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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The European Union in Turbulent Times: Brexit, Populism, and Future Challenges

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#### ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom's 2016 decision to exit the European Union constituted a pivotal moment in European politics, precipitating a surge of uncertainty and contemplation throughout the continent. Brexit represented not merely a political or economic division; it epitomised the escalating impact of right-wing populism, which has subsequently intensified throughout Europe. Nationalist and populist groups are undermining the conventional principles of integration and collaboration, prompting the European Union to confront unparalleled enquiries regarding its unity, stability, and future trajectory. Right-wing populist discourses are explicitly nationalist and are organised to identify another against whom the nation is delineated: the Brexit referendum campaign and the extended history of Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom. The internal and external elements of populist discourses are pertinent in many manners. This article analyses the relationship between Brexit and the ascendance of right-wing populism, investigating the wider ramifications for the EU's long-term viability, governance, and identity in a swiftly evolving political context.

**Keywords:** Brexit; Rightwing Populism; European Union; Integration; Euroscepticism

#### INTRODUCTION

The question of the UK's participation in a broader community with its European neighbours has historically been a contentious matter. Since the UK's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, some individuals have argued that participation undermined the UK's sovereignty, while others contended it was crucial for peace and stability. In the 1975 referendum over the UK's continued membership in the EEC, slightly more than 67% of voters opted to remain<sup>1</sup>. In the 1990s, the EEC transformed into the European Union (EU), prompting further enquiries regarding the UK's continued membership. Dissatisfaction prompted the establishment of a Eurosceptic political party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Support for UKIP and the proposition of a referendum on EU membership gradually increased during the 2010s, culminating in Prime Minister David Cameron's commit-

ment to a referendum contingent upon the Conservative Party securing a majority in the 2015 general election. As promised, he organised a referendum for June 2016, despite participating in the campaign to remain in the EU<sup>2</sup>. Cameron and the campaign organisation Britain Stronger in Europe contended that EU membership was crucial for peace, commerce, and the economy, and addressing significant challenges such as climate change.

On 31 January 2020 at 11 PM, the UK formally departed from the EU and commenced a transition period that concluded at 11 PM on 31 December 2020. Upon the conclusion of the transition phase, the UK exited the EU single market and customs union. In recent years, right-wing populism in Europe has emerged as a formidable political movement, indicative of dissatisfaction with conventional political elites and institutions, notably over immigration, globalisation, economic disparity, and European integration. Although specific issues differ by nation, certain similar



themes and patterns characterise right-wing populism throughout Europe<sup>3</sup>. Right-wing populist parties frequently underscore national sovereignty and resist globalisation, contending that national interests should supersede international agreements, organisations, or norms. They often advocate for safeguarding the home industry and restricting the influence of supranational entities such as the European Union (EU).

A robust opposition to immigration, especially from non-European nations, is fundamental to numerous right-wing populist agendas. They contend that immigration erodes national identity, burdens public services, and escalates crime rates. This discourse frequently conveys a wider message of maintaining cultural uniformity and traditional values. Numerous right-wing populist movements criticise the European Union, promoting the diminishment of EU institutional authority or, in extreme instances, complete withdrawal from the EU, exemplified by the UK's Brexit<sup>4</sup>. They contend that the EU diminishes national sovereignty and enforces unwelcome policies on member states.

Despite variations in economic policy among right-wing populist parties, many advocate for protectionist measures to safeguard national industries from foreign competition. This may involve supporting tariffs, resisting free trade agreements, and endorsing local efforts. Certain political parties amalgamate this with welfare chauvinism, endorsing welfare benefits for native people while opposing them for immigrants. Right-wing populists frequently underscore the significance of robust law and order initiatives. They advocate for more stringent law enforcement, severe penalties, and rigorous crime control measures, often associating these matters with immigration and perceived societal instability. Right-wing populists portray themselves as the guardians of the populace against a corrupt or disconnected elite. This discourse frequently targets political elites, the media, intellectuals, and occasionally huge corporations or financial organisations<sup>5</sup>. They assert that these elites have disregarded the concerns of average citizens, especially over immigration and national sovereignty. Numerous right-wing populist movements prioritise the preservation of traditional cultural and social values, frequently resisting liberal or progressive advancements concerning gender, family dynamics, LGBTQ+ rights, and secularism. They promote policies that strengthen conventional roles and national heritage. Right-wing populism has transformed the political landscape in Europe, addressing prevalent dissatisfaction regarding immigration, globalisation, and economic disparity. As these parties increase their power, they challenge the European political order and raise concerns regarding the future trajectory of democracy and integration on the continent<sup>6</sup>.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BREXIT AND THE RISE OF POPULISM

The United Kingdom's (UK) vote to exit the European Union (EU), generally known as Brexit, represented a pivotal event in contemporary European history. The decision, rendered in a 2016 referendum, cannot be comprehensively understood without contextualising it within the wider historical framework of populism, nationalism, and the UK's intricate relationship with European integration. This paper will examine the fundamental causes of Brexit, the influence of populist movements on its result, and the relationship between Brexit and the global growth of populism within broader political trends.

