

The European Identity of the British

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ABSTRAKT

Evropská identita Britů je velmi komplexní téma, o němž se diskutuje a které je předmětem sporů již od dob britského impéria. Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je prozkoumat britskou evropskou a národní identitu. Tato práce mapuje úplné počátky britské evropské integrace a analyzuje události, politické osobnosti a faktory, které ovlivnily vztah mezi Británií a Evropskou Unií. Poslední fází, která nadobro zpřetrhala vazby týkající se britské evropské identity, bylo vystoupení z Evropské unie, takzvaný Brexit. Je proto důležité uvést, co Brexitu předcházelo, jak samotné referendum probíhalo, a jak Brexit rozdělil britskou společnost na příznivce a odpůrce Evropské unie.

Klíčová slova: Británie, Evropská unie, britská identita, euroskepticismus, Brexit, referendum

ABSTRACT

The European identity of the British is a very complex topic that has been debated and contested since the time of the British Empire. The main aim of this bachelor thesis is to explore British European and national identity. This thesis traces the full origins of British European integration and analyses the events, political figures, and factors that have influenced the relationship between Britain and the European Union. The final phase that severed the ties concerning British European identity for good was the withdrawal from the European Union, the so-called Brexit. Therefore, it is essential to set out what preceded Brexit, how the referendum was conducted, and how Brexit divided British society into supporters and opponents of the European Union.

Keywords: Britain, European Union, British identity, Euroscepticism, Brexit, referendum

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of the European Union, identity took on a new dimension as, alongside national identities, shared European identities suddenly emerged. And it was mainly the British European identity that had been in conflict since time immemorial. Neither Euroscepticism nor the patriotic concept of Britishness has contributed to the British public's acceptance and appreciation of European unity.

Since the days of the British Empire, Britain has been renowned for its distant and reluctant approach to Europe. At that time, Britain's goal was to preserve its sovereignty and title as a leading world power and, at the same time, prevent the emergence of any dominant power in Europe that would be a threat to Britain. However, after two world wars and the decline of the British Empire and economy, Britain decided to join the then European Community, beginning a torrid ride that led to Brexit in 2016. During this time, British European identity was challenged numerous times, from the 1975 membership referendum, through Margaret Thatcher's Eurosceptic and Tony Blair's pro-European government, to David Cameron's referendum that decided the fate of Britain's European identity once for good.

This bachelor's thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with British identity. This chapter explains the general concept of identity, the difference between British European and national identities, and the concepts of Britishness and Euroscepticism, which play a significant role in forming a weak British European identity. The second chapter traces the relationship between Britain and the European Union. Here the attitudes to European integration from the time of the British Empire to actual membership in the European Union and the subsequent events and governments of political figures that led to the withdrawal from the European Union are discussed in detail. The last chapter is devoted to Brexit. It describes David Cameron's road to Brexit, the referendum campaigns, the pressing issue of immigration that was crucial at the time of the referendum, and finally, the result and analysis of the Brexit vote.

1 IDENTITY

1.1 Explaining identity

This thesis will predominantly deal with British European or national identity. But, before discussing British identity, it is vital to outline what the term identity implies. The concept of identity is, however, highly complex and divisive and has no fixed definition. According to Childs and Storry, identity pertains to how individuals perceive themselves or are perceived by others. They argued that identity can be thought of as a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, a person's identity is partially determined by factors the state deems significant about them, such as their physical appearance, place of birth, and occupation. At the other end of the spectrum, many people may perceive their emotions, aspirations, intellectual or even sporting accomplishments, and other aspects as the most significant components of their identity.¹ Hence, there are versions of identities as opposed to having a single definitive identity for each human being. Christina Julios explained the term identity in a way that “whether private or public, minority or mainstream, monolingual or multilingual, the notion of identity is essentially defined as self-ascription to a particular group.”² Therefore, the meanings that we and those who surround us assign to certain aspects of our identity ultimately determine how we feel about our inner spirit. Similarly to Childs and Storry, Julios believes that perceptions play a crucial role in affecting how people see themselves, how they see others, and how others ultimately see them.

1.2 British European and national identity

The United Kingdom is a nation with defined boundaries, a unique scenery, a protracted and distinguished history, and a place in the numerous international social, economic, and political league tables. British people, however, are much more difficult to characterize. Identity clashes between European and British have been common in Britain since time immemorial. The tumultuous ties, rooted in the time of the British Empire (*Chapter 2*) and eventually leading to Brexit (*Chapter 3*), have been responsible for several conflicts and a distant relationship with the rest of Europe. Various historical, political, and cultural elements have influenced British European identity, making it a complicated and nuanced topic. However, the fact is that throughout the whole Europe, Britain consistently felt the

¹ Peter Childs and Mike Storry, *British Cultural Identities* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4-5.

² Christina Julios, *Contemporary British Identity: English Language, Migrants and Public Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2008), 9.

least European. Numerous studies have found that many British citizens had a strong sense of their national identity and did not identify as European as strongly as citizens from other EU member states did. This supports the argument that many British never felt a strong connection to the EU.

Nevertheless, the question is, what does it even mean to have a European identity or to be European? Unfortunately, there is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes having a European identity. The concept of European identity originated from the solidarity of the founding member states of the European project and their shared obligations to other European countries and the rest of the world. The idea of European identity has evolved over time. Being European rather used to be about embracing diversity and cosmopolitanism and recognising the importance of different values and beliefs within other member states. However, a common perception of modern European identity is that it resulted from the voluntary integration of several nations, creating a common political framework and citizenship. Thus, being European is firmly linked with sharing certain political rights rather than any particular ethnic or cultural identity that sets itself apart from others.³ With that, British citizens perceived a threat to their own national identity, as they feared any political domination and felt that European identity should resonate more with ethnicity and culture.

