

Brexit: Political Impact on Britain

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Abstract

Brexit is done, with obvious political impact on Britain. The political impact can be classified to internal and external effects; on the internal side, Brexit affects the political relations between legislative and executive within UK. On the other side, Brexit has effects on the UK's relations with European Union EU. Among other things, this paper focuses on the Brexit's impact on the Northern Ireland and its relations with EU and The Republic of Ireland, the issue of borders and the constitutional situation of Northern Ireland. In addition to the case of immigration in Britain which constitute several political and cultural issues within UK.

Introduction:

This paper is interested in the political impact of the UK exit from the European Union, which is known as: Brexit. As we know, Brexit is considered a huge problem to both the UK and the EU. As a precedent, Brexit launched numerous issues on several dimensions; political, economic, cultural, etc. This paper is concerned with the political impact of Brexit, on both sides; internally and externally, in addition to the impact on Northern Ireland and Immigration. The applied method will be Empirical. The structure of the paper is as

following; First: Historical framework. Second: Political causes of Brexit. Third: Political issues that confronted Britain's policy makers; (a) Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations. (b) Immigration. Finally: Conclusion.

First, Historical Framework:

The treaty of Rome forged the unique institution, The European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957. The aim of this regional organization was promoting economic integration to the main European states. The treaty was signed by Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany. (Gabel, 2022:1) It was only in 1973 that the UK decided to join the EU.

The last comprehensive EU treaty reform was done through 2007 Lisbon Treaty. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty famously says that any Member State 'may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements'. (Weale, 2018:28)

So, the UK was a member state with long-term opposition to the European integration process and the European project in general. Margaret Thatcher in an address in the Bruges in 1988, spoke against the EU's desire to "suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the center". (Hoinaru, 2019:804)

Brexit affects the UK's ability to identify its foreign, security and defense requirements that would benefit from continued cooperation with the EU. (Hadfield, 2018:175) There are concerns regarding the future of bilateral initiatives and

agreements, the existing ties, some of which have resulted in practical collaboration and some more intangible but no less significant, such as the UK's informal role as an interlocutor between US and the EU.

Behind Britain's decision to exit the EU, scholars found some driving forces, either; political, economic or cultural, in behalf of defending national interest. The main assumption of Britain's illustrates that the UK is financially and economically exploited by the EU. Other analysts attribute the Brexit to the rise of populism or right wing populism. Populism covers up some aspects linked to the socio-economic and cultural image. In other words, populism is a reaction to cultural backlash and growing Economic inequality. Although considering this political trend as new to British political sphere, it is also considered as one of the drives of Euroscepticism established in Britain politics for decades. (Ababakr, 2019:7, 8)

Second, Political Causes of Brexit:

The United Kingdom had formally withdrawn from the European Union on January 31, 2020, after the victory of the Leavers on 23 June 2016 referendum.

On one hand, the EU as an international body can promote common interest between the members of the Union. But on the other hand, while states enter into the European Union with their sovereignty, their common interests may be merged into their sovereignty and applied by European institutions. (Ababakr, 2019:4)

In other words, the European convergence will take place in order to resolve problems of European countries more effectively. Convergence has two stages: (1) Political priorities are shaped in the domestic environment. (2) Bargaining and negotiations between states take place internationally.

However, the Eurosceptic attitudes in many member states, not only in the UK, had emerged due to: (1) anti-establishment and anti-EU discourse. (2) The wave of 1 million refugees that have settled on EU territory. (3) Zero-sum games and double standers that have been promoted by the EU institutions themselves. (4) The lack of transparency in EU decision making processes. All of these reasons have led to a fundamental distrust of the EU by the British citizens. (Hoinaru, 2019:809)

There are several reasons for the UK's attempt to exit the European Union, primary observation lead to the crucial causes of Brexit and we can mention the following:

(1) Sovereignty: outside the EU, states cooperate with each other without abandoning their sovereignty. Observation lead to understand that the processes such as Europeanism, Europeanization, and unity of Europe means that parts of the state sovereignty must be left to a higher entity. The idea of a Unified Europe progressing towards greater integration and formation of the United States of Europe is a total loss of national sovereignty in the eyes of some of the British decision-makers. UK was worried about losing

its sovereignty. "Vote Leave, Take Back Control" was the key slogan from the 2016 referendum. (Carter, 2021:97) From 1962, years before British accession to the EU, the leader of Labour, Gaitskill, warned that the British integration would be "...the end of a Thousand years of History". (Hoinaru, 2019:804)

(2)National interest: According to Stanley Hoffman, a rational defense of national interests and the preservation of a core of sovereignty, along with cooperation between governments, can be seen as a common issue among different countries, not only UK. Outside of EU, the interaction between states takes place with a priority of protecting the national interests.

(3)Populist ideology: that assumes that the immigration and other nationalities have altered the UK pure national identity. (Ford: 2020:78) Traditionally, very few British people distinguished themselves as having a European identity. In addition of decades of rising ethnic heterogeneity. This has led to a values gap between relatively well defined social groups over Europe, immigration, national identity and multiculturalism. (Hobolt, 2020:48)

(4)Media: The largely Eurosceptic press and the "leave" campaign. Throughout Britain's forty-two year membership, political and mass media actors painted a

negative image of the European Union.

(5) **Globalization**: Some scholars asserted that more and more voters were rejecting the rationale of globalization and its aspects, such as open markets and open borders, seeking a new balance between freedom and protection. In the words of Donald Tusk, the president of European Council: “it is therefore crucial to restore the balance between the need for freedom and security and between the need of openness and protection”. (Middelaar, 2018:48, 86)

Third, Political Effects on Britain:

In January 2013, David Cameron, British Prime Minister committed to organizing a referendum regarding the future of UK within the EU if the Conservative Party would win the May 2015 general elections. Cameron did not believe that the Conservative Party would gain the majority and counted on the Liberals, to block the referendum. Ironically, the Conservatives gained a solid majority in the general election. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) strongly pressured the Prime minister to act on his word. Cameron was forced to call the referendum for June 23rd 2016.

On June 23, 2016, UK performed a referendum in which 52% of voters preferred leaving the EU, the country was deeply divided. According to the result of this referendum, The UK government then notified the EU officially on March 29, 2017, of its intention

to leave. 2016 referendum have formed new political identities; “Leavers” and ”Remainers”. (Hobolt, 2020:47)

Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council warned that “uncertainty about the future of the UK in the EU is a destabilizing factor”. (Hoinaru, 2019:806) Brexit was scheduled to occur in March 2019. But the British Parliament had rejected the withdrawal agreement negotiated between UK, under the Prime Minister Theresa May, and the EU. (Belke, 2017:4)

British politicians have managed to cultivate the electorate’s Eurosceptic and even Eurocynic attitudes towards the community from the moment that preceded their entry. The following waves of accession to the European Community caused further unrest with citizens who started debating the usefulness of the project in terms of benefits and Britain’s future.

Referendum did not include anything about the form that Brexit should take, but the result from June 23rd 2016 required:

- A UK withdrawal from the EU and an invocation of article 50 of the treaty of the EU.
- Following parliamentary approval, a two-year period was set for the negotiation of a withdrawal agreement from March 2017 to March 2019.
- Following the withdrawal agreement, a transnational period would ensure until the end of 2020.
- During this transition, the UK would not be represented in the EU institutions, but would still have the obligations of

an EU member state in terms of customs union, single market, following the EU law and contributing to the European Union budget. (Hoinaru, 2019:806)

Prime Minister Theresa May wasn't able to break the stalemate over Brexit in Parliament. Repeatedly, she was unable to secure parliamentary approval for her deal. So she resigned as leader of Conservative Party on June 2019. On 24 July 2019, Boris Johnson became the new Prime minister through winning the Conservative Party leadership contest. Then, he inherited the government by virtue of support from the Democratic Unionists Party (DUP), the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland, known as strongly supports Northern Ireland's continued integration with UK. (Mix, 2020:2)

Although Mr. Johnson succeeded in renegotiating the terms of the agreement with the EU, in respect of the provision of Northern Ireland, in addition to repair much of the division among Conservatives, he was unable to secure full formal parliamentary approval for the revised deal, resulting further extension of negotiating period.

