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Foreign policy identity of the United Kingdom after Brexit

Abstract. This study aimed to systematise the primary changes brought about by Brexit for the United Kingdom government, highlighting the main threats that Eurosceptics may face. The research was based on content analysis of media outlets and news agencies, including The Mirror, Reuters, and others. Additionally, a documentary analysis of official reports from the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Office for National Statistics under the United Kingdom government was conducted. The study's results revealed that in 2018, the United Kingdom's foreign trade turnover amounted to approximately 800 billion dollars, rising to nearly one trillion dollars by 2023. However, projections for the United Kingdom's Gross Domestic Product growth are lower than those for 24 of the 27 European Union member states. It was found that relations between the United Kingdom and the EU are governed by the Withdrawal Agreement, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and the Northern Ireland Protocol. The latter remains a contentious issue, as evidenced by the widespread workers' strike in early 2024. Since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022, the United Kingdom government has aligned its sanctions packages with its European counterparts. Additionally, British military personnel have joined the European Union's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) military mobility project. Although the rhetoric of British diplomacy has shifted post-Brexit, this is unlikely to be directly related to the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, as British diplomatic views have long aligned with the commonly accepted approach within democratic societies to addressing international challenges. The findings of this study indicate that the United Kingdom government still faces several unresolved issues following its withdrawal from the European Union, further complicated by the unstable geopolitical situation. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom's status as one of the most influential global actors in international relations, coupled with the relative resilience of its economy, suggests, according to government forecasts, the potential for a swift adaptation to changes within the international community

Keywords: consumer price index; business environment; contractual framework; sanctions alignment; diplomatic dimension

Introduction

The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU) marked the beginning of a new chapter for the British people, necessitating a re-evaluation of the nation's foreign policy identity on the global stage. The relevance of this issue lies in the fact that the Brexit process has simultaneously impacted the political, social, and economic landscape of both the United Kingdom and the EU, as the United Kingdom government's contributions were among the largest (Ross, 2019). In this context, examining this subject is crucial for understanding the changes in contemporary international relations.

Firstly, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU has necessitated a review of its foreign policy doctrines. The United Kingdom government has experienced a partial loss of influence and access to European political institutions, demanding the creation of a new framework for bilateral and multilateral relations. This primarily involves the negotiation of treaties, the strengthening of ties with countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, and other measures that require a clear understanding of the United Kingdom's new geopolitical identity in global politics.

Secondly, the realities of Brexit have introduced new challenges to political stability, as issues surrounding Northern Ireland have been exacerbated. It is worth noting that during the referendum, the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU (How Britain voted..., 2016). Such circumstances could significantly impact the United Kingdom's political stability, as the government faces the challenging task of balancing the

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interests of national unity with the need to address foreign policy challenges. Therefore, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU is significant in terms of its domestic political implications for international relations.

Thirdly, the reconfiguration of relations between the United Kingdom and the EU is crucial for the functioning of the European Union. This is because UK-EU relations are vital not only for ensuring economic stability but also for political and security coordination within Europe. Brexit, as a completed process, could have long-term consequences for European politics, altering the terms of cooperation and increasing competition, which makes this topic particularly compelling for research. Overall, an analysis of the consequences of Brexit is important for understanding the United Kingdom's new foreign policy and the impact of the process on both international and European identities.

In their study of Brexit, O. Hissa-Ivanovych & Y. Kybich (2020) highlighted the potential for increased disintegration within the EU. Conversely, for the United Kingdom government, the termination of old cultural, political, and economic agreements could be seen as a positive factor, as it would allow for the negotiation of new, more effective treaties in these areas. L.V. Maleiko (2023) noted that issues such as subsidy distribution and immigration policy are the primary sources of tension among EU member states and that the EU as a single entity must now compete for access to the United Kingdom market. O.V. Shkurupiy *et al*. (2022) added that while Brexit has weakened the EU economy, the effects have not been catastrophic, and one of the most significant areas of cooperation is the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific regions.

In her study, I. Sushko (2023) highlighted the potential for growth in the creative industries following the United Kingdom's departure from the EU. She focused on the impact of policy changes such as the United Kingdom's points-based immigration system and the Global Talent visa. O.S. Korin (2023) explored recommendations for strengthening the resilience of the EU's monetary and financial integration in the wake of Brexit. L. Shkulipa (2023) found that the United Kingdom government has successfully aligned its national sovereignty in accounting with the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS).

The scholar W. Tang (2023) noted the rise of pessimistic sentiments during the Brexit process, as the United Kingdom economy faced a decline in the value of its national currency, rising inflation, and a reduction in the volume of foreign direct investment, which increases risks for the country's financial system. Additionally, B. Martill & M. Sus (2022) wrote that Brexit could set a damaging precedent and undermine trust in the EU, with security and defence issues emerging on the periphery, potentially becoming part of a broader and more competitive landscape.