On the other hand, the term national identity refers to an individual's sense of kinship and belonging to their country. According to Ashcroft and Bevir, national identity needs to be thought of as a complex tradition consisting of multiple interrelated elements. It is important to reject the view that the nation is a fundamental or organic entity, and also to avoid describing national identity as imaginary or mythical. Nations are seen as constituted by a shared history, institutions, values and culture. When individuals speak of a singular 'national identity', their discourse often refers to their subjective, value-based definition of what national identity should entail rather than to an objective, factual definition.⁴

The interplay between national and European identities dominated mainly in the Brexit referendum, as some argued that a European identity poses a danger to the British national identity. On the contrary, some people considered their national identity as a component of a larger European identity. While the European identity is based on democratic ideas, rights, and constitutional conventions, the national identity entrenches instead in the cultural

³ Muray Stewart Leith et al., "What does Brexit Tell Us about Our Understanding of European Identity?" *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (July-September 2019): 560-61.

⁴ Richard T. Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, "Brexit and the Myth of British National Identity," *British Politics* 16, (2021): 119.

traditions, which include a common language, education, religion, etc.⁵ The European identity and the national identity portray different concepts; however, people may identify with both without feeling a contradiction between them. In fact, national identities have a certain degree of European influence since globalization has impacted all nations. However, British elites failed to create a ground for the EU that suited their desires. Thus, they struggled to construct an EU-supportive environment that citizens could buy into and probably feel more European.

1.2.1 Britishness

Another significant aspect of British identity is Britishness. The concept of Britishness has a complex history and has changed and evolved throughout time. A critical stage in the formation and growth of Britishness occurred during the 130-year span between 1707 and 1837, more specifically after the Act of Union of 1707, which united England and Scotland with hopes of devotion and allegiance.⁶ Diverse factors, including imperialism, religion, commerce, and wars, have influenced the formation and development of Britishness. Since the late 1800s, the Union, the monarchy, the Church of England, and Parliament have become emblematic of Britishness and shaped the contemporary British nation. Moreover, the English language had a significant role in developing the British national identity as it was extensively exported and employed by the British Empire as a means of cultural dominance. The last century has seen the emergence of a uniquely British identity based primarily on the principles of a nation with English as its mother tongue, is of white race, has Anglo-Saxon heritage, and practices Protestantism.⁷ The British colonial history, historical institutions, and typical British symbols have all shaped their identity. However, different actors have different perceptions of what Britishness means, depending on their political belief, social mores, or historical heritage.

1.3 British Euroscepticism

Over the past decade, an extensive study has been conducted on Euroscepticism, especially in the British context, allowing a better comprehension of this phenomenon. Throughout this

⁵ Muray Stewart Leith et al., "What does Brexit Tell Us about Our Understanding of European Identity?" *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (July-September 2019): 562.

⁶ Charlotte Parker, "On the Edge of Britishness: The Rupture of a National Identity," *National Identities* 22, no. 3 (2020): 246.

⁷ Christina Julios, *Contemporary British Identity: English Language, Migrants and Public Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2008), 77.

thesis, the term Euroscepticism is used extensively, and is interconnected with British European identity, so it is essential to clarify what this term means and how it can be further broken down.

Euroscepticism is generally characterized as a condemnation of the EU and European integration. Euroscepticism became a popular term in the British population as a main defender of the British ingrained beliefs that Britain is exceptional compared to other nations. Hawkins argues that the concept of Euroscepticism has expanded to include a broader sense of discomfort and animosity toward the creation and implementation of European-level institutions and policies within EU member states. Resistance to the European integration process has been present since its inception, leading experts to describe Euroscepticism as a deep-rooted and consistent phenomenon at both national and European levels.⁸ However, according to Baker and Schnapper, the term itself is somewhat ambiguous, as ‘scepticism’ refers to the distanced but constructively critical attitude towards European integration, which does not necessarily assume that integration or specific policies are advantageous by default. But in reality, Euroscepticism is often associated with a more negative connotation and various levels of ideological Europhobia. That can mean a complete hostility to the European project or its contemporary forms, for a variety of reasons, including economic, political, social, or symbolic ones.⁹

1.3.1 Hard Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is divided on the basis of the degree of negative attitude towards European integration. Hard Euroscepticism describes a complete refusal of the European project, either from its commencement or due to subsequent developments, which results in a request to exit the EU. In Britain, the Labour Party or the Green Party have resonated with hard Euroscepticism at certain times in history. At the same time, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) and British National Party (BNP) have constantly adhered to this perspective. Hard Eurosceptics frequently evaluate the EU in light of their pre-existing set of beliefs and values. Therefore, opposition to the EU stems from the fact that the EU represents a perceived adversary that is clearly identifiable, “whether it is socialism (for

⁸ Benjamin Hawkins, *Deconstructing Brexit Discourses: Embedded Euroscepticism, Fantasy Objects and the United Kingdom’s Vote to Leave the European Union* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 19.

⁹ David Baker and Pauline Schnapper, *Britain and the Crisis of the European Union* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 62.

Conservatives), neoliberalism (for socialists), bureaucracy (for populists) or culture and race (for extreme nationalists).”¹⁰

In the context of Britain, those who opposed membership in the European Community (EEC) or later in the European Union based their arguments regularly on parliamentary sovereignty. They portrayed sovereignty as a situation in which whatever benefit supranationalism received resulted in a setback for Britain. This viewpoint was underpinned by the belief that British parliamentary sovereignty served as a fundamental aspect of the UK’s constitution and national identity and that any attempt to curtail it would debilitate the very foundations of the country.¹¹

1.3.2 Soft Euroscepticism

Soft Euroscepticism, conversely, is characterized by a reserved opposition to the EU, typically based on concerns about one or more policy areas or the belief that the direction of the EU does not correspond with the national interest. However, unlike hard Eurosceptics, soft Eurosceptics frequently employ a pragmatic case-by-case method, stressing the conflicts between their anticipated national interest and particular EU policies and advocating for adjustments to those policies to keep the EU membership consistent with those national interests.¹² As will be demonstrated in Chapter 2, in Britain, the two major political parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, underwent phases of soft Euroscepticism at some point during their government.

