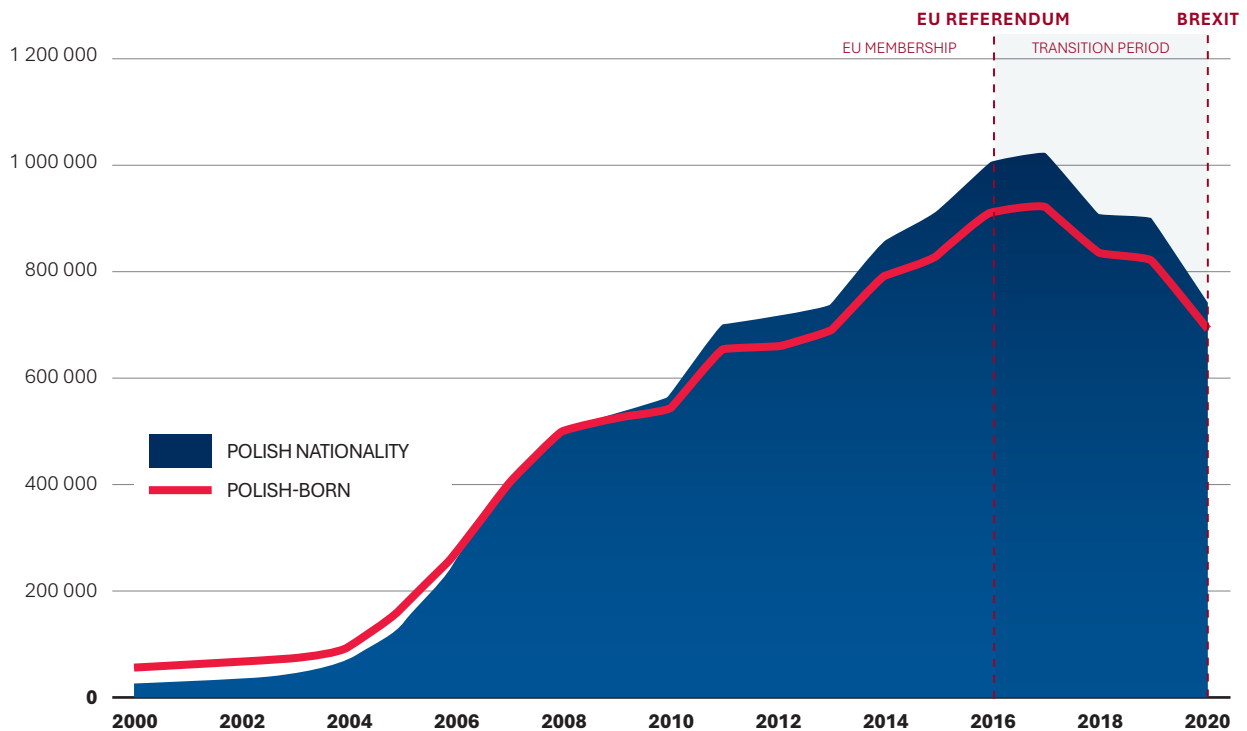


Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024.

151 Office for National Statistics, *Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality: Individual Country Data*, Office for National Statistics, Newport 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets>.

152 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2024*, United Nations, New York 2024.

THE POLISH POPULATION IN THE UK, 2000–2020



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), „Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality: individual country data” (underlying datasheets; discontinued after June 2021).

4.8.2 POLAND AS A SUCCESS STORY

The change in the perception of Poland is reinforced by the economic success of recent decades. British commentators increasingly portray Poland as one of the success stories of the post-communist transformation and one of Europe’s most dynamic economies. After 2022, the organisational capacities of the Polish state, its social resilience and the scale of the support it extended to Ukraine earned additional recognition. Poland ceased to function in British consciousness solely as a state catching up with the West and came to be seen as a co-architect of European security and development.