The UK's association with European integration has consistently been marked by ambivalence. Although Europe commenced formal union after World War II, establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, the UK exhibited reluctance. It first refused to join the EEC, opting instead to prioritise its Commonwealth connections and its special relationship with the United States. By the 1960s, acknowledging the economic advantages of membership, the UK made two applications to join, both of which were denied by French President Charles de Gaulle. The UK became a member of the EEC in 1973 under the Conservative government of Edward Heath. Nonetheless, the nation continued to be profoundly polarised on the matter<sup>7</sup>. A 1975 vote validated broad endorsement of membership; yet, suspicion remained, particularly regarding the forfeiture of national sovereignty and the perceived dilution of British identity.

During the 1980s, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's leadership, the UK adopted a more conservative approach to European integration. Although Thatcher initially endorsed the European project, anticipating it would foster free markets, she became progressively apprehensive about the centralisation of authority in Brussels and the trend towards greater political unification. Her renowned 1988 Bruges address highlighted her apprehensions, underscoring the necessity for a Europe honouring its nation-states' sovereignty. Thatcher's escalating Euroscepticism established a faction within the Conservative Party that would gain significant influence in the years preceding the Brexit referendum<sup>7</sup>. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which converted the EEC into the European Union, exacerbated divides within the Conservative Party by obligating member states to further political and economic cooperation.

The 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing Eurozone debt crisis significantly influenced the political landscape in Europe. The EU, once regarded as a beacon of prosperity and peace, is now increasingly perceived as part of the issue. Austerity measures implemented by the EU in nations like Greece, Spain, and Italy, as a reaction to the debt crisis, incited considerable discontent. In the UK,



these crises propagated the perception that the EU was an overreaching, undemocratic entity, inflicting economic distress on the general populace. For some individuals in the UK, especially among working-class communities, the EU epitomised economic mismanagement and relinquishment of sovereignty over national borders and immigration (Robert Ford). The unrestricted mobility of individuals, a core tenet of the EU, emerged as a source of significant discontent. A significant number of residents, especially in regions impacted by deindustrialisation and unemployment, believed that immigration was suppressing wages and burdening public services, despite empirical data frequently refuting these beliefs.

Brexit was not a singular occurrence. The emergence of populism in the UK constituted a component of a wider phenomenon throughout the Western world. Donald Trump's victory as president in 2016 in the United States, occurring shortly after the Brexit vote, signified a comparable reaction against globalisation, immigration, and political elites. Populist movements in Europe have strengthened in nations like France, Italy, and Hungary, where figures such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Viktor Orban have exploited anti-immigrant sentiment and Euroscepticism. Populism, defined by its anti-elite and anti-establishment discourse, flourishes on the belief that political systems are manipulated to disadvantage the general populace. In the context of Brexit, this was evident in the repudiation of the political elite, which predominantly supported remaining in the EU<sup>8</sup>. The Leave campaign effectively positioned the referendum as a conflict between everyday Britons and Brussels's remote, unaccountable elite.

### ***Key Drivers of Globalization and Neoliberal Policies***

Globalisation and neoliberal economic policies have profoundly influenced the economic environments of the European Union and the United Kingdom. Globalisation has led to liberalisation of commerce within the EU and with external nations. The EU's single market and customs union have enabled the unrestricted movement of goods, services, capital, and individuals, fostering economic integration and growth. The EU has sought enhanced economic integration, establishing a more cohesive economic area. This has involved aligning regulations, standards, and policies among member nations to develop equitable conditions and diminish obstacles to trade and investment. The EU has established multiple trade agreements with nations and regions beyond its borders, enhancing market access for European enterprises and fostering global commerce<sup>9</sup>. These accords seek to diminish tariffs, eradicate trade obstacles, and augment economic collaboration.

Neoliberal economic policies prioritise deregulation to enhance competitiveness and efficiency. The EU and the UK have enacted measures to alleviate regulatory burdens on firms, intending to foster a more business-friendly

environment. Privatisation has been a fundamental aspect of neoliberal policy, entailing the transfer of state-owned firms to the private sector. This initiative aims to enhance efficiency, diminish public sector debt, and encourage private investment. Neoliberal policies frequently encompass economic austerity measures, including the reduction of public expenditure and tax cuts. These initiatives seek to regulate public debt and establish a more sustainable fiscal framework. Labour market reforms have been introduced to enhance flexibility and diminish unemployment<sup>10</sup>. These reforms encompass initiatives to facilitate the hiring and termination of employees, in addition to decreasing labour expenses.

Globalisation and neoliberal policies have facilitated economic expansion in both the EU and the UK. Augmented trade, investment, and competition have propelled economic growth and innovation. Globalisation and neoliberal policies have yielded economic advantages, although they have also contributed to increasing inequality. The advantages of economic expansion have not consistently been equitably allocated, resulting in inequalities in income and wealth. The focus on market efficiency and deregulation has occasionally undermined social welfare programs. This has prompted discussions over the equilibrium between economic expansion and social safeguarding. Globalisation and neoliberal policies have affected political dynamics in both the EU and the UK. Immigration, trade, and economic inequality have become significant issues in political discourse, influencing electoral results. Globalisation and neoliberal economic policies have significantly influenced the economic and social landscapes of the EU and the UK<sup>3</sup>. Although they have generated economic advantages, they have concurrently posed issues concerning inequality, social welfare, and political stability. Comprehending these effects is essential for steering future economic policy in both areas.