In light of the above, this study aimed to identify the key changes in the foreign policy activities of the United Kingdom government to understand the risks and threats that Eurosceptics may face in the future. The research objectives included reviewing the regulatory framework governing the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU, examining the dynamics of escalating internal and external political contradictions regarding the status of trade with Northern Ireland, and analysing changes in diplomatic dialogue in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the crisis in Syria.

Materials and Methods

The identification of key events leading up to the final exit from the EU was made possible by information available on the United Kingdom Parliament's House of Commons Library website (Walker, 2021). To analyse the economic consequences, materials from Bloomberg (Winkler, 2024) were utilised, along with the annual report "Economic and Fiscal Outlook" (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2024). Furthermore, a comparative analysis of United Kingdom trade in 2018, 2022, and 2024 was conducted (Office of National Statistics, 2019; 2022; 2024a). To understand changes in GDP (Gross Domestic Product), research from the analytical centre (UK in a changing Europe, 2024) was particularly significant, while shifts in the free movement of people were examined about visa regulations (Newson, 2021) and a study from the University of Oxford (Cuibus, 2023). Additionally, statistics regarding employment by sector (Office of National Statistics, 2024b) and wage levels (Office for National Statistics, 2024c) were obtained from the Office for National Statistics. The impact of Brexit on the business community was investigated through a survey conducted by the analytical organisation Experts in Communication, Brand and Reputation Research (Where Brexit hurts..., 2023).

The regulatory framework governing the relationships between the United Kingdom and the EU has been examined through the Agreement on the Withdrawal (2019) and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (2021) between the EU and the United Kingdom. Additionally, provisions from the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (2021) and The Windsor Framework (2023) were explored. An understanding of future collaboration between the United Kingdom and the EU in the fields of science, technology, and innovation was emphasised in an information note from the House of Commons Library (Fella *et al*., 2023), particularly regarding the Horizon Europe Programme (European Commission, 2024a) and Copernicus (European Commission, 2024b). In the context of the United Kingdom's role in the European security architecture, information from the Heinrich Böll-Stiftung (Whitman, 2024) and the European analytical centre at the Carnegie Endowment (UK-EU Security..., 2024) was utilised.

Shifts in British diplomatic rhetoric in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine were examined through an analysis of media and news agencies, including the Mirror (Hughes, 2014), Reuters (Britain's Johnson says..., 2016), and the BBC (Ukraine conflict: Liz..., 2022). Press releases from the Ukrainian (Minister for Foreign..., 2015) and British (Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Hammond, 2015) governments were also consulted. Additionally, a content analysis of reciprocal visits between British and Syrian political leaders (Blair visits Syria..., 2001; Syrian president meets..., 2002) was conducted. British diplomatic attitudes towards the Syrian government following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War were analysed using media reports (MacFarquhar & Mourtada, 2012) and by examining United Kingdom government activities before (Foreign Secretary oral..., 2014) and after (UK-Syria development..., 2023) its departure from the EU.

The following methods were employed to analyse these sources: Content analysis was used to examine media and news agency publications on the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom government and public opinion, identifying key risks for Eurosceptics. Documentary analysis involved the study of official government documents and reports from the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Office for National Statistics to obtain precise data on economic indicators such as trade and GDP growth forecasts. Comparative analysis was used to assess economic growth rates post-Brexit and to identify major trends in international relations. Discourse analysis examined changes in the United Kingdom's diplomatic discourse following Brexit, particularly in the context of EU and international organisation cooperation, allowing for an assessment of Brexit's impact on foreign policy.

Results

The consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom. The Brexit process was preceded by a series of events spanning approximately five years. According to the House of Commons Library (Walker, 2021), a referendum held on 23 June 2016 resulted in a majority vote in favour of initiating the process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU. The withdrawal process commenced in March 2017 and was originally expected to be completed within two years. However, in March 2019, the United Kingdom government was forced to request an extension from the EU. Subsequent political events and decisions led to the United Kingdom's final exit from the EU's single market and customs union on 31 December 2020.

Immediately following the referendum, the pound plummeted by 11% against the dollar and 8% against the euro. Moreover, between 2000 and 2016, the average expected price volatility of the euro was 1.2% higher than that of the pound (Darvas, 2016). However, by 2017, investor confidence in the British currency had waned, leading to a volatility increase of almost 2% compared to the euro in the same period (Perspectives on 2017..., 2018). Additionally, according to forecasts from 61 economists surveyed by Bloomberg (Winkler, 2024), the United Kingdom's GDP is projected to grow by 0.4% in 2024 and 1.2% in 2025, which is lower than the GDP growth rates of 24 out of 27 EU countries. When considering the percentage change in the pound-to-dollar exchange rate over the past decade, the results are disheartening, with a depreciation of nearly 24%. Conversely, between July 2022 and July 2024, this figure has shown a positive growth of 7.71% (British pound to..., 2024).