¹⁰ David Baker and Pauline Schnapper, *Britain and the Crisis of the European Union* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 63-64.

¹¹ David Baker and Pauline Schnapper, *Britain and the Crisis of the European Union* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 64.

¹² Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

2 BRITAIN AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

In order to understand why Britain held a weak European identity, it is necessary to map the relationship between Britain and the Continent and the subsequent European Union. The components mentioned in the previous chapter, such as national identity, Britishness, and Euroscepticism, are essential as all these concepts are intertwined and help to understand Britain's problematic and distant relationship with the EU, starting from the British Empire and ending with Brexit. These issues will be outlined in the following chapters.

2.1 British Empire

Looking back in history, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the British differentiated and regarded itself as an island nation apart from the rest of Europe. During this time, Britain used its navy to defend their nation from French and Holland invasions while at the same time attempting to preserve power on the Continent. Later in the 18th century, Britons considered Britain the centre of a vast worldwide trade network with its advantageous location in the Atlantic Ocean. They held that the only reason to fight in Europe was to hinder one power from monopolizing the Continent and possibly confronting Britain on the high seas.¹³ By 1815, England successfully created a balance of power in Europe and, at the same time, developed a leading international empire. In contrast to previous empires, British Empire gained the majority of its finances from trade domination rather than high taxation or plunder. Furthermore, the Empire was competent in maintaining open markets and free trade. The implication is that pre-20th century British European identity was at a low ebb.

In the early 1900s, an international, predominantly European planning movement slowly emerged. However, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the UK joined this movement quite late, simply because the UK became too used to the idea of being in charge, with other countries lagging. When British Empire was at its heyday, Britain became a global leader with its excellent healthcare, sanitary engineering, and housing and urban development. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the United States and Germany started to weaken Britain's global dominance in economics and strategic operations. This marked the start of the decline of the British feeling of supremacy.¹⁴ At first, British planning

¹³ Ian Morris, "A Brief History of Britain's Relationship with Europe, Starting in 6000 BCE," *Harvard Business Review*, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://hbr.org/2016/06/a-brief-history-of-britains-relationship-with-europe-starting-in-6000-bce>.

¹⁴ Stephen V. Ward, "Not Wholly Belonging: British Planning's Uncertain European Connections," *Planning Perspectives* 38, no. 1 (2023): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2022.2156067>.

was heavily involved in Europe through bilateral and multilateral organizations, which supported planning and its policies. However, this engagement faded over time. Britain's primary international connections were outside of Europe; particularly with the United States, mainly because of the shared language and pragmatic approach to planning that resonated with Britain.

Eventually, British military and economic superiority diminished, making Britain unable to prevent the dreaded unification of Europe. However, in 1914, Germans attempted to unify Europe under their power, sparking a disastrous First World War. The Germans emerged as the losers in the end, but the first war brought huge losses for Britain in all respects, not to mention the ensuing Second World War, which was as devastating. Once the British Empire started to fade, political elites shifted their attention from the Commonwealth to Europe to preserve their international dominance. Politically, this change turned out effective but left the issue of how to define British identity after the Empire unresolved.

In the British Empire's time, the idea of British national identity was based on the interpretation of Britain being a uniquely privileged nation. British identity was associated with the British Empire, which disseminated British political institutions, business principles, and cultural ideals worldwide. The monarchy served as a representation of this identity, looked upon as an assurance of equity, consistency, and democracy. The Whig narrative of British exceptionalism expanded beyond the British Isles, explicitly linking British national identity to the Empire.¹⁵ Britain also despised the other European states, arguing that, unlike them, it would provide its colonies independence as soon as they could rule themselves.

To sum up, for more than three centuries, Britain's goal was to engage in international trade while, at the same time, thwarting the emergence of any dominant powers in Europe and expanding the British Empire overseas. This included naval, colonial, and continental wars with European as well as non-Europeans nations. In the 20th century, Britain fought against Germany in the First and Second World Wars, leading to an arising reliance on the United States both economically and militarily. After 1945, Britain had no other option but to gradually start cooperating with the EU.

¹⁵ Richard T. Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, "Brexit and the Myth of British National Identity," *British Politics* 16, (2021): 121-23.

2.2 Post-war years

After the Second World War, there was an attempt to unite Europe in an effort to restrain nationalism, which was seemed to be the driving force behind the devastating wars that had torn apart the Continent. In order to preserve a balance of power, sovereign states needed to modify their claims against one another within the single European framework. It represented a kind of internalization of conflict to set the peace. It was also crucial from a geopolitical standpoint. The Europeans stood at risk of being subordinated to the United States, and of having Americans decide on matters concerning the future of Europe. Only by uniting as Europe could this dependence be prevented.¹⁶ But the UK was constantly focused on its commitment to the Empire and was extremely cautious about entering into any agreement that might tend to erode its sovereignty and national identity. Overall, this had the effect of capping Western Europe's progress toward unification due to the UK's vague and reserved attitude.

However, the first steps towards European unity can be attributed to the Schuman Declaration, which was released on May 9, 1950, and proved to be the catalyst for the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which was later ratified by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. The ECSC was founded in order to control the production of coal and steel. It continued with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, creating the European Communities, also known as the Common Market, that eventually united into a single European Community (EEC) in 1967. Furthermore, finally, in 1992, the Maastricht Treaty established the European Union.¹⁷

2.3 Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill served as a Conservative Prime Minister in Britain from 1940 to 1945 and from 1951 to 1955. Moreover, Churchill was an inspiring statesman, author, orator, and leader.¹⁸ Churchill was one of the first to advocate for European unity but remained undecided about whether Britain should become a part of this unity. Churchill delivered a speech at Zurich University in 1945 following his defeat in the general election. Churchill had, in fact, repeatedly called for European unity even before his Zurich speech. Besides that, in the past, he referred to this unity as the United States of Europe. In his speech, he

¹⁶ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 16-17.

¹⁷ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 18.