Globalisation, along with its perceived beneficiaries and detractors, significantly contributed to the emergence of populism. Globalisation has yielded substantial economic advantages, but it has also intensified inequality and rendered numerous communities marginalised. In the UK, deindustrialisation, and the deterioration of conventional sectors in Northern England and the Midlands fostered an environment conducive to populist sentiment. These regions, historically the foundation of the British economy, perceived themselves as neglected amid the political and economic transformations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries<sup>4</sup>. For numerous voters in these regions, Brexit symbolised a chance to repudiate the status quo and express their aspiration for transformation.

Although Brexit has significantly contributed to the ascendance of populism in the UK, the overarching trend of populist movements seems improbable to dissipate soon. The fundamental concerns that inspired Brexit economic inequality, regional differences, immigration, and scepti-



cism towards political elites persist unaddressed. Populist leaders and movements will persist in capitalising on these challenges, both in the UK and beyond. The Brexit decision represented not merely a repudiation of the EU, but also a dismissal of the political and economic framework that has governed Western democracies for decades<sup>11</sup>.

As populist groups persist in gaining momentum, the political scene is expected to remain tumultuous, with established parties and institutions encountering continuous challenges. Brexit emerged from historical difficulties in the UK's relationship with Europe and was influenced by the larger ascent of populism and anti-establishment feeling. The referendum outcome revealed significant differences in British society, influenced by apprehensions of immigration, sovereignty, and economic disruption. Brexit is a component of a broader populist movement that has transformed politics throughout the Western world<sup>12</sup>. As the UK charts its post-Brexit trajectory, the populist forces that provoked the referendum will persist in shaping its political landscape for the foreseeable future.

## BREXIT AND THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

The United Kingdom's 2016 decision to exit the European Union, known as Brexit, is a pivotal occurrence in modern European history. Brexit beyond a mere referendum on EU membership; was a pivotal moment in the ascendance of right-wing populism in the United Kingdom and contributed to a larger political phenomenon transforming Western democracies. Populist groups, especially those on the right, capitalise on public anxieties regarding immigration, sovereignty, and national identity, frequently positioning these issues in contrast to globalisation and political elites. This part will analyse the interconnection between Brexit and the ascendance of right-wing populism, investigating the historical origins of right-wing populism in the UK, the dynamics of the 2016 vote, and the worldwide backdrop of this political transformation<sup>13</sup>.

Populism fundamentally is a political strategy aimed at galvanising the general populace against a dominant elite, asserting itself as the authentic representative of the people's interests. In contrast to left-wing populism, which prioritises economic injustice and social fairness, right-wing populism generally centres on nationalism, immigration, and a perceived danger to cultural identity. It flourishes on the notion that conventional elites, whether political, economic, or cultural, are inadequate in safeguarding the nation and its populace against external or internal threats. Right-wing populism frequently emphasises national sovereignty, law and order, and the safeguarding of national identity<sup>14</sup>. It often attributes societal problems to globalisation, immigration, and diversity, portraying these phenomena as existential dangers to the nation-state. In the UK, this discourse significantly influenced the Brexit

referendum, as right-wing populist movements asserted that EU membership had compromised British sovereignty and led to unchecked immigration, especially from other EU member states.

The origins of right-wing populism in the UK can be linked to enduring anxieties around national identity and British exceptionalism. Before the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC), the UK exhibited ambivalence towards European integration. In contrast to numerous continental European countries that pursued peace and prosperity through unification following the destruction of two world wars, the UK prioritised its Commonwealth ties and its special relationship with the United States. A significant portion of the British populace, along with political figures, perceived European integration as a menace to national sovereignty<sup>15</sup>. The emergence of Euroscepticism, particularly among the Conservative Party, sprang from apprehensions regarding the transfer of political and economic authority from London to Brussels.

In the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, the UK's relationship with Europe became increasingly strained. Although Thatcher initially endorsed the EEC for its economic advantages, she became apprehensive about the escalating centralisation of authority within European institutions. Her 1988 Bruges address was a crucial milestone, as she articulated her dissent against further European political unification, stating that the UK must retain its sovereignty<sup>11</sup>. Thatcher's cynicism regarding European integration became a major aspect of the Conservative Party's program, particularly among the right-wing element that would play a crucial role in the Brexit movement. This group advocated for national sovereignty and opposed the EU's efforts towards greater political and economic integration. In the 1990s, following the Maastricht Treaty that restructured the EEC into the more politically cohesive European Union (EU), differences within the Conservative Party about Europe intensified.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), established in 1993 by Alan Sked, arose in reaction to the increasing influence of the EU and the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Originally a marginal political movement, UKIP's primary objective was to extricate the UK from the EU, asserting itself as the proponent of British sovereignty and the guardian of national identity. In the early 2000s, UKIP, led by Nigel Farage, achieved considerable momentum. Farage, a charismatic individual adept at harnessing public dissatisfaction, elevated UKIP from a marginal protest group to a significant entity capable of impacting mainstream politics. His emphasis on immigration and the apparent erosion of national border control resonated with citizens disenchanted with the political elite<sup>16</sup>.