A key indicator of economic change within a country is the Consumer Price Index, which measures changes over time in the general price level of goods and services purchased by households for their own consumption. This indicator is analysed in the annual reports of the United Kingdom Government's Office for Budget Responsibility (2024) (Fig. 1).

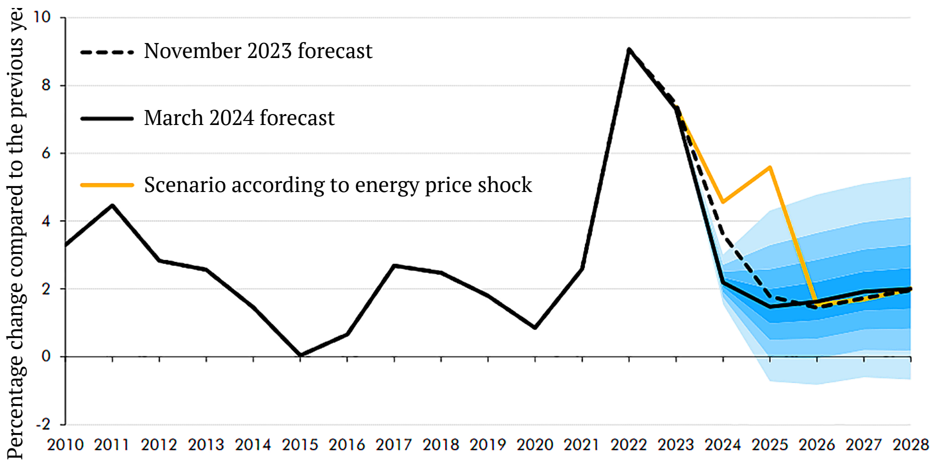

Figure 1. Inflation according to the United Kingdom consumer price index
Source: Office for Budget Responsibility (2024)

Accordingly, the Consumer Price Index inflation stood at 4.2% in the last quarter of 2023, 0.6 percentage points below the November forecast. The Office for Budget Responsibility's (2024) fiscal document projected inflation to decline to an average of 2.2% in 2024 and 1.5% in 2025, before gradually returning to the target level by the end of the forecast period. These forecast revisions are partly attributed to expectations of falling global energy prices. Additionally, domestic inflation is expected to be lower due to decreased overall economic spending caused by falling energy prices and a weakening labour market. Furthermore, it has been noted that the unrest in the Red Sea is expected to have only a minor impact on inflation (0.2 percentage points). However, potential risks remain due to the escalation of conflict in the Middle East, which, under certain scenarios, could lead to a sharp increase in energy prices and peak inflation rates approaching 6% annually (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2024).

The United Kingdom's export and import landscape has also undergone significant changes. For instance, in 2018, exports reached nearly 350 billion pounds, while imports totalled 459 billion pounds (Office of National Statistics, 2019). With the easing of economic shocks and market stabilisation in 2022, these figures rose to 645 billion pounds for exports and 415 billion pounds for imports (Office of National Statistics, 2023). However, in 2023, both figures experienced a moderate decline, reaching 581 billion pounds for exports and 394 billion pounds for imports (Office of National Statistics, 2024a). Concurrently, the United Kingdom's trade relations with the EU and the rest of the world have transformed. In 2018, approximately 50% of exports and 55% of imports were destined for or sourced from EU countries (Office of National Statistics, 2019). This distribution shifted notably in 2022, with the EU accounting for around 45% of exports and 47% of imports (Office of National Statistics, 2023). The trend persisted in 2023, with exports to the EU remaining relatively stable compared to 2022, while imports increased to 55% (Office of National Statistics, 2024a). These findings suggest a high degree of adaptability in the United Kingdom's trade and economic model in response to geopolitical changes. Notably, the United Kingdom's top export partners over the past six years have remained largely consistent, including the USA (United States of America), Germany, the Netherlands, and France. The same pattern is observed for imports, with Germany, PRC (People's Republic of China), the Netherlands, the USA, and France consistently ranking among the top trading partners between 2018 and 2023.

The post-Brexit economic performance of the United Kingdom has been characterised as stagnant relative to historical trends and weaker when compared to its European counterparts. According to estimates (UK in a changing Europe, 2024) using counterfactual models to assess Brexit's impact on the United Kingdom's GDP growth, the country is approximately 5% behind the trend observed before EU membership. These models speculate on how the United Kingdom's economy would have performed had it remained in the EU. While the United Kingdom's economy appeared robust compared to other major European economies before the referendum, assuming this trend would have continued without Brexit might be inaccurate. A significant portion of the shortfall can be attributed to challenges that have also affected other European countries, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is challenging to envision a scenario where the United Kingdom, without leaving the EU, would have significantly outperformed its European counterparts. Therefore, a more accurate counterfactual estimate of Brexit's impact on the United Kingdom is around 2-4% of GDP. However, compared to pre-pandemic levels, the United Kingdom's GDP growth is the second worst among G7 nations. In terms of real wages and living standards, the United Kingdom's post-Brexit performance remains weak even when compared to other major European economies, except Italy (UK in a changing Europe, 2024).