The DUP opposed the Northern Ireland provisions in the renegotiated withdrawal agreement because it will treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. However, the DUP lost its political influence in the UK parliament after 2019 elections, and was unable to block approval of the renegotiated withdrawal agreement. (Mix, 2020: 18)(De Mars, 20) 2019

general election witnessed the largest majority in favor of Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party for more than thirty years, while Labour Party was reduced to its lowest number of seats since 1935. (Goodwin, 2020:61)

In October 2019, UK and EU had reached a new withdrawal agreement including Northern Ireland. Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced difficulties in securing Parliament's approval of the new deal. The UK Parliament agreed to set an early general election for December 12, 2019. The Conservative Party, led by Johnson, won 365 out of 650 seats in the UK House of Commons. This decisive victory allowed the UK to ratify the new withdrawal agreement and bring the UK's membership in EU to an end. (Mix, 2020:1)

The new agreement replicates most of the elements from the original agreement. The original agreement, held on November 2018 between the EU and the government of then-Prime minister Theresa May, included guarantees pertaining to citizens' rights, in addition to UK financial commitments to the EU, and a transition period lasting through 2020. (Brussels, 2020:2, 6)

Under the withdrawal agreement negotiated by the United Kingdom and the European Union, the UK has to continue applying EU rules during the transition period. UK and EU are expected to achieve the negotiation of their future relations including political relations among other issues.

The main difference in the new withdrawal agreement 2019,

compared to the November 2018 original agreement is included in the documents' respective Protocols on Ireland-Northern and Republic of Ireland. In the original agreement of the border issue - which the British government calls "backstop" - the problem was ultimately extended to the entire UK after Prime Minister May backed the DUP's adamant rejection of a Northern Ireland-only provision. This means that DUP would create a regularity barrier on the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and thus will threaten the UK constitutional integrity. The DUP also opposed the provisions for Northern Ireland in Johnson's renegotiated withdrawal agreement, especially the customs border in the Irish Sea, for the same reasons.

The election outcome put the UK on course to withdraw as a member of the EU in January 31, 2020 deadline. The UK government introduced a revised Withdrawal Agreement Bill, which became a law on January 23, 2020. The UK government ratified the withdrawal agreement. The European Parliament voted its consent to the agreement on January 29, 2020, and the Council of the EU completed the EU's ratification on the following day. On January 31, 2020, the UK concluded its 47 year membership in the EU. (Mix, 2020:5)

Surveys showed that many British people do identify strongly as either a *Remainer* or a *Leaver*. It has appeared that Brexit generates a kind of passion and emotional commitment that the country's political parties used to attract. (Ford, 2021:78)

With the UK formal exit, an 11 month transition period began, while the UK was expected, through this duration, to continue following the EU rules and remain a member of the EU single market and customs union. The withdrawal agreement allows for one or two year extension of the transition period. But Prime Minister Johnson has strongly opposed the idea of an extension and inserted a term in the Withdrawal Agreement Bill that transition period will conclude at the end of 2020 without an extension. (Mix, 2020:5)

Politically, Brexit continued to be a dividing and polarization tool, obviously in two ways: **First**, voters rather to state that leaving the EU will either be beneficial or damaging, and less likely to feel that it will not make much difference. **Second**, Remain voters and Leave voters seemed to have very different views about the consequences of being in or out of the EU, and the gap between them became wider since the referendum. (Curtice, 2020:8)

Political Effect on British Parliament:

Brexit sparked a central argument about the need to regain the Parliament role in the UK Parliament. Seeking (taking back control) to regain power over areas of policy making that had been governed by EU laws. The UK joined the European Community in 1973 through a Parliamentary vote. But membership soon emerged followed by the first UK wide referendum, held in 1975, giving the people a right to directly decide the future relationship with the

European bloc. (Russell, 2020:72)

On the internal level, Brexit caused some political problems. Since the 2019 election, the government has continued to lock Parliament out of decision making. The Withdrawal Agreement Bill was written to remove the requirement for the Parliamentary vote on any future trading relationship with the EU. (Saunders, 2021: 71)

Referendums were demanded on the Masstricht treaty, promised on UK's entry onto the euro and on the Lisbon treaty, and guaranteed by the European Union act 2011. This cemented a promise of empowering the public vote. The problem is damaging the role of the Parliament. (Russell, 2021:72)

Following the 2016 referendum, Parliaments role was increasingly challenged. The Supreme Court intervened twice to put Parliament back at the heart of decision making. Theresa May's relationship with Parliament became increasingly antagonistic. Boris Johnson ultimately failed at prorogation. By the 2019 general election, Parliament was being portrayed as an enemy of democracy! Parliamentarians were given a single day, on 30 December 2019, to agree a bill implementing a 1,246 page agreement. (Russell, 2020:72)

The paradox of a referendum, spatially Brexit referendum, is that it is often presented as a device of popular control by which political power is regained by the people. In practice, it increases executive power, as the government seeks the freedom from

Parliament and legal constraint in order to implement what it sees at the popular will. (Weale, 2018:36)

Fourth, Political Issues that Confronted Britain's Policy Makers:

Among many problems that faced Britain's Policy Makers, we can cite Northern Ireland and Immigration as long the hard Brexit is already occurred.

a) Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiation:

The problem with Northern Ireland is the issue of border. The border became an external symptom of an internal issue. Partition reflected intractable identity divisions. The border also left a sizable minority of Nationalists in Northern Ireland cut off from their majority on the island as a whole. Decades went by without high level official contacts between the governments on either side of the border. The result was political violence, attacks on borders in the 1920s. In the years of 1930s and 1950s, part of an undercurrent of political violence in Northern Ireland. The 1960s saw political inertia gradually give way to tension. Impatience within Nationalism about discrimination spurred on Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, while increasing concerns among Unionist politicians over Northern Ireland's changing demography (two thirds of Northern Ireland's population identified as Protestant in 1926, but under half by 2001) stocked a backlash. In 1969, the border became intensively militarized. Then, the division of Ireland became ringed with

barbed wire and cast in concrete. (De Mars, 14, 15) Given its peripheral position, developed institutions and small size, Northern Ireland was quite used to being far from the center of decision making in Westminster.

Northern Ireland constitutes various problems such as:

- (1) Possibility of Republic of Ireland being reunified within the EU without the need for the EU's accession process by which new members join.
- (2) Regulatory alignment.
- (3) The economy of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (De Mars, 20)

During the battles in Northern Ireland the 2016, Brexit referendum had little to do with David Cameron's renegotiation of the UK's place in the EU. Northern Ireland's place in the EU became a proxy for something deeper about Northern Ireland's constitutional status, especially in the case of Hard Brexit.¹

Tensions about the relationship between the UK's component parts have never been too far from the surface during the political crisis triggered by Brexit. The means by which to avoid the recreation of a customs and regulatory border on the island of Ireland became a major source of friction during the article 50 negotiations. (Kenny, 2020:85)

Under the new withdrawal agreement 2019, Northern Ireland

¹ **Hard Brexit** is exiting EU without agreement, while **Soft Brexit** is exiting EU with political, economic, security agreement.

would remain legally in the UK customs territory but practically in the EU customs union, which essentially will create a customs border in the Irish Sea. That means the following:

- a) Northern Ireland remains aligned with the EU regulatory rules, creating an all-island regulatory zone on the island of Ireland and eliminating the need for regulatory checks on trade in goods between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland.
 - b) Physical checks, which are necessary to ensure customs compliance, are to be conducted at ports or points of entry away from the Northern Ireland – Republic of Ireland border, with no check of infrastructure at this border.
 - c) Four years after the arrangements comes into force, the Northern Ireland executive and Assembly must consent to renew it, through vote in 2024.
 - d) At the end of the transition period – the end of 2020 – the entire UK including Northern Ireland, will leave the EU customs union and conduct its own national trade policy.
- (Mix, 2020:3)

Political effect on Northern Ireland:

There are obvious concerns about the Brexit effect on Northern Ireland. Brexit could destabilize the Northern Ireland peace process, regarding to the issue of the *hard border* that will result between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, with infrastructure and customs checks between them. Notable

improvement since 1998 – known as the Good Friday or the Belfast agreement - has been achieved. Yet many researchers, analysts and politician assess that peace and security in Northern Ireland is still fragile, due to divisions and challenges for Northern Ireland peace process, economy and constitutional status apart of the UK. (Mix, 2020:1, 14)

The Referendum of 2016 reflected strongly “Remain” and “Leave” identities within Northern Ireland. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, UK, Irish and EU leaders asserted that they did not want a hard border and worked to prevent such a possibility. In the 2017 initial UK-EU agreement setting out the main principles for the withdrawal negotiations, the UK pledged to uphold the Good Friday agreement, and avoid a hard border, including customs controls and any physical infrastructure, and protect north-south cooperation on the island of Ireland. Border has become central to the shape of Brexit. (Mix, 2020:17)

In short, the recognition of sovereignty over Northern Ireland, internationally, and within Ireland, has shifted in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum. The framework that governs this relationship between Republic of Ireland, the UK and Northern Ireland was redefined with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, through two aspects: **First**, it underpinned the high level of support given to the Irish government. And it also underpinned to the provisions of the GFA by the EU as an institution, and by EU member states,

manifested in the refusal of the EU to negotiate a land border on the island of Ireland. For the UK this was an unforeseen outcome as its negotiation strategy was based on the EU prioritizing the importance of accessing the UK economy over Irish claims under the GFA. **Second**, the undermining of the political stability and relative consensus created by the GFA has led to a new discourse on Irish unity across the island of Ireland, including the potential shape of a new Ireland. This is visible in the mainstream media, on social media and in the findings of opinion polls. (Connolly & Doyle, 2019:217)

Brexit has caused nationalists to see Irish reunification as both more desirable and more likely, and this is one of Brexit's problems. The influence of the EU both directly and indirectly has also been vital in facilitating a change in relations regarding the Sea. (Wright, 2018:107)

Beyond the trade, the negotiations on the future UK-EU relationship are expected to seek a comprehensive partnership covering issues including security, foreign policy, energy and data sharing. Besides other areas related to the broader, there are economic relationship – such as financial services regulation – environmental and social standards, transportation and aviation. (Hall, 2020:24)

On the other hand, there are deep concerns that Brexit could lead to a return of the issue of hard border with the republic of Ireland and destabilize the peace process. Police officials warned that the

hard border post-Brexit could pose considerable security risks. During the troubles, the border region, were considered “bandit country”, with smugglers and gunrunners. Checkpoints were frequently the site of conflict, especially between British soldiers and militant nationalists groups – the republicans – such as the Irish Republican Army IRA, that sought to achieve a united Ireland through force. Militant unionist groups – loyalists – were also active during the Troubles. (Middelaar, 2018:85)

The Good Friday agreement commits the UK normalizing security agreements, including the removal of security installations – consistent with the level of threat – but does not require an open border. Many observers argued that open border had become intrinsic to peace and ensuring the fulfillment of provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. Constitutional status of Northern Ireland is a core issue after Brexit. (Mix, 2020:17)

The beginning of Jan. 2020, witnessed a new regime come into operation for the trade between UK and Northern Ireland. Prospects for the post-Brexit Northern Ireland’s economy have been further damaged by the lack of information and decisions from the government regarding the implementation of the protocol. (Hayward, 2021:92)