4.9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ten years after the Brexit referendum, Polish–British relations can be regarded as one of the most successful bilateral partnerships in Europe. Brexit did not weaken them. On the contrary, it served as a catalyst for the development of a more mature and strategic relationship.
2. In the coming decade, the priority should be the further deepening of cooperation in the field of security and defence. Joint defence-industry projects should be developed, cooperation on cybersecurity expanded, and shared capabilities for responding to hybrid threats built.
3. In parallel, economic cooperation should be strengthened in the sectors of the future, particularly in the areas of new technologies, artificial intelligence, energy and the defence industry.
4. It is also essential to sustain support for initiatives that promote knowledge of Poland in the United Kingdom. The experience of the past decade shows that the durability of a strategic partnership depends not only on political decisions but also on the quality of social, cultural and academic relations. Poland should not be satisfied with the improvement in its image. It should strengthen its presence in the fields of culture, history and scholarship in order to engage both British elites and wider society, while making greater use of the global reach of London, British cultural institutions and British universities to promote knowledge of Poland.
5. The most important achievement of the past ten years, however, is not merely the development of political, military or economic cooperation. It is the fundamental change in mutual perception. Poland and the United Kingdom have evolved from a relationship marked by limited mutual knowledge, disputes over migration and partially divergent threat perceptions into a genuine partnership founded on shared interests and a common vision of European security.

5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Arkady Rzegocki



1.

Brexit Confirms That Leaving the Single Market Entails Lasting Economic Costs

The United Kingdom's experience demonstrates that even a large, highly developed economy with global ambitions cannot replace the benefits of participation in the single market without cost. New regulatory barriers, trade restrictions and additional administrative costs have led to a weakening of economic exchange, disruptions to supply chains and a decline in the investment attractiveness of certain sectors of the British economy.

Recommendation: *Poland should consistently support the development and deepening of the European single market, treating it as one of the most important sources of its own economic growth and competitiveness.*

2.

Strategic Changes Require a Long-Term Vision of the State

One of the most significant problems of the post-referendum period turned out to be the absence of a coherent strategy defining the United Kingdom's place after leaving the European Union. The mere recovery of competencies does not automatically mean a more effective state or better public policies.

Recommendation: *Poland should avoid strategic decisions taken under the influence of short-term political emotions. Any fundamental change concerning the country's position in Europe must be preceded by a realistic assessment of the costs, benefits and long-term consequences.*

3.

Formal Sovereignty Does Not Replace Economic Interdependence

Brexit showed that, in a globalised economy, even states possessing considerable political and economic potential remain dependent on international flows of capital, goods, services and workers. An attempt to limit one form of dependence often leads to the emergence of new ones.

Recommendation: *Poland should pursue a policy of strengthening sovereignty through the building of economic, technological and military potential, rather than through the restriction of international cooperation.*

4. Migration Policy Requires Realism, Not Political Slogans

One of the principal objectives of Brexit was to restore national control over migration policy. In practice, the United Kingdom restricted the inflow of workers from the European Union while simultaneously reaching record levels of migration from third countries. In many sectors of the economy, labour shortages emerged that could not be quickly remedied.

Recommendation: *Poland should pursue a pragmatic migration policy based on the needs of the labour market, the security of the state and long-term demographic trends.*

5. Europe Needs the United Kingdom, And the United Kingdom Needs Europe

Despite Brexit, the United Kingdom has remained one of the most important pillars of European security. This became particularly evident after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, when London, together with Warsaw, played a key role in organising military and political support for Kyiv.

Recommendation: *Poland should support the maintenance of the closest possible relations between the United Kingdom and Europe, especially in the areas of security, defence and foreign policy.*

6. The Polish–British Partnership Should Become One of The Pillars of Polish European Policy

The past decade has demonstrated that Poland and the United Kingdom share an exceptionally high degree of convergence in their interests with regard to security, eastern policy, the future of NATO and efforts to counter Russia's aggressive policies. The partnership developed after 2016 should be regarded as one of the greatest successes of Polish foreign policy in this period.

Recommendation: *Poland should consistently develop its strategic partnership with the United Kingdom, treating it as a permanent element of its security policy and its European policy.*

7.

Poland Should Seek to Leverage British Soft Power More Effectively to Enhance Its International Position

Brexit did not deprive the United Kingdom of its most important assets: its global universities, media, cultural institutions, financial market, the English language, and its immense cultural and intellectual influence. British soft power remains one of the most effective instruments of influence in the world.