Another significant consequence of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU has been immigration. A direct result of Brexit was the cessation of the free movement of not only capital but also people. The abolition of free movement has significantly increased the circumstances under which EU citizens may be denied entry to the United Kingdom at border checks. In many cases, this can be attributed to the United Kingdom government's assertion (Newson, 2021) that visitors may be refused entry if "clear from their travel history they are seeking to remain in the United Kingdom for extended periods or making the United Kingdom their home via repeated visits." Consequently, in 2023, over half, or 53%, of those denied entry to the United Kingdom were EU citizens. As researchers from The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford noted (Cuibus, 2023), it remains uncertain whether this trend will persist, as both individuals and government agencies adapt to the new reality over time. Additionally, factors such as the subjective judgments of border force officers, changes in legislation, and regulatory frameworks can influence both the number of entries into the United Kingdom and the rate of refusals. Moreover, the views of United Kingdom businesses and their attitudes towards Brexit-induced changes are also crucial (Fig. 2).

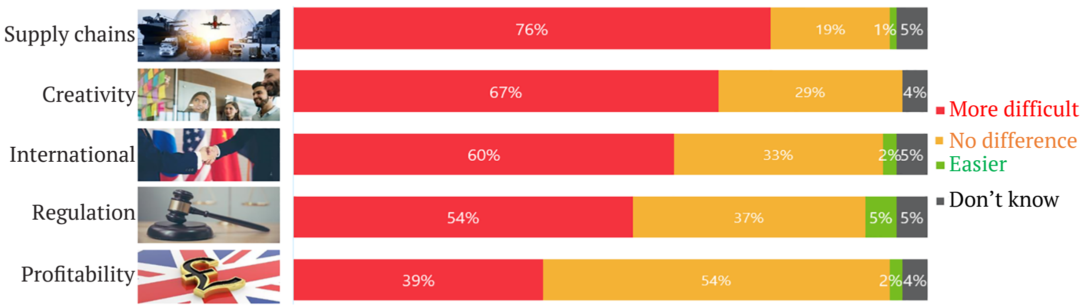

Figure 2. Impact of Brexit according to a 2023 survey
Source: Where Brexit hurts British business most (2023)

Almost 200 FTSE (Financial Times Stock Exchange) directors from various sectors indicated (Where Brexit hurts..., 2023) that their resilience has been achieved through improved supply chain management, reduced business model risk, and a focus on British talent. Additionally, some registered companies conduct global operations with a limited United Kingdom presence, while others operate solely within the United Kingdom market and have not experienced a significant impact. One respondent summarised that Brexit has led to a "huge loss of talent, more cumbersome regulations, and a loss of synergies."

Brexit and the new immigration system have the potential to significantly alter the balance of jobs filled by EU workers in the United Kingdom. Compared to the era of free movement, the new system has substantially restricted the ability of EU citizens to work in professions that are not classified as highly skilled (i.e., those not requiring at least A-level qualifications or equivalent and meeting salary thresholds). The pandemic has also influenced the availability of jobs. Employment in some sectors, such as manufacturing, remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels even in 2023 (Office of National Statistics, 2024b), while employment in sectors like health and care continues to grow (Office of National Statistics, 2024c). Consequently, Brexit has had a profound impact on both domestic trade, economic, and social relations, as well as external affairs.

UK-EU relations after Brexit. Following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, both parties have collaboratively developed a unique set of mechanisms and tools to effectively manage their new relationship. The primary legal frameworks governing UK-EU relations are the Withdrawal Agreement (2019) and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (2021).

The Withdrawal Agreement (2019) established five specialised committees to monitor and implement the specific provisions of the document. The EU is represented by the European Commission, with additional participation from member states as required. The agreement also stipulates that the Northern Ireland Assembly must periodically vote to consent to the continued application of EU law on goods, customs, the single electricity market, VAT (Value Added Tax), and state aid to Northern Ireland (Davies & Kassim, 2022).