Immigration became the main concern for UKIP and the wider right-wing populist movement in the UK. Farage



and his associates contended that EU membership facilitated the unrestricted movement of individuals, resulting in an influx of immigrants that burdened public services, suppressed wages, and undermined British cultural identity. The 2004 EU enlargement, which included the accession of nations such as Poland and Hungary, exacerbated these apprehensions, as several Eastern European migrants migrated to the UK in search of employment<sup>17</sup>. The 2014 European Parliament elections were a pivotal moment for UKIP, as it secured the highest number of votes among British parties. This outcome reverberated throughout the political establishment and compelled Prime Minister David Cameron to respond. In reaction to increasing Euroscepticism within his Conservative Party and the emergence of UKIP, Cameron pledged a referendum on EU membership contingent upon his victory in the 2015 general election.

A prominent element of the Leave campaign was the assertion of British sovereignty. Right-wing populists contended that EU membership had diminished the UK's capacity for self-governance, with unelected officials in Brussels making choices impacting the lives of ordinary Britons. This anti-elite feeling was fundamental to right-wing populism and contributed to the Leave victory. The campaign leveraged nationalist feelings, highlighting the distinctiveness of British identity and depicting the EU as a foreign organisation intent on undermining that identity<sup>18</sup>. Brexit has significantly influenced European politics. It invigorated populist forces around the continent, illustrating that it was feasible to contest the EU and achieve victory. In nations such as Italy and Hungary, right-wing populist leaders have utilised Brexit as a paradigm for their Eurosceptic agendas, advocating for increased national authority over immigration and economic policies. Simultaneously, Brexit has presented considerable hurdles for the EU, which must now manage the intricate process of extricating the UK from the union while preserving the cohesion of its remaining member states. The EU is compelled to address its legitimacy crisis, as populist movements persist in contesting its authority and advocating for reforms<sup>19</sup>.

Brexit represented a victory for right-wing populism, highlighting profound anxieties regarding immigration, national sovereignty, and the influence of political elites. It represented the apex of decades of Eurosceptic sentiment and a wider repudiation of the globalised economic and political framework. Anticipating the future, the factors that precipitated Brexit economic disparity, regional differences, and immigration apprehensions are improbable to dissipate. Right-wing populist forces, both in the UK and globally, will persist in exploiting these difficulties, contesting the political establishment, and advocating for a reversion to national sovereignty and control. In the UK's post-Brexit era, the ascendance of right-wing populism will continue to exert significant influence on political discourse and policy for the

foreseeable future.

## CHALLENGES TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union (EU), created to foster peace, stability, and economic development in post-war Europe, has developed into a major political and economic union in contemporary history. Nonetheless, despite its tremendous achievements, the EU has various difficulties that jeopardise its stability, legitimacy, and future trajectory. The EU's existence and coherence in the future decades will hinge on its capacity to address political fragmentation, economic inequities, the development of nationalism, and external threats. This article will analyse the principal issues confronting the European Union, including internal divides, economic disparities, the ascent of nationalism and populism, migrant pressures, external geopolitical dangers, and the EU's institutional and democratic deficiencies<sup>7</sup>. A major difficulty for the EU is the emergence of Euroscepticism, a political philosophy that doubts or opposes further European integration. In the last twenty years, numerous member nations have experienced a rise in political movements that contest the EU's authority and advocate for a reversion to national sovereignty. Right-wing populist movements have gained momentum in nations such as Hungary, Poland, Italy, and France.

Political entities like the National Rally in France, Fidesz in Hungary, and Law and Justice in Poland have advocated for nationalist, anti-European Union agendas. They contend that the EU has diminished national sovereignty, enforced onerous laws, and inadequately safeguarded the interests of member nations, especially concerning immigration and economic policies. In certain instances, these movements have campaigned for complete withdrawal from the EU, exemplified by Brexit, while others have promoted internal reform of the union<sup>13</sup>.

### *Brexit Impacts on EU*

Brexit has profoundly influenced the European Union (EU) across multiple dimensions, including economic, political, and social facets. The United Kingdom was among the foremost net contributors to the European Union budget. Its withdrawal led to a decrease of almost 5% in the overall EU budget. This has resulted in heightened financial strain on the remaining member nations, especially Germany, which has had to augment its contributions. Brexit established new customs laws and trade impediments between the UK and the EU. This has resulted in heightened expenses, delays, and administrative challenges for enterprises on both sides<sup>20</sup>. Trade volumes initially declined but have subsequently rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, albeit not without difficulties. The EU has had to adapt to the exclusion of the UK's market, once the second-largest economy within the EU. This has impacted supply chains, investment flows,



and market access for EU enterprises.