¹⁸ "History of Sir Winston Churchill," GOV.UK, accessed January 8, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/winston-churchill>

declared that there was a remedy “to recreate the European family, or as much of it as we can, and provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety, and in freedom.”¹⁹ However, then he stated in words that foreshadowed his post-war policies, “But we have our own dream and our own task, we are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not comprised.”²⁰ Furthermore, Churchill argued that Britain needed to become a friend as well as a sponsor of the new Europe but did not advocate for Britain actually to participate in this new Europe. On the contrary, his indecisiveness can be seen in the late 1940s speeches as he overtly suggested that the UK should join the new European movement and even lead it. However, Churchill’s main concern about engaging with Europe was that it would erode the ties with the Commonwealth.

2.4 Joining the EEC

The EEC was formed in 1957 by signing the Treaty of Rome. The EEC was originally founded by six states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), whose goal was to create a Common Market. The free movement of goods, along with the free movement of people, services, and capital, would serve as the cornerstones of that Common Market.²¹ The construction of the Common Market would be aided by a group of political organizations tasked with implementing and expanding the fundamental legal precepts outlined in the EEC Treaty. A Court of Justice would supervise the Community’s Member States to uphold the obligations they had agreed to under the treaties.

However, the UK’s European integration and the potential emergence of its European identity were a bit complicated. After Churchill’s speeches with hints of possible cooperation of European institutional structures, it actually seemed to come into existence. However, all hopes were dashed when the UK refused to be a part of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Some historians and commentators believe that Britain’s refusal to join the ECSC was the pivotal point at which Britain irreparably failed to have an impact on the politics and economy of post-war Europe.²² Moreover, by doing so, they showed their weak European identity as they were reluctant to any European integration. After all, in 1956, the UK suggested establishing a European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Through this

¹⁹ Winston Churchill, “Speech on a Council of Europe” (Zurich, September 19, 1946).

²⁰ Winston Churchill, “Speech to the House of Commons” (London, May 11, 1953).

²¹ Kenneth A. Armstrong, *Brexit Time: Leaving the EU – Why, How and When?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9.

²² Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 37.

association, goods could be moved between participating states without being subject to tariffs. In addition, the participating states could still maintain control over their trade policies with those not a part of EFTA. Thus, EFTA offered international economic liberalism without undermining the state's sovereignty, which would not have occurred as a member of the EEC. The EFTA was eventually established in 1960.

During the 1960s, the UK's economy did not flourish, and the UK, with its depreciated currency, was not on the same level as its European neighbours. However, a North Atlantic Free Trade Area plan enforced by the United States prompted Harold Macmillan's Conservative government to consider membership in EEC, as it would highly benefit the UK. The French president de Gaulle turned down Macmillan's application in 1961, which was the UK's first attempt to join the EEC.²³ According to de Gaulle, six continental states of the exact nature had ratified the Treaty of Rome in 1957, and the UK was not one of them. Furthermore, de Gaulle referred to the UK as being insular and maritime and argued that the UK had connections with the most diverse and remote nations through its exchanges, markets, and supply lines., which did not sit well with him. The French president also criticized the UK for its past reserved attitude towards the EEC. Another reason France was against accepting new members to the EEC was a concern about complications in decision-making within the EEC. In addition, France expressed worries about the possibility of shifting EEC's "focus away from achieving greater internal political integration and solidarity towards a more expansive internationalist external free trade agenda."²⁴

The second application submitted in 1967 by the Labour government headed by Harold Wilson was also denied. The other five EEC Member States, apart from France, openly supported the UK's membership. In September 1967, the UK, along with Denmark, Ireland, and Norway, were encouraged by the European Commission to start membership negotiations. However, President de Gaulle continued to be against approving the membership. Eventually, Edward Heath, Wilson's successor, started the successful negotiations later in 1970. It played into his hands that the new president of France became Georges Pompidou, who, unlike de Gaulle, was not sceptical about UK's admission to the EEC.²⁵ His negotiations resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Accession on January 22,

²³ Kenneth A. Armstrong, *Brexit Time: Leaving the EU – Why, How and When?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 12-13.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 24.

1972. Hence, the UK formally concurred to join the EEC, and on January 1, 1973, became the official Member State of the EEC.

Various political leaders already observed and discussed the idea of a weak British European identity at this time. The other EEC member states perceived that the UK joined the EEC solely intending to be part of the Common Market but was not really committed to deepening the integration with Europe overall. The other states often referred to Britain as being the awkward partner. Even Schuman, back in the 1950s, stated that the European states shared a 'common destiny.' However, he questioned whether Britain actually shared that same destiny, or was just a different kind of nation.

2.5 The 1975 Membership Referendum

Shortly after becoming part of the EEC, Britain showed its reticence and unease about this membership and Europe in general, demonstrating their poor European identity. By this time, the Labour Party, under Harold Wilson, had won again the general election over Edward Heath's Conservative Party. Under the pressure of his Eurosceptic left-wing party, Wilson's foremost priority was to renegotiate the membership terms, also known as Tory Terms, which eventually led to the 1975 Referendum. The EEC membership of the UK was up for a vote in the referendum, giving citizens the power to decide whether to leave or remain in the EEC. Wilson's renegotiations mainly aimed to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), EEC Budget and preserve national control over economic, industrial, and regional policies.²⁶

During this time European Council was established with its first meeting that was held in March of 1975 in Dublin. For completing Wilson's renegotiations, this particular meeting was essential as his demands, including mainly UK's budget contributions, were met there. It was intended to settle issues with the UK without reopening negotiations and adjusting the EEC Treaty itself. Following the European Council meeting in Dublin, Wilson assured the House of Commons that renegotiations were successful and that he had reached his main objectives. Furthermore, Wilson encouraged the government to advise British citizens to support the UK's membership in the EEC. When the voter leaflets were sent to the public with the intention to urge them to vote to remain, the Prime Minister, however, claimed that the UK's renegotiation goals had primarily been, but not entirely, achieved. Nevertheless,

²⁶ Robert Schütze, "Britain in the European Union: A Very Short History", *Global Policy* 13, no. S2 (2022): 40.

the leaflet emphasized that the Dublin Agreement would result in the UK receiving back £125 million annually, intending to subtly impress the British.²⁷ The decision was made, with two-thirds of the voters preferring to remain in the EEC. Some interpreted this result as evidence that the British had come around to the idea of Europe and potentially slowly emerging the European identity. However, according to one of the polls, 51 percent of voters, including a third of those who voted for Britain to stay in the EEC, believed that entering the EEC was a mistake, disproving the above statement. Moreover, 53 percent of the overall voters believed that leaving would immediately cause a political and economic crisis, thus remaining in the EEC was a safe option.