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement outlines eight specialised committees and ten specialised trade committees. Moreover, a fundamentally new body, the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, was established (The UK-EU Parliamentary…, 2022). The role of this inter-parliamentary body is to meet and exchange views on issues arising under the Agreement, including amendments to the agreements and any other matters of mutual interest. However, the role of this body, even by its own definition, is quite vague, suggesting significant scope for determining its working methods and agenda. The mechanisms outlined above are not exhaustive, as there is also a United Kingdom Working Party (Working Party on…, 2024), a European Parliament Contact Group on the United Kingdom (United Kingdom Contact Group, 2021), and an ongoing EU-UK financial regulatory dialogue (Regulatory dialogues with…, 2024), among others.

The Northern Ireland question has been a significant factor in UK-EU relations for decades, given the region's unique political dynamics. The population is divided between unionists, who favour closer ties with Great Britain, and nationalists, who support a united Ireland. Therefore, given Northern Ireland's geographic location, the complexities of Brexit, particularly concerning trade barriers, have had a profound impact on the region's economic prospects. In 2021, the Northern Ireland Protocol (The Protocol on Ireland…, 2024) was adopted to address practical issues related to goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, aiming to protect the interests of Northern Ireland's people and businesses. However, the issue remained unresolved, leading to prolonged disputes between the EU and the United Kingdom during Boris Johnson's premiership. Consequently, it was not until February 2023 that a new agreement, the Windsor Framework (2023), was reached as a supplement to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Notably, the framework introduced a "green lane" for goods destined for Northern Ireland and simplified checks on agri-food products.

Despite the Windsor Framework, tensions between the United Kingdom and the EU over Northern Ireland persisted in 2024. At the beginning of 2024, a major strike occurred (Schools, transport…, 2024), with approximately 170,000 public sector workers in Northern Ireland protesting for higher wages. Such actions may suggest that unionist political forces could gain new leverage to further improve conditions within the framework of The Windsor Framework. Resolving this issue is likely to take a considerable amount of time. The ongoing reinterpretation of the Northern Ireland Protocol remains a source of contention between the EU and the United Kingdom, which also contributes to a decline in mutual trust.

For two years following Brexit, the United Kingdom and the EU were embroiled in discussions regarding the United Kingdom's continued participation in the Horizon Europe and Copernicus programs. Horizon Europe is the EU's flagship research and innovation program, with a budget of 93.5 billion euros for 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2024a). Copernicus, on the other hand, is a program dedicated to observing the Earth and its environment for the benefit of European citizens. Its applications range from managing large areas to protecting nature, construction, tourism, and more (European Commission, 2024b). In the autumn of 2023, the United Kingdom government announced (Fella *et al.*, 2023) that agreements had been reached for United Kingdom participation in both programs, following extensive reviews of institutional differences.

The United Kingdom government's provision of military aid to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion has solidified its position as a leading player in shaping Europe's security architecture, a role that had been somewhat overshadowed by Brexit. Following Russia's invasion in February 2022, the EU and the United Kingdom, despite lacking formal structures for external cooperation, security, and defence, sought to coordinate their support for Ukraine, particularly regarding sanctions and military training operations. Furthermore, agreements were reached within the G7, a key forum for setting goals and collective actions in response to the Russian war (Whitman, 2024).

As the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (2021) does not cover foreign policy, the United Kingdom, from early 2021, stepped back from bilateral relations with EU member states and sought to reassert itself as a global rather than a European player. Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a renewed effort to cooperate on foreign policy. This put internal European disputes into perspective and spurred a determined collective response. Following the full-scale invasion, high-level talks took place between Boris Johnson and EU leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU High Representative Josep Borrell (Martill, 2023). The then-UK Foreign Secretary also attended an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

British personnel were deployed to the Brussels hub for military equipment destined for Ukraine, initiating discussions on the United Kingdom's participation in the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) military mobility project (Council of the EU, 2022). Post-Brexit, sanctions cooperation continued, with the United Kingdom aligning with and implementing EU-agreed packages (UK-EU Security…, 2024). Furthermore, should a Donald Trump administration come to power following the US presidential elections, an increase in security and defence cooperation between the United Kingdom and the EU can be anticipated. This is significant for enhancing the coordination of efforts and strengthening Western relations. The United Kingdom's policy of bolstering its defence capabilities through military support for Ukraine appears to be one of the most robust among European nations.

The rhetoric and stance of British diplomacy towards key international conflicts before and after Brexit. One of the most significant conflicts in Europe has been Russia's annexation and occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. Former Foreign Secretary William Hague stated (Hughes, 2014) that the United Kingdom was prepared to pay an economic price to impose tougher sanctions on Russia. With the arrival of new Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, the position became more explicit: the annexation of Crimea was a gross violation of international law, a disregard for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity; the use of force to change borders was unacceptable, and the referendum held in Crimea was a sham (Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Hammond, 2015). However, during a meeting in March 2015 (Minister for Foreign…, 2015) between the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine and the United Kingdom, Philip Hammond, while expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people, announced the provision of humanitarian aid to address the consequences of terrorist groups in eastern Ukraine (Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Hammond, 2015). The assertion that the aid was being provided specifically to address the consequences of terrorist groups suggests a reluctance by British diplomacy in 2015 to acknowledge the presence of regular Russian troops, even after the events of Ilovaisk. Philip Hammond's successor, Boris Johnson, during his first visit to Kyiv in 2016 as Foreign Secretary (Britain's Johnson says…, 2016), noted that achieving peace in eastern Ukraine depended primarily on the Kremlin and that the West needed to maintain sanctions against Russia.