Brexit has enabled the EU to implement policies unimpeded by the UK's resistance, which frequently obstructed further integration initiatives. This has resulted in a transformation in the EU's political environment, with certain member states advocating for more integration while others exercise caution. The EU has had to restructure its institutions and reallocate responsibilities once assigned to UK officials. This encompasses modifications within the European Parliament, the European Commission, and several other EU institutions. Brexit has affected regional dynamics within the EU, especially in Northern Ireland, where new product safety regulations and trade agreements have been established<sup>21</sup>.

The cessation of free movement between the UK and the EU has impacted persons on both sides. EU residents residing in the UK and UK citizens residing in the EU have had to adapt to new residency and work visa regulations. Brexit has affected cultural and educational interactions, including the Erasmus+ program, which once enabled student mobility between the UK and EU nations. Brexit has affected public opinion on the EU in the UK and other member nations<sup>22</sup>. This has ignited discussions over EU membership and integration, prompting several nations to reassess their stances. Brexit has unequivocally transformed the EU in various aspects, offering both problems and opportunities for the union and its member nations.

### ***Brexit Referendum***

The 2016 Brexit referendum, in which the United Kingdom opted to exit the EU, constituted a significant setback for the union. This was the inaugural instance of a member state choosing to withdraw from the EU, establishing a perilous precedent for others. Brexit was primarily motivated by concerns about national sovereignty, immigration, and Euroscepticism. Although no other nation has yet emulated the UK's trajectory, the triumph of the Leave campaign has invigorated Eurosceptic movements throughout Europe, particularly in countries where discontent with the EU was already pronounced<sup>20</sup>. Brexit also prompted enquiries over the EU's enduring sustainability and unity. With the departure of one of its most prominent members, the union confronts the issue of preserving cohesion among the other 27 member states. The intricacies of the Brexit discussions revealed the challenges of extricating a member state from the EU's legal and regulatory systems, highlighting the profound integration of member states.

The referendum was pledged by former Prime Minister David Cameron during his 2015 general election campaign to confront increasing Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party and the wider population. The legal foundation for the referendum was instituted by the European Union Referendum Act 2015. The 2016 Brexit referendum was a crucial event in British history, signifying the United

Kingdom's decision to depart the European Union. The referendum, conducted on June 23, 2016, posed a singular inquiry to voters: "Should the United Kingdom retain its membership in the European Union or withdraw from the European Union?" The result was a marginal triumph for the Leave campaign, with 51.9% in favour of departure and 48.1% in favour of the remaining<sup>23</sup>.

The Remain campaign cautioned against economic uncertainty, job losses, and diminished investment should the UK exit the EU. The Leave campaign contended that the UK could secure superior trade agreements autonomously and reallocate funds formerly allocated to the EU towards domestic priorities such as the National Health Service (NHS). A primary theme of the Leave campaign was the reinstatement of British sovereignty, contending that EU membership compromised the UK's capacity to legislate and regulate its borders. The immigration debate was controversial, with the Leave campaign emphasising apprehensions regarding unchecked immigration from EU nations and its effects on public services and employment<sup>24</sup>.

The referendum experienced a significant voter turnout of 72.2%, with a total of 33,577,342 votes submitted. The outcome was announced on June 24, 2016, with 17,410,742 votes in favour of Leave and 16,141,241 votes for Remain. The result precipitated considerable political turmoil, culminating in David Cameron's departure and the subsequent leadership of Theresa May, followed by Boris Johnson. The decision to exit the EU, known as Brexit, commenced a complicated and protracted negotiating process to establish the conditions of the UK's departure. Brexit has significantly influenced commerce, immigration, and political dynamics within the UK and throughout Europe. The 2016 Brexit vote was a pivotal event that transformed the UK's relationship with the EU and produced enduring consequences for both parties<sup>3</sup>.

### ***The Economic Concerns***

A primary difficulty confronting the EU is the substantial economic difference among its member states. Although the EU has established a single market and a shared currency, the euro, not all member states have experienced equal advantages from these measures. Northern European nations, like Germany and the Netherlands, have garnered significant economic advantages from the single market and the euro. Conversely, Southern European nations such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal have faced elevated levels of debt, unemployment, and stalled economic growth. The Eurozone crisis exposed these economic inequities following the 2008 global financial crisis. Countries such as Greece, which had amassed unsustainable public debt, were compelled to implement stringent austerity measures in return for financial bailouts from EU institutions and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)<sup>24</sup>. This engendered profound animosity among citizens in the impacted nations, who



perceived that their governments had relinquished authority over their economic policies. Concurrently, residents of affluent Northern European nations exhibited hesitance to perpetuate financial assistance for what they perceived as fiscally imprudent Southern European countries.