2.6 Margaret Thatcher

Another important figure during Britain's journey throughout the EU was Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher can be seen as one of the most prominent actors when it comes to European issues, as she was able to influence members of the general public with her views on the EU, further deepening the doubts between British European and national identity.

Thatcher became prime minister after the Conservative Party won the general elections in 1979. In her early years in office, Thatcher struggled to cut back on Britain's sizable net budget contributions to the EEC, which led to a combative relationship with her European partners.²⁸ This disparity was primarily brought on by the UK's heavy tariff payments on food imports from its Commonwealth suppliers because the CAP did not provide adequate financial support to Britain's agricultural sector. Britain finally received the budgeted refund at the Fontainebleau summit in 1984.

The 1980s saw an abrupt shift in party allegiances toward Europe. The Labour Party had historically held the more anti-European position, contending the integration of Europe would thwart the rise of socialism in one nation. However, under Neil Kinnock's leadership, whose tenure as leader could be seen as a precursor to Tony Blair's New Labour era after 1994, Labour started to lean more toward the European cause. The EEC began to hold some promises for the Labour Party.

At Trades Union Congress in 1988, Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, asserted that the EEC could implement many of the trade unions' envisioned

²⁷ Kenneth A. Armstrong, *Brexit Time: Leaving the EU – Why, How and When?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23-24.

²⁸ Nicholas Sowels, "From the 'Thatcherisation of Europe' to Brexit," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 24, no. 4 (2019): 4, <https://doaj.org/article/41d1e592831d436c935b765a34bdd867>.

policies, which the neoliberal Conservative government of Thatcher had opposed. According to Delors, Europe had political, economic, and social facets. His speech aided in winning Labour's support for the cause of Europe.²⁹ Its downside was that it alienated Margaret Thatcher and a large portion of her Conservative government.

A few weeks later, Thatcher addressed Delors in her 1988 now infamous Bruges speech, which became renowned among Eurosceptics. Thatcher favoured Europe based on collaboration between independent nation-states, rejecting European federalism as well as the expansion of supranational institutions. Thatcher claimed that the EEC had deteriorated since the 1957 signing of the Treaty of Rome. She argued that although the treaty purported to declare economic liberty, the developing monetary union and pleas for a single currency undermined that concept.³⁰ There happened to be, therefore, issues Thatcher expressed concerns about as the EEC expanded. The idea of the EEC strongly emphasized integration and harmonization, which weakened national sovereignty. These doubts served as the foundation for the Thatcherite criticism of Europe, which won Thatcher widespread acclaim from the public.

Thatcher, along with her close ally Lord Arthur Cockfield, was the one fully engaged in the development of the Single Market project, often called the 'Thatcherisation of Europe.' Thatcher saw the Single Market as a form of World Trade Organization agreement that sought to completely open up the national economies of Europe, mainly by removing the non-tariff barriers for goods and services in particular.³¹ Although the Iron Lady did not initially condemn British membership in the EEC, as her term as prime minister wore on, she grew increasingly critical of the concept of the Europe Union. Ironically, Thatcher, who was primarily responsible for Britain's two valuable contributions to the European Union: the Single Market and expansion of the member states, turned against Europe in her final years. Even later, Thatcher wrote in her book that Britain's membership in the EEC had been "a political error of historic magnitude."³²

²⁹ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 69-70.

³⁰ Graham Taylor, *Understanding Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2017), 19-20.

³¹ Nicholas Sowels, "From the 'Thatcherisation of Europe' to Brexit," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 24, no. 5 (2019): 3-4, <https://doaj.org/article/41d1e592831d436c935b765a34bdd867>.

³² Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 75.

2.6.1 Single European Act

The Single European Act (SEA) of 1986, arguably the most significant of all the Treaty of Rome amendments, became the most considerable contribution Britain has ever made to the development of Europe, and Thatcher was a key contributor to its creation. The SAE was ratified in Luxembourg, and it opened up the continental markets to unrestricted trade in goods and services, movement of people, and capital movements.³³ Additionally, SAE represented an acceptance of the Ministerial Council's qualified majority voting system. The abandonment of unanimous voting greatly enhanced decision-making and reduced national governments' ability to oppose policies directly.³⁴ Overall, the SAE significantly tightened the UK's ties to the EEC and European law compared to the prior situation.

2.6.2 European Monetary System

The question of whether Britain should join the European Monetary System (EMS), founded in 1979, also arose during the administration of Margaret Thatcher. To remove trade barriers brought on by fluctuations in national currencies, Jacques Delors and other European politicians argued that the concept of the single market required a monetary union and the adoption of a single currency, the euro. Delors anticipated that the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) and subsequently single currency would shield Europe from the harm that competitive devaluations and floating exchange rates would cause. However, Margaret Thatcher believed fixed exchange rates were erroneous because they distorted the market.³⁵ According to Thatcher, the ERM seemed to be an attempt to regulate the market, countering economic rationalism. Despite her initial reluctance, the senior ministers convinced Thatcher to join the EMS in October 1990. The Labour Party and Liberal Democrats strongly backed this decision. Joining the EMS was Thatcher's last crucial decision, as she resigned as prime minister six weeks later.

2.7 John Major

After Margaret Thatcher's resignation, John Major, her former chancellor, took over as prime minister. When Major replaced Thatcher in 1990, he made it clear that he wanted to build a less antagonistic relationship with the EEC, which included being part of the ERM.