Further shifts in the rhetoric of British diplomats can be observed even after Brexit. In April 2021, a phone call took place (Dmytro Kuleba and…, 2021) between Dmytro Kuleba and Dominic Raab, during which the latter reaffirmed the United Kingdom government's solidarity with Ukraine and added that any attempt by Russia to create a large-scale military escalation would have severe consequences for it. Liz Truss succeeded Raab as Foreign Secretary and, at the outset of the full-scale invasion, declared (Ukraine conflict: Liz…, 2022) that the United Kingdom was doing everything possible to support Ukraine with defensive weapons and stricter sanctions against Russia. Subsequent British Foreign Secretaries have generally adhered to this stance.

Consequently, changes in the rhetoric of British diplomats followed a path characteristic of European political thought: a lengthy and bureaucratic process towards understanding the causes and consequences of conflicts. However, it was precisely after Brexit that British diplomatic statements became more explicit, directly implicating the Russian government and its regular forces in the hybrid war launched in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022.

British diplomacy also closely monitored conflicts in the Middle East. In the early 2000s, relations between the United Kingdom and Syrian governments were developing positively. Following the events of 11 September 2001, United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair visited Syria (Blair visits Syria…, 2001) and held talks with Bashar al-Assad, despite concerns about the Syrian government's alleged support for extremist groups. Furthermore, just a year later, Bashar al-Assad visited the United Kingdom (Syrian president meets…, 2002) and met with Tony Blair and Queen Elizabeth II.

However, relations deteriorated significantly following the outbreak of civil war in 2011, and the United Kingdom government recognised (MacFarquhar & Mourtada, 2012) the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. William Hague also added that it was in the interests of Syria itself, the wider region, and the United Kingdom for London to continue supporting them and to close the space for extremist groups. In his oral statement in 2014, Foreign Secretary William Hague emphasised (Foreign Secretary oral…, 2014) that the message from representatives of all 11 countries, including the United Kingdom, at the peace talks in Paris was a determination to continue supporting a political solution to the conflict and to end the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people.

As of 2023, the United Kingdom government has not maintained official relations with the Bashar al-Assad regime and has also been unwilling to engage in direct conflict with Syria, despite numerous human rights abuses. Instead, the United Kingdom's position (UK-Syria development…, 2023) is rooted in its International Development Strategy, aiming to reduce poverty and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Efforts are focused on establishing numerous funds that complement UN funds to assist communities in northern Syria, and since July 2022, the United Kingdom government has provided critical services for children and women in camps for internally displaced persons in northeastern Syria. In addition to various other programs, the United Kingdom government will seek to engage like-minded partners in a new "Contact Group", alongside Egypt, Jordan, the Arab League, and several other governments.

Considering the foregoing, the rhetoric of British diplomacy has evolved independently of the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. Rather, diplomatic efforts have been transformed by the prevailing sentiment within democratic societies regarding the resolution of various conflicts. Thus, any changes have been driven by both internal and external factors, not solely by Brexit.

Discussion

S. Engilbertsson & G. Zoega (2020) noted in their study that the United Kingdom's exit from the EU and subsequent political events led to a significant devaluation of the pound sterling. Indeed, immediately after the referendum, the pound sterling depreciated by 8.05% against the USD. However, in recent years, the British currency has experienced revaluation. E. Ricciolini *et al*. (2023 found that among the 27 EU member states, North and Western European countries are generally more resilient, demonstrating positive shifts in all areas except the environment, which cannot be said for the former socialist countries. Nevertheless, even considering this, the study's results indicate that the projected GDP growth rate for the United Kingdom in 2024 is lower than that of 24 out of 27 EU member states. In this context, R.M. Trishch *et al*. (2023) write that in 2019, the United Kingdom ranked tenth among the 28 EU member states in terms of GDP per capita. The current study, conversely, has shown a regression of the United Kingdom's GDP as a result of Brexit.

Significant changes in the United Kingdom's economic landscape have also occurred in the Consumer Price Index. The index rose following the political decision to leave the EU in 2020 and subsequently due to sharp increases in energy prices and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, the forecast provided by the Office for Budget Responsibility (2024) indicates the possibility of a gradual decline and stabilisation of the Consumer Price Index in the coming years. A.E. Ilori *et al*. (2023), examining United Kingdom monetary policy, highlighted the importance for the country's central banks to invest in improving data collection and analytical capabilities to more effectively implement financial measures and policies in line with price movements. M. Geiger & J. Güntner (2024) also noted the impact of Brexit on the sharp rise in inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index.