The Eurozone crisis also prompted enquiries on the future of the euro as a unified currency. The crisis demonstrated that if the euro facilitated economic stability and integration, it simultaneously highlighted the dangers of a singular currency lacking an accompanying political and fiscal union. Countries in economic hardship, lacking authority over their monetary policies, were compelled to depend on foreign financial assistance and EU-mandated austerity measures, exacerbating social and political tensions among member states<sup>25</sup>. While the acute crisis has subsided, the underlying problems of economic inequality and the absence of a comprehensive fiscal policy are unaddressed. The EU must rectify these structural deficiencies to avert future crises and guarantee the euro's long-term viability.

### *Migration Issues*

A significant concern confronting the EU is the matter of migration. In 2015, the EU faced a migration crisis as more than one million refugees and migrants, escaping war, persecution, and economic distress, arrived in Europe, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and other conflict-affected areas. The magnitude of the crisis inundated numerous EU member states, especially those situated on the union's exterior periphery, including Greece and Italy<sup>26</sup>. The crisis revealed significant rifts within the EU on the management of migration and asylum policies. Countries such as Germany, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, embraced a more hospitable stance, whilst other member states, especially in Eastern Europe, opposed the acceptance of refugees. The absence of a cohesive, uniform EU migration policy resulted in a collapse of solidarity, as numerous countries declined to share the responsibility of resettling refugees.

The migration issue has prompted enquiries over the future of the Schengen Agreement, which facilitates passport-free travel among the majority of EU member states. Critics contended that Schengen's open borders hindered individual nations from regulating their immigration policy and that the absence of internal border inspections exacerbated illicit immigration and transnational crime<sup>22</sup>. In reaction, several member states temporarily re-established border restrictions, undermining a fundamental principle of the EU. The EU's forthcoming task will be to reconcile the advantages of Schengen's open borders with the necessity of securing its external borders and implementing an equitable and sustainable migration policy.

### *Geopolitical Challenges*

The Geopolitical challenges, especially from Russia, increasingly threaten the EU. The 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia and its continued engagement in the eastern Ukraine conflict have escalated relations between the EU and Moscow. Eastern European member states, especially Poland and the Baltic nations express apprehension regarding Russian aggression and advocate for further EU and NATO engagement in their defence. The EU's capacity to exhibit a cohesive stance against Russian aggression has been hindered by divergent perspectives among member states<sup>21</sup>. Countries such as Germany and France prefer to sustain engagement with Russia, whilst others, especially those in proximity to Russia's borders, support a more adversarial stance. This split undermines the EU's geopolitical power and its capacity to respond to external threats cohesively.

Brexit has profoundly impacted Northern Ireland owing to its unique geographical, political, and historical circumstances. The impact mostly stems from the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union (EU), resulting in the creation of a new trade boundary between Northern Ireland and the remainder of the United Kingdom. Given the province's tumultuous past, Northern Ireland is pivotal in discussions concerning the UK's departure from the EU and the future of relations with the European Union. The historical context of religious, ethnic, and economic struggle and its impact on the present political landscape of Ireland.

### *Security Issues*

Alongside security issues, the EU encounters external challenges from global powers such as China and the United States. China's expanding economic clout in Europe, facilitated by its Belt and Road Initiative and investments in essential infrastructure, has elicited apprehensions regarding the EU's economic autonomy and security. Certain EU member states, especially in Eastern Europe, have welcomed Chinese investments, whilst others are cautious about excessive dependence on Beijing. In recent years, the EU's relationship with the US has become tense, especially under Donald Trump's administration, characterised by a more isolationist and protectionist approach that challenged conventional transatlantic relations<sup>10</sup>. Despite enhanced relations under the Biden administration, difficult problems such as trade disputes, defence expenditure, and digital taxation persist. The EU must manage these intricate relationships while safeguarding its economic interests and strategic independence.

A prevalent critique of the EU is its alleged democratic deficit, characterised by the idea that its institutions are remote, bureaucratic, and unaccountable to the general populace. The European Commission, possessing considerable executive authority, is not directly elected, while the European Parliament, although elected by EU voters, is



sometimes perceived as lacking substantial legislative power in comparison to national parliaments. The disconnection between EU institutions and the public they represent has exacerbated populist movements and Euroscepticism<sup>23</sup>. A significant number of Europeans believe that choices impacting their life are determined by remote elites in Brussels, rather than by their respective national governments. Rectifying this democratic deficiency is essential for the EU's credibility and its capacity to sustain public endorsement for deeper integration. To tackle these difficulties, the EU must implement substantial institutional reform. Reform proposals encompass augmenting the authority of the European Parliament, bolstering transparency in decision-making, and refining the EU's connection with its inhabitants. Nonetheless, implementing these reforms necessitates agreement among the member states, many of which are hesitant to relinquish additional authority to EU institutions.

The European Union has numerous significant issues, including internal discord, economic disparities, migration pressures, and external geopolitical dangers. The emergence of Euroscepticism and nationalist movements persistently undermines the EU's cohesiveness and legitimacy<sup>7</sup>. To solve these obstacles, the EU must combine national interests with overarching integration objectives, reform its institutions to mitigate democratic issues, and enhance its capacity to respond to foreign threats. The EU's capacity to surmount these challenges will determine its future position as a global political and economic force. Despite the obstacles ahead, the EU's historical resilience and agility indicate its capacity to confront these challenges directly.

## FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In recent years, Europe has experienced a notable political transformation characterised by the emergence of populism. This tendency is marked by increasing scepticism towards conventional elites, an emphasis on national identity, and a repudiation of globalisation, leading to a transformation of the political landscape throughout the continent. The origins of populism in Europe can be attributed to various elements, including economic concerns, cultural conflicts, discontent with mainstream politicians, and the imperialistic policies of the EU. The 2008 global financial crisis served as a catalyst, exacerbating pre-existing frustrations and cultivating mistrust with established institutions<sup>27</sup>. Concerns over immigration, identity, and sovereignty have invigorated populist discourses, exploiting anxieties about cultural erosion and loss of authority. The Brexit referendum has arguably been the most prominent expression of populism in recent years. Although Brexit has been hailed by Eurosceptics as a triumph for national sovereignty, it has simultaneously initiated a phase of uncertainty and division, both domestically and throughout Europe<sup>5</sup>. The increasing populism may be comprehended with the European Union

and its critique as being excessively elite-driven, promoting significant migration, and functioning as an imperialistic neo-liberal entity that advantages the elites at the expense of the working class.

The result of the 'Brexit' referendum is detrimental to both Britain and the European Union (EU). Unless unforeseen circumstances arise, Britain will exit the EU after two years. The economy will deteriorate, and the political landscape will become increasingly polarised. The EU, already struggling to address several difficulties, must navigate complex negotiations about Britain's exit and contend with the boost the Brexit vote will provide to far-right nationalist groups throughout Europe. Nationalism has been a detrimental force in European history, and its influence in contemporary European politics should not be underestimated<sup>24</sup>. The political and economic repercussions for the UK are expected to be significant. The legal and economic challenges of disentangling the UK legal system from decades of EU Single Market legislation and establishing new trade agreements, alongside the potential exodus of EU professionals and businesses from the UK, will exacerbate an already fragile economy, potentially precipitating a renewed recession. The political system will fragment as pronounced divides within both the Conservative and Labour parties, reflecting those in the voters, incite internal conflict and disruptive realignments<sup>6</sup>.

The ramifications for Europe may be equally significant. Nationalist anti-European parties have gained significant traction in numerous European nations, particularly in France, Scandinavia, Italy, and more recently Germany, and Brexit is expected to amplify their calls for EU departure referendums. It may also empower illiberal parties currently in power in Hungary and Poland. This will render the domestic politics of EU member states progressively contentious and vulnerable to democratic collapse and violence<sup>7</sup>. The deterioration of political discourse and the emergence of overt anti-immigrant xenophobia during the Brexit campaign, subsequently accompanied by an increase in racist abuse towards immigrants, is likely to recur in other contexts. Referendums, with their oversimplification of intricate matters, serve as advantageous tools for nationalists, exacerbating public anger.

Supporters of Brexit are driven by various factors, including anxieties that resonate throughout Europe and beyond (including the US): idealisations of the national past; unease with multiculturalism and evolving social norms, particularly concerning gender equality and LGBT rights; and vague (and erroneous) convictions that a reversion to 'nation' will yield superior results compared to economic integration. The post-referendum rhetoric of UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, a principal victor, elucidates the ideological aspirations underlying the Brexit vote<sup>2</sup>. This was a triumph, he proclaimed, for the genuine populace, for the common individuals, for the honourable



citizens, and for faith in the nation. The underlying message is evident: genuine, commonplace, and virtuous individuals need not tolerate other types of individuals foreigners, multiculturalists, and internationalists who prioritise free and open societies over notions of "blood and soil."

The Brexit vote fundamentally signifies the revival of a distinct form of English nationalism, transcending socio-economic divisions, reminiscent of an idealised 'Downton Abbey' era characterised by traditional values, established hierarchies, quaint towns, village cricket, and a homogeneous (white) populace. The significance of racism in the allure of UKIP and right-wing Conservatives, together with their nationalist rhetoric, should not be underestimated; this message has been extensively promoted by Britain's isolationist and xenophobic tabloid media. The nativist appeal has been associated with other authentic and pressing issues in the vote, such as the implications for prosperity stemming from the financial crisis and the ensuing recession<sup>6</sup>. Nativist views have persistently existed; many elder Britons who supported Brexit have yet to reconcile with the continuous waves of immigration to the UK since the 1950s. The charming mythology of 'resilient small island Britain' during World War II continues to resonate profoundly with that demographic. However, it requires leaders like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in the UK (similar to Donald Trump in the US) to confer credibility and political momentum on them<sup>27</sup>.