³³ Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 179.

³⁴ Nicholas Sowels, "From the "Thatcherisation of Europe" to Brexit," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 24, no. 5 (2019): 4, <https://doaj.org/article/41d1e592831d436c935b765a34bdd867>.

³⁵ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 69-75.

In March 1991, Major declared in his speech to Konrad Adenauer Stiftung: “My aim for Britain in the Community can be simply stated. I want to be where we belong. At very heart of Europe.”³⁶ Under Major, there was an opportunity to create a pro-European narrative that could convince Britons to evince support for the EU, thereby building a stronger European identity. However, the European issue caused the Conservative Party to split during Major’s administration. As a result of a breakdown in the cabinet’s collective responsibility, the government stumbled from one crisis to another. Major lacked any reliable support and was consistently attacked by anti-Europeans and Eurosceptics and thus failed to make any headway in shaping Britain’s European identity.³⁷

2.7.1 Black Wednesday

The Maastricht crisis under the Major administration was a crucial turning point in the developing Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party. In 1992, on so-called Black Wednesday, Britain was compelled to leave the ERM due to an overvalued pound, and high-interest rates. The Black Wednesday events brought to light the dispute between European integration and the UK’s place in international financial markets. This stoked the flames of a growing Euroscepticism. Major successfully negotiated opt-outs from the Social Chapter and the monetary union. However, he could not negotiate the wanted referendum, which would have allowed the people to vote on the fate of the Maastricht Treaty. This gave rise to several new Eurosceptic movements, foundations, and political parties, that disagreed with European integration based on British sovereignty and exceptionalism.³⁸ According to the Eurosceptics, leaving the ERM allowed Britain to devalue its currency and spearhead economic recovery. That was the reason why they called this event White Wednesday and not Black Wednesday.

British foreign exchange reserves decreased by approximately £3.3 billion net due to leaving the ERM. Although the overall consequences were not severe, the immediate results were disastrous. Nearly 25,000 company liquidations and 36,000 bankruptcy filings occurred in the first nine months of 1992. Over 200,000 property owners were put into mortgage payments arrears, and over 68,000 properties were repossessed.³⁹ The political

³⁶ John Major, “Speech to the Conservative Group for Europe,” (Manchester, April 22, 1993)

³⁷ Neil McNaughton, *Britain and European Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 255-256.

³⁸ Graham Taylor, *Understanding Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2017), 20-21

³⁹ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 78-79.

repercussions were just as severe. For the Major administration, it was a disaster that tarnished the Conservative Party's longstanding reputation for prudent economic management. It became a significant factor in the party's prolonged period of opposition following 1997. After leaving the ERM, taxes had to be increased, evoking even more Euroscepticism and a negative attitude toward European identity in public.

2.8 New Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown

In 1997, after the general election won the New Labour, Tony Blair became the new prime minister. New Labour stayed in power until 2010, firstly under Tony Blair's government and later in 2007 under Gordon Brown's government. Blair was a steadfast supporter of European integration during his time in office and worked to strengthen the UK's ties to the EU. Due to this, Blair stood out from the Thatcherite-style moderate Euroscepticism performed by the preceding Conservative governments.⁴⁰ By placing a globalist ethical perspective and European values at the forefront of British foreign policy, Blair sought to modernize British national identity and its standing in the global community, while at the same time creating an environment for the development of the British European identity.

Early in the Blair government, he played a crucial role in negotiating the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam. In 1999, Blair even founded the organization "Britain in Europe" with the elimination of the pound and the adoption of the euro as its primary objective. But Blair's opponent, Gordon Brown, at that time chancellor of the Exchequer, promptly rebutted it.⁴¹ So, while prime minister Blair encouraged Britain in Europe to make a case for Britain's adoption of the euro, Brown, the second most influential Labour minister, prevented this from happening. Ultimately, the notion of replacing the volatile pound sterling was flatly rejected, and Britain chose not to join the eurozone.

During the early 2000s, the European issue mainly remained dormant. The economy appeared to be thriving, and despite growing Euroscepticism among the British population, the European Union looked to be less of a pressing concern. Even though Britain was neither a part of the EMU nor the Schengen area, it outperformed its major European competitors. After being labelled as the weak link in Europe for over 50 years, Britain suddenly outpaced its main competitors to take the top spot in the EU's economic rankings. But rather than

⁴⁰ Oliver Daddow, "Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and the Eurosceptic Tradition in Britain," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 2 (May 2013): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00534.x>

⁴¹ Denis MacShane, *Brexit: How Britain Left Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 94-5.

looking to Europe for economic inspiration, Britain preferred to take inspiration from the United States.⁴² However, after the European Union expanded in 2004, intending to include the former communist states, Europe quickly returned to the forefront of public discussions, primarily due to the flood of immigrants from central and eastern Europe, which Blair encouraged to come working to Britain. This flood of immigrants made Europe less appealing to the public once again.

Although Blair and Gordon had different perspectives on foreign affairs and at times disagreed on import policy matters such as joining the eurozone, they shared some views regarding the outlooks on Europe. Both Blair and Brown considered themselves Europeans and believed Britain needed to modernize by engaging with the EU. Furthermore, they both agreed that while the EU was far from ideal, Britain's best interest would still be to remain in the EU. Last but not least, they hoped that the EU might help Britain accomplish some of its international goals.⁴³ But in contrast to Blair, Brown's attitude to European integration was often viewed as more cautious and pragmatic since he was preserving national sovereignty and trying to keep control of crucial policy areas. Blair's feeble attempts to portray himself as an advocate of integration never persuaded the media or the country's predominantly Eurosceptic people to change their opinion about European integration. By his third term in office, Blair had abandoned his attempts to convince the nation of the case for Europe.