Northern Ireland had to follow two sets of UK-EU negotiations during the transition period: those regarding the implementation of the protocol, and those regarding the future relationship. The UK-EU Joint Committee decisions on 17 Dec. 2020, offered a

few essential but highly limited mitigations for the movement of goods across the Irish Sea after Jan. 2020. When the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) was revealed, the reason for this strict interpretation of the EU's customs and regulatory rules became clear. The hard Irish Sea border reflects the hardness of the Brexit that the UK government has negotiated. Johnson saw a hard Irish Sea border as a price worth paying for restoring national sovereignty.

Thus, Brexit raised questions about politics within UK, such as: "How much do British trust the politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in the tight corner?" (Curtice, 2020:15)

b) Immigration:

The British public's discomfort with rising immigration levels has been evident over several decades. Between the mid-1960s and 1970- a time when immigration numbers were relatively low, more than 75% of the British people felt that there were already too many immigrants in the country. In the lead-up to the Brexit vote in 2016, more than 40% of the British public were naming immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country. (McLaren, 2021:64) (Glencross, 2018:23)

Brexit will not mean the end of migration between the UK and EU. Since the Brexit vote, UK public opinion has become more pro-migration, opening political space for a more liberal policy than appeared likely before. (Ryder, 2022:2)

Immigration was considered a major factor in the Brexit vote. Migration from EU has enlarged, helped address skilled and labour shortages, and benefited the public finances. It also led to rapid population growth in some areas. The implications of Brexit for migration have major consequences for the UK economy. Over 20 year period, the number of UK residents born in an EU member state more than doubled to over 3.6 million, and about one in five EU citizens who have migrated within the EU live in the UK. (Hancke, 2021:2)

The right wing in UK was concerning itself with migration of Muslims, Mexicans, Polish, Romanians, etc. which are being employed as delivery, taxi drivers, supermarkets and household workers. Care workers, bus drivers and super market staff all fulfill essential functions, and it is unlikely to the UK public to support an immigration system that excludes such workers, especially if it means lower quality public services, higher taxes, or both. (Portes, 2021:33)

Among some scholars, migrant's access to social benefits and strained public services was too easy. (Wincott, 2021:44) Migration effect is problematic for reasons; **First**, the data situation is problematic. Information on the stock of foreign workers by nationality in all 50 sectors and for all countries would be required. **Second**, comparable information on the welfare state treatment of migrants are also required. **Third**, the economic incentive of labour mobility is problematic and

required. (Schmid-Druner, 2018:12)

Important images for mobility are:

- (1) The mobility of specialists is necessary for cross-border provisions of services, which are often necessary for, on one hand, the successful export of industry products and, on the other hand foreign workers often hold important knowledge about foreign markets, which might reduce the trade cost of their employers.
- (2) The international mobility of workers leads to a balance of comparative advantages and thus a reduction of trade volumes.
- (3) The restriction of migration increases the economic advantage of international trade. (Felbermayer, 2017:6)

This can lead to loss of skills, inability to serve customers in the countries concerned and loss of talent. As a result, profit margins will be reduced which could lead to job cuts. Unemployment was expected to rise, and data shows that unemployment set to rise through the summer of 2021, besides divergences in ethnic minority political attitudes. (Brewer, 2021:111)

Conclusion:

This paper aimed to analyze Brexit as it is a major event that occurred in Europe. The historical framework shows the British hesitant attitude towards the exit of European Union. British people, as well as governments, showed several waves and different visions. As Brexit is done; we can observe

multidimensional aspects resulted on both EU and UK. The political effect, within UK and between UK and EU is obvious. Data shows effects on Northern Ireland and its critical border issue and major dispute about immigration. Brexit raises questions about the unification of both EU and UK themselves; will Brexit lead to deconstruct EU? Brexit will continue to be a problematic issue to be studied, may be for a long time.

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