Recommendation: *Poland should use its cooperation with the United Kingdom to strengthen its own international recognition, to promote Polish culture, scholarship and the economy, and to build a stronger Polish brand. This also applies to supporting the image of Polish products as high-quality, innovative and competitively priced—positioned in the ‘premium at a reasonable price’ segment, rather than merely as a cheaper alternative to Western products.*

8.

Poland and The United Kingdom Should Jointly Sustain Western Interest in Central and Eastern Europe and Work to Strengthen Transatlantic Ties

One of the most important challenges of the coming years will be sustaining the lasting engagement of Western states in the security of Central and Eastern Europe. This concerns both support for Ukraine and the long-term deterrence of Russia.

Recommendation: *Poland and the United Kingdom should remain leaders in cooperation for the security of NATO’s eastern flank and in transatlantic cooperation—particularly with the United States and Canada—and should continue to act against the imperial and revisionist policy of the Russian Federation.*

CONCLUSION

The most important lesson of the first decade after Brexit is relatively simple: **even a state possessing the economic, financial and political potential of the United Kingdom bears tangible costs when it leaves a deeply integrated market without a clearly defined strategy for further development.**

At the same time, the experience of recent years shows that geography, security and shared interests remain stronger than institutional divisions.

Poland should therefore simultaneously strengthen its embeddedness within European structures and develop its strategic partnership with the United Kingdom as one of the most important European and global states.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PUBLISHER





Dr. habil. Arkady Rzegocki

Professor at the Jagiellonian University and Polish Ambassador to the United Kingdom (2016–2021), Ambassador to Ireland (2023–2024), and Head of the Polish Foreign Service (2021–2023). He is the author of *Dyplomacja otwarta, czyli jak skutecznie realizować rację stanu* [Open Diplomacy, or How to Effectively Pursue the National Interest] (Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2025).



Dr. Piotr Arak

Chief Economist at VeloBank and a Lecturer in the Department of Political Economy at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw. He is a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and a co-founder of the Polish Economic Institute, which he led from 2018 to 2023. He studied at the University of Warsaw, the SGH Warsaw School of Economics, the Université du Québec à Montréal, and the Harvard Kennedy School.



Dr. Przemysław Biskup

Lecturer at the Institute of International Economic Policy at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics, where he conducts research and teaches in the fields of international relations and European politics. He has been with SGH since 2018, and previously worked at the Faculty of Journalism and Political Science at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include Polish–British and EU–British relations, with particular emphasis on Brexit, as well as the United Kingdom's energy and climate policy. He also conducts research on post-Brexit cooperation among the countries of the Anglosphere (including AUKUS and CANZUK). His interests further extend to the political determinants of European integration, Eurosceptic movements, the foreign policy of the EU and the EEAS, and EU sanctions policy. He is a member of the the sanctions research networks SIFMANET (RUSI) and MINOS (Ghent University), a visiting professor at Sciences Po Lyon (2016, 2018, 2022, 2024, 2026), and, since 2017, an analyst in the European Union Programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM).



Zuzanna Hebdzyńska

An expert in migration and asylum policy. A graduate of Migration Studies from the University of Oxford (St Anne's College) and in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) from King's College London. She has gained experience across European institutions and international organisations – including the European Parliament, Frontex, the Polish Embassy in London, and the Office for Foreigners — as well as through field research in Kenya and Uganda.



Dr. Aleksander Łaszek

An expert in macroeconomics and Senior Manager and Head of the Economic Analysis team at Deloitte Poland. For many years, he was associated with the Civil Development Forum (FOR), where he served as Chief Economist and Vice-President of the Management Board. He was educated at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics, and is an active member of the Polish Economists' Society. In his research and advisory work, he specialises in long-term economic growth, public finance, and the impact of legal regulation on the economy. He is a co-author of well-known educational and analytical projects such as Rachunek od państwa [The Bill from the State], and the author of analyses for institutions including the World Bank and the Lisbon Council.