When Brown entered the office in 2007, a year later, Britain and the rest of the world were dealing with a global financial crisis. The onset of the Great Recession, which lasted from 2008 to 2009, once again shifted political tides not in favour of the Labour Party. Britain's economy sputtered under Brown's leadership as the world economic crisis peaked. This led to a shift in support for more protectionist policies put out by anti-European movements.⁴⁴ Eventually, Labour lost power in 2010. A key theme in the election was the Conservative promise of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Since it was ratified in 2007, it invoked concerns among politicians and the public, as Britain could lose the national sovereignty and deepen the immigration crisis. It was the New Labour that the Conservatives blamed for permitting the influx of immigrants from the new EU member states into

⁴² Denis MacShane, *Brexit: How Britain Left Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 92-3.

⁴³ Oliver Daddow, "Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and the Eurosceptic Tradition in Britain," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 2 (May 2013): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00534.x>

⁴⁴ Archil Chochia, David R. Troitiño and Tanel Kerikmäe, *Brexit: History, Reasoning and Perspectives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 166.

Britain.⁴⁵ The issue of immigration was prominently woven into the case against the EU and played a crucial role in the 2016 referendum.

This chapter vividly presented events, political figures, and factors that influenced British European identity. Therefore, it can be stated that all the negative experiences and problems that have occurred between Britain and the EU throughout history were subsequently transferred to the public through political actors, creating a negative view of the EU and a reluctance to identify with Europe in any way.

⁴⁵ Denis MacShane, *Brexit: How Britain Left Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 106.

3 BREXIT

Although Brexit is primarily associated with issues such as immigration, British sovereignty, or economic problems, which will be predominately discussed in this chapter, understanding Brexit also requires examining it through the prism of British national identity. As mentioned, Brexit can be interpreted in different ways; however, the connection between Brexit and national identity is evident. Brexit talks frequently touched on issues such as Britain's future, what defines a British citizen, and how to preserve or comprise British identity. Brexit resulted from an ongoing argument about the British identity that started in 1945, following Britain's significant decolonization-related changes. Decolonisation was a challenge for Britain that sparked a chain of events where each potential solution raised new concerns, necessitating additional divisive adjustments. Although the Labour and Conservative political parties reached some compromises, the tensions spurred by those continuous discussions were not fully resolved. Thus, Brexit pointed out the inability of the two major parties to find common ground for their different competing factors regarding national identity, multiculturalism, and globalization.⁴⁶

3.1 David Cameron and a Road to Brexit

In 2010, the Conservatives/Liberal Democrats, the first coalition government in modern British history under the governance of David Cameron, won in the general elections against Gordon Brown's Labour Party. As Cameron became the Conservative Party leader in 2005, he was frequently compared to Tony Blair. Like Blair aimed to alter the fundamental beliefs of the Labour Party, many believed that Cameron could move the Conservative Party away from its Thatcherite roots. As a leader, Cameron emphasized the importance of modernization and represented the more liberal faction within the Conservative Party. Additionally, he shared Blair's steadfast commitment for the expansion of democracy and humanitarian action.⁴⁷ Initially, there were no indications that Cameron would be responsible for leading the UK toward Brexit. However, according to Oliver, people who claimed that Cameron could have prevented the referendum did not acknowledge the prevailing political environment, and the referendum was only a matter of time, and Cameron just happened to be the mediator.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Richard T. Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, "Brexit and the Myth of British National Identity," *British Politics* 16, (2021): 121.

⁴⁷ Archil Chochia, David R. Troitiño and Tanel Kerikmäe, *Brexit: History, Reasoning and Perspectives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 167.

⁴⁸ Craig Oliver, *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 16.

Nonetheless, the eurozone crisis and the ensuing migrant crisis strengthened the fear-based narratives about the perils of European integration and how it would potentially threaten British sovereignty and national identity. Conservative Party members who were sceptical of the EU started to assert their influence and pressured Cameron's leadership to change its stance on the European issue.⁴⁹ Cameron eventually caved in to pressure from the public and the MPs and decided to give his most important speech at Bloomberg on 23 January 2013. The increasing scepticism towards the EU within his Party and the success of the strongly anti-European UKIP also played a significant role in his decision.⁵⁰ Cameron stated that if his party is re-elected in the 2015 general elections, they would profoundly alter the European issue. Cameron promised that if the process of negotiating the terms of renewed membership failed, he would hold a referendum on whether Britain should remain or leave the EU. In the first two parts of his speech at Bloomberg, Cameron discussed the issues plaguing the EU and the measures required to address them. Cameron highlighted concerns such as the problems faced by the eurozone, the competitiveness crisis within Europe, the absence of democratic accountability at the European level, and other similar issues. Yet, in the last part of his speech, he stated, "I want the EU to be a success. And I want a relationship between Britain and the EU that keeps us in it. If we can negotiate such an arrangement, I will campaign for it with all my heart and soul. Because I believe something very deeply. That Britain's national interest is best served in a flexible, adaptable and open EU and that such EU is best with Britain in it."⁵¹

Cameron hoped that the referendum would result in a successful conclusion to the European issue, similar to Harold Wilson's hope in 1975. But despite Cameron's tenacity and efforts to keep the UK in the EU, his deal has been condemned as a failure, and the UK decided to leave the EU. The day after the 2016 referendum, Cameron eventually resigned as Prime Minister. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition Labour Party at that time, evinced lukewarm support for Cameron's remain campaign and criticized his stance on the issue of Britain's membership in the EU. Specifically, Corbyn accused Cameron of not dealing with the vital problems that Britain was facing.⁵²

⁴⁹ Archil Chochia, David R. Troitiño and Tanel Kerikmäe, *Brexit: History, Reasoning and Perspectives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 167.

⁵⁰ Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 275-276.

⁵¹ David Cameron, "Speech at Bloomberg" (London, January 23, 2013).

⁵² Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 286.

3.2 Referendum campaigns

In 2016 British politics was divided into two different camps with different aims and messages to deliver to British citizens to fulfill their pro-EU or anti-EU desire. On one side, Britain Stronger in Europe, the campaign highly emphasizing keeping Britain in the European Union and silencing Euroscepticism. Moreover, on the other side, Vote Leave, the campaign insisting on better prosperity of Britain as a sovereign unit, which beat their rival campaign groups, for instance, Grassroots Out, the Eurosceptic cross-party umbrella group, Leave.EU, or Labour Leave.