The EU, like the US, confronts numerous problems, including adaptation to a transforming global economy, significant immigration, and security dangers stemming from a destabilising Middle East and an increasingly aggressive Russia. It is often perceived that the EU project is fundamentally deficient in addressing these challenges, exacerbates the situation, and is ultimately accountable for the return of nationalism<sup>15</sup>. It is asserted that EU institutions have disregarded the wants and desires of 'ordinary' individuals and are now facing the consequences. That is, undoubtedly, a significant oversimplification favoured by nationalists. However, the parallelism with prevalent 'essentialist' discourse among academics is regrettable. For an extended period, rational, prudent, and impartial examination of the EU has been undermined by reductive political rhetoric; numerous scholarly works now resemble blog entries with citations. The advocacy of economic nationalism, criticisms of alleged 'German hegemony', the application of terms like 'ordo-liberalism' and 'neoliberalism' to simplify intricate realities, and pervasive assertions that the EU's challenges are intrinsic and irreparable, all serve as ammunition for nationalists throughout the continent<sup>14</sup>.

The Brexit vote opposing the EU represents a rejection of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism. Although these motives may vary among individual voters, they have been conflated into a detrimental anti-liberal narrative by Brexit proponents and British tabloids such as The

Sun, The Daily Mail, and The Daily Express. The referendum occurred on June 23, 2016, in response to a commitment by then-Prime Minister David Cameron to tackle increasing Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party and the wider population. The official Remain campaign was spearheaded by "Britain Stronger in Europe," a bipartisan organisation promoting sustained EU membership<sup>17</sup>. Notable figures comprised David Cameron, George Osborne, and other distinguished politicians from the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party.

Brexit was regarded as a significant disruption to the European integration initiative, questioning established notions regarding the ultimate objectives of the European project. There was a concern that a fragmented and vulnerable EU would find it challenging to articulate a unified stance and negotiate successfully with a cohesive and resolute UK. Conversely, there were apprehensions that Brexit could instigate a domino effect among the remaining member states and provoke a broader disintegrative trend<sup>18</sup>. Brexit prompted a significant response from essential EU stakeholders. Motivated by apprehension and commitment, the nascent EU 27 committed to addressing Brexit in a manner that mitigated the adverse effects of this unwelcome political occurrence. The British expectation of achieving an advantage by pitting member states against EU institutions was mistaken. The newly formed EU 27 united reached a consensus on key priorities and mostly achieved its objectives in the Brexit discussions. The EU's strategy on Brexit was both notably consistent and highly effective. The effectiveness was fundamentally reliant on the EU's readiness and capacity to wield collective power<sup>20</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, Brexit has served as both a stimulus and a warning regarding the ascent of right-wing populism throughout the European Union. The UK's exit from the EU highlighted the appeal of nationalist ideologies and cynicism regarding supranational authority, strengthening analogous movements in other member states. These transformations present considerable issues for the EU, including the management of political fragmentation and the resolution of various economic and social concerns that populists frequently exploit. The European Union's reaction to these populist movements will be pivotal in shaping its future. Enhanced initiatives for integration, attentiveness to local concerns, and comprehensive policies regarding migration, economic disparity, and regional security could fortify EU unity. Failure to address these issues may facilitate the advancement of right-wing populism, so threatening the integrity of the EU's political and economic frameworks. The Brexit experience indicates that the EU must adapt and reconnect with its citizens, cultivating resilience against dividing influences while adhering to the principles of unity and cooperation. As the EU traverses this transitional epoch,



it must reconcile internal inequalities with the foundational ideas that motivated its inception, delineating a trajectory that honours national identities while strengthening a collective European vision.

Brexit exemplifies a populist nationalist trend that will complicate the implementation of good policies and the management of practical matters in an interconnected world. The UK has continued to be a significant contributor to effective global integration despite its demise as a global power. Europe has been instrumental in establishing and guiding current global institutions. If personal issues and insularity are diminished, the world will endure adverse consequences. Nationalism is once more demonstrated to be a reaction to extrinsic obstacles, rather than merely an outcome of national culture and customs. It serves as a means to establish a defence against anxiety-inducing globalisation, rather than merely opposing it. Populism is mostly an expression of rage, solidarity, and occasionally aspirations, rather than a constructive political agenda. Populism is not an anomaly; it is a recurring reaction to issues associated with extensive capitalism and centralised governmental authority. Brexit provided limited viable remedies to the issues that exasperated its supporters. However, this does not imply that their grievances lacked a basis.

Populism and nationalism are not intrinsically aligned with either the right or left political spectrum. They are ideologically malleable and susceptible to manipulation by demagogues from both the right and left. The Right orchestrated Brexit and influenced numerous analogous movements globally. There are clear parallels across the European continent, along with other left-populist parties. In each instance, discontent with global economic trends is intertwined with cultural and security apprehensions, alongside a perception of being disregarded by national elites. In each instance, mobilisation has harnessed and provoked racial animosity and ethnic grievances. The decline of the British Empire underpins Brexit, with many supporters harbouring dreams of its reversal, while the decline of US hegemony informs Trump's endeavour to restore America's greatness. Frustration with the dissolution of Soviet power indeed influences Vladimir Putin's populist efforts to reinforce Russia. Analogies are imprecise yet there about Recep Erdogan's Turkey, Narendra Modi's India, and Jinping Xi's China. In all instances, populism serves as a potent tool for elites seeking to galvanise popular support. In every instance, the populace is discontented, in part due to the failure of prior elites to provide the respect and opportunity they sought.

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