Prof. Anand Menon

Anand Menon is Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at Kings College London. He is a Director at Public First and directs the UK in a Changing Europe project (www.ukandeu.ac.uk), which has established itself as the leading source of impartial, research based evidence on the UK and its relationship with the EU. He has published numerous academic books and articles, including the Oxford Handbook of the European Union (OUP, 2012), and Brexit and British Politics (Polity 2018). He contributes regularly to both print and broadcast media and has appeared on most major radio and television news outlets including the Today Programme, Newsnight and Question Time. He is a trustee of Full Fact a member of the Strategic Council of the European Policy Centre, a Council member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and member of the Advisory Board of the Resolution Foundation.



Dr. Julia Patorska

An economist with over 20 years' experience, a Partner at Deloitte, and a leader of projects at the intersection of economics, regulation, and sustainable development. She specialises in analysing the impact of regulatory change and public policy on the economy, supporting both the public sector and major corporations in their strategic decision-making. From 2017 to 2024 she served as President of the Polish Economists' Society (TEP), actively contributing to the development of public debate, the popularisation of economic knowledge, and the strengthening of dialogue between academia, business, and government.



The Sobieski Institute is a Polish private think tank whose mission is “Creating ideas for Poland.” It was registered in 2005 as a foundation, having began its activities in 2003. Between 2003 and 2010, the Institute published “Międzynarodowy Przegląd Polityczny”, a quarterly. From 2011 to 2015, it organized the annual “Poland – The Great Project” congress. In 2017, it organized the National Innovation League. Since 2017, the Institute has placed strong emphasis in its activities on publishing studies and recommendations aimed at demonstrating how the Polish economy should capitalize on the opportunities associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, innovation, and new technologies.

The Sobieski Institute also conducts educational activities through the "Academy of Young Experts" project, which supports young people in developing leadership skills and soft skills. Each edition of the program focuses on a different key issue, addressing the current needs of the younger generation. Currently, during its 6th edition, the project focuses on European Union, imparting knowledge and preparing participants to take part in European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) competitions. The program opens the door for its participants to international careers in the EU institutions. It is a unique opportunity to gain practical skills and pursue professional development at the highest level.

One of the Sobieski Institute’s latest projects is the “Sobieski Channel,” which we invite you to subscribe to on YouTube. The channel was created to feature inspiring conversations on topics important for Poland. We meet with interesting personalities there to foster space for substantive debate in a joint effort.

Over the years, the Sobieski Institute has collaborated with many organizations. To date, these have included:

- non-governmental organizations: Polish Automation and Robotics Forum, Mutual Insurance Support Foundation, Republican Foundation, Jagiellonian Institute, New Confederation, Ambitious Poland, Youth for Poland, Students for the Republic, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Central European Energy Partners, Sławomir Skrzypek Foundation, Wacław Felczak Foundation, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet), Institute for Politics and Society (Institut pro politiku a společnost), The F. A. Hayek Foundation Bratislava;
- commercial companies: Aiut, Assay Group, Rohde & Schwarz, WB Electronics, Asseco, Samsung, Lotos, Google, Procter & Gamble, PwC, Cisco, EY, Phoenix Systems, Uber, USP Zdrowie, Fortum, Orange, Energa, Zysk i Ska, Collegium Wratislaviense, 4CF;
- Government/supranational institutions: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Commission Representation in Poland, Ministry of Climate and Environment, Industry of the Future Platform Foundation, Agency for Development and Industry, Warsaw Stock Exchange, Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Digital Affairs, Law and Justice, Embassy of Hungary, Senate of the Republic of Poland, European Conservatives and Reformists Party, European Parliament Office in Poland.

A complete list of reports and publications, as well as information about the Institute’s activities, can be found at www.sobieski.org.pl.






We also invite you to subscribe to the Sobieski Channel on youtube.com/kanalSobieski. Join us—it’s worth it!

10
AFTER THE
BREXIT
REFERENDUM

A SHRINKING POWER

AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL
ASSESSMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



-  @InstSobieskiego
-  Instytut Sobieskiego
-  Instytut Sobieskiego
-  Kanat Sobieski
-  Kanat Sobieski



Lipowa 1a/20
00-316 Warszawa

sobieski@sobieski.org.pl
www.sobieski.org.pl

©Copyright by
Instytut Sobieskiego 2026

ISBN 978-83-68374-24-7
Warsaw 2026