The United Kingdom's export and import landscape has also changed. In 2023, exports to the EU accounted for approximately 45%, compared to 55% in 2018, while the level of imports remained roughly the same as in 2018. In monetary terms, in 2018, the United Kingdom's total exports and imports were slightly above 800 billion USD, reaching nearly 1 trillion USD in 2023. However, these figures also indicate that the United Kingdom's economy has been transforming towards seeking new export and import markets, either beyond the EU or within the framework of new international legal relationships. S. Buigut & B. Kapar (2023) share a similar view, emphasising the importance for the United Kingdom government to actively conclude new trade agreements with other governments and trading blocs, as well as to refine the existing new regulatory framework with the EU.

Building on this, J. Du (2023) adds that, according to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the United Kingdom government has experienced a significant reduction in the variety of goods exported to the EU. M. Gasiorek & N. Tamberi (2023) arrive at similar findings in their research, suggesting a limited impact of the uncertainty in trade and economic relations caused by the referendum and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in 2020. Additionally, the authors noted that the unevenness in the percentage structure of the United Kingdom's exports and imports with the EU was linked to a lack of time for the comprehensive implementation of the provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Brexit also resulted in the introduction of new visa schemes for foreign nationals entering the United Kingdom. J. Portes & J. Springford (2023) do not reach a definitive conclusion regarding the impact of this on the United Kingdom labour market and suggest that the effects of the new visa mechanisms may only become apparent over time. Following the referendum, the flow of labour from the EU decreased by almost a third, indicating the previously high level of labour immigration to the United Kingdom (Iasio & Wahba, 2023). Consequently, as research has shown, 53% of applications for entry to the United Kingdom by EU citizens in 2023 were rejected, which could be attributed to both subjective judgments by border force officials and government statements regarding the denial of entry to those who may remain in the country long-term. Regarding the impact of Brexit on the business environment, a survey by S. Kröger & M. Dede (2023) indicated that respondents reported a negative impact of the United Kingdom's exit from the EU on their businesses. Furthermore, the majority of respondents supported stricter visa rules, even if this led to labour shortages. The survey, analysed in the study, also pointed to significant complications in conducting business, particularly in the areas of supply chains, regulation, and international trade. Additionally, A. Přívara *et al*. (2023) noted in their research that an influx of migrants can put downward pressure on the labour market and lead to lower wages. However, in terms of real wages, even within the new visa regime, levels in the United Kingdom remain relatively low compared to other developed European countries, as demonstrated by the research findings.

The fundamental changes in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU were enshrined in the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Separate committees operate under each of these documents, responsible for different aspects of the bilateral relationship. However, other areas have been left outside the scope of these agreements. For example, M. Shellaker *et al*. (2023) wrote about the decreased interconnectedness between the United Kingdom and EU police forces at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Moreover, there are divergent views between the United Kingdom and the EU on the issue of trade with Northern Ireland. On this point, N. Sowels (2024) added that with the arrival of Rishi Sunak's government, relations between the United Kingdom and the EU have improved significantly, as government policy has shifted towards a more pragmatic approach to easing tensions around Northern Ireland. C.J. Kelly & E. Tannam (2023), as demonstrated by their research findings, also wrote about the negative impact of Brexit on British-Irish intergovernmental relations. Significantly, from 2020, there was uncertainty regarding the United Kingdom's participation in the Horizon Europe and Copernicus programmes. However, agreements were finally reached in 2023, allowing the United Kingdom to participate in these programmes under specific conditions. The importance of participating in the Horizon Europe Programme for the United Kingdom government lies in the fact that the United Kingdom was the largest recipient of EU research funding after Germany (Kleibert, 2020). Additionally, with the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, the question of the future security architecture of the EU became pressing, even though the EU itself is not nominally a security union. The United Kingdom government's commitment to European security and its desire to cooperate with EU member states and the EU as a whole was exemplified by the participation of British military personnel in the PESCO programme in 2022. Moreover, the United Kingdom government has coordinated sanctions packages against Russia with EU member states. B. Wicaksono & H.S.D. Nugrahani (2023) added another aspect of European security not considered in the study, namely that the United Kingdom government, according to its obligations, will continue to contribute 2% of its gross national income to the European Commission budget. Simultaneously, the United Kingdom government's support for participation in security programs, coordination of sanctions packages, and existing obligations indicate a mutual interest of both parties in ensuring regional security. J.S. Vara & R.A. Wessel (2022) also highlighted the positive role of the United Kingdom government's participation in PESCO, emphasising the project's importance as a catalyst for defence integration, and technological, and industrial cooperation.

Over time, and with the changing geopolitical landscape, British diplomatic rhetoric has evolved. For instance, in the early 2000s, high-level British politicians visited Syria, and vice versa, with Syrian officials making reciprocal high-level visits to the United Kingdom. However, with the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, British policy shifted dramatically, and the Bashar al-Assad regime ceased to be a partner for the United Kingdom, which instead supported the Syrian opposition. Concurrently, the Brexit process did not significantly impact the overall state of relations between the two countries. F. Huda (2023) also notes that the governments of the USA, France, and the United Kingdom provided political, financial, and military assistance to the Syrian opposition following the outbreak of the civil war. Moreover, a key objective of the British government was to support sustainable development goals in Syria through the implementation of humanitarian funds to raise money for the needs of women and children in refugee camps in northern Syria. R. Sabates-Wheeler & J.P Barker (2024), examining the United Kingdom government's humanitarian aid in neighbouring regions of the Middle East, noted that the majority of those receiving aid were women, children, people with disabilities, the elderly, and those with chronic illnesses.

Regarding the situation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the statements of British diplomats have undergone significant changes. For example, in 2015, the then Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom called only for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Crimea, but nothing was said about the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. In the same year, Philip Hammond announced humanitarian aid to address the consequences of terrorist groups, even though it was already known that regular Russian military formations were involved in the destruction and deaths in Ukraine. However, he also noted that the United Kingdom could not afford to see the collapse of the Ukrainian army (Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Hammond, 2015). In contrast, the statements of subsequent British diplomats, starting from 2020, were more explicit and emphasised the need for immediate provision of defensive weapons to Ukraine in the event of a large-scale conflict. The proactiveness of British diplomacy became even more apparent after the full-scale invasion, and A. Hadfield & R.G. Whitman (2023) added that since February 2022, the United Kingdom has restored its leading role in European security through its diplomatic and military support for Ukraine.

Thus, the analysis of the scholarly contributions from various authors, alongside the results of the current study, has illuminated several additional aspects of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom. The most significant finding is the confirmation that the volumes of both exports and imports have not decreased; rather, they have even increased. In contrast, changes in British diplomacy were likely not directly related to the Brexit process, as the rhetoric evolved in response to prevailing sentiments and expectations both within the EU and NATO.

Conclusions

The findings of the conducted research indicated that the Brexit process has had an impact on the export and import activities of the United Kingdom. While external trade turnover reached approximately 800 billion USD in 2018, it rose to nearly 1 trillion USD by 2023. Additionally, the structure of British trade evolved over time, as the proportion of trade with the EU fluctuated compared to the rest of the world between 2018 and 2023. Changes in the United Kingdom's trade regulations also significantly affected the consumer price index, which recorded an inflation rate of 4.2% in the final months of 2023. However, this is also closely linked to the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which has considerably raised energy prices. According to forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility, inflationary risks are expected to stabilise by the end of 2024. A survey conducted by experts in communication, brand, and reputation research revealed ongoing challenges in conducting business and attracting investment, even in 2023.

It is established that post-Brexit relations between the EU and the United Kingdom are governed by the Withdrawal Agreement, and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and extensive discussions have taken place regarding the implementation and application of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Numerous committees operate under the first two agreements to regulate the provisions of the treaties. Moreover, several newly formed organisations, including the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, the United Kingdom Working Group, and others, are involved in intergovernmental cooperation. Furthermore, with the onset of Russian aggression, the United Kingdom has joined EU security initiatives, as evidenced by the participation of British military personnel in the PESCO programme and the coordination of sanctions packages with European counterparts.

Analysis has shown that British diplomatic rhetoric has evolved in response to broader global trends, with Brexit having a less significant impact on diplomatic relations. From the early 2000s, the United Kingdom government-maintained connections with the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria but severed diplomatic relations and supported opposition forces following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. In 2023, British officials are focusing on addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine, British diplomats in 2014-2015 made cautious statements, condemning the annexation of Crimea but largely avoiding the issue of regular Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. However, after 2020, Dominic Raab, Liz Truss, and their successors have openly condemned Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine and pledged military support in the event of a full-scale invasion.

The limitations of the conducted research included certain inaccuracies in the examination of the export and import figures for the United Kingdom, as non-monetary gold and other precious metals were not considered in the calculations. The price fluctuations of these metals can distort trends in trade and economic relations. Furthermore, the United Kingdom government continued to address the status of trade between Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland.

Future research on this topic could encompass changes in the United Kingdom's partnerships with the rest of the world, including the USA, the PRC, Canada, and countries of the Commonwealth of Nations. Additionally, given the tense geopolitical situation in Europe, it may be valuable to investigate the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom government's participation in programmes under NATO auspices.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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