3.2.1 Vote Leave

The Vote Leave campaign was the official lead anti-EU referendum campaign whose goal was to leave the European Union. The campaign group was introduced on 9th October 2015. The Labour Leave campaign, Conservatives for Britain, and Business for Britain were Eurosceptic groups backing and highly promoting leaving the European Union.⁵³ Boris Johnson, at that time London mayor; Gisela Stuart, the chair of the campaign group; Michael Gove, the Conservative cabinet minister, who criticized Britain's membership in the European Union for a long time, or David Cummings were the key figures of the Vote Leave campaign. Although the UKIP leader, and the leading member of the rivalry group Grassroots Out, Nigel Farage, lost the privilege to be the head of the lead referendum campaign, Farage constantly urged to leave the European Union mainly because of the immigration policies.⁵⁴

The primary aspect that unified the Vote Leave campaign became their slogan 'take back control.' A patriotic message about regaining control over democracy, finance, trade, law, and border served as the primary tool to pursue the voters to vote in correlation with their campaign.⁵⁵ As reported by Leavers, sovereignty was also a significant factor for Leavers since, according to them, the British Parliament lacked sovereignty as well as the British judiciary system. The Vote Leave campaign also stated that Britain would control immigration since migrants from the European Union would not have an automatic right to live in the UK. Leavers stated Britons would no longer be on trials charged for minor

⁵³ "Lead EU Referendum Campaigns Named," *BBC News*, April 13, 2016, Accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36038672>.

⁵⁴ "The People Hoping to Persuade UK to Vote to Leave the EU," *BBC News*, June 13, 2016, Accessed February 4, 2023, <https://wwwnews.live.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34505076?cv=1>.

⁵⁵ Kenneth A. Armstrong, *Brexit Time: Leaving the EU – Why, How and When?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 65-66.

offences abroad since the European Arrest Warrant would not be in force. Nevertheless, Leavers also accentuated factors such as employment, national defence, or clout.⁵⁶

3.2.2 Britain Stronger in Europe

The Britain Stronger in Europe campaign was the official front-running pro-EU referendum campaign whose goal was to uphold the membership of the United Kingdom in the EU. The campaign group was formed on 12th October 2015. Prime Minister David Cameron played a vital role during the Britain Stronger in Europe referendum campaign, emphasizing mainly the economic risks Britain would run if leaving the European Union. Alongside Cameron, Britain Stronger in Europe was comprised of Lord Rose, former chair of Marks and Spencer, who was the chair of the campaign group, George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, who concurred with Cameron's concerns about potential economic damage, Nicola Sturgeon, who led the campaign in Scotland, Will Straw, Roland Rudd, and other prominent personalities. The Labour in For Britain campaign, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, ex-premiers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and John Major expressed support for this campaign, doubting the prosperity of the United Kingdom not being a member of the European Union. The primary financial support came from Lord Sainsbury, who donated 2.3 million pounds.⁵⁷

The campaign contents of both Leavers and Remainers differ drastically. The risks to the economy, employment, and investment that would arise from a choice to leave the EU became the core focus of the Remain campaign. According to Remainers, trade with European countries covered 44 percent of the whole export; thus, leaving the EU would be futile. As far as sovereignty is concerned, Remainers proposed that countries cooperate to flourish economically. Opposing the migration crisis, Remainers pitched that leaving the European Union would paradoxically result in moving the border controls from Calais to Dover. In the campaign, Remainers were also concerned since three million jobs were somehow related to the European Union. Although the United Kingdom is a member of NATO, for Remainers, it was essential to linger in European Union if the United Kingdom

⁵⁶ Ben Riley-Smith, "Arguments Made for and against Brexit during the EU Referendum Campaign," *The Telegraph*, August 6, 2018, Accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/0/arguments-made-against-brexiteu-referendum-campaign/>.

⁵⁷ "The People Hoping to Persuade UK to Vote to Stay in the EU," *BBC News*, June 13, 2016, Accessed February 4, 2023, <https://wwwnews.live.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34505076?cv=1>.

was ever under attack because combating any potential threats would be easier having been in the European Union.⁵⁸

3.3 Immigration problem

Looking back in history, between 1881 and 1914 some 325,000 Jews immigrated to Britain from Eastern Europe and later, before the Second World War, another 50,000 arrived as they fled the Nazis. In 1947, the UK also implemented the Polish Resettlement Act to give asylum to Poles who refused to return to their homeland. This Act became the first substantial immigration statute for non-empire citizens and provided citizenship to 200,000 people.⁵⁹ Later, once the Immigration Act of 1971 came into force, it stopped laborers from Commonwealth countries from immigrating to the UK. However, at that time, roughly 600,000 people born in Commonwealth nations and possessing UK citizenship were already residing in Britain. Additionally, in 1972, the UK let over 30,000 Ugandan Asians who had been ruthlessly expelled by President Idi Amin to settle in the country.⁶⁰ Fast forward to 2014, Theresa May at Home Office formed another Immigration Act. According to May, the Act should have simplified the process of deportation, reduced the appeals, and prevented illegal immigrants from abusing public services or working in the country. Furthermore, the Act obliged private landlords, clergy, driving instructors, and even hospitals and school to verify the immigrants' legal status.⁶¹

No EU member state was authorized to impose immigration restrictions on citizens of any other member state since the SAE of 1986 guaranteed legal protection for free movement of people. While Westminster had the power to restrict immigration from non-EU countries, it could not limit European immigration. The countries formerly under communist regimes had significantly lower living standards than other European member states. The West, therefore, attracted their citizens, mainly the UK, which dominated with its well-developed welfare system and National Health Service. The British people expressed concerns about immigration and its impact on the economy after 2004, when a wave of workers from Central and Eastern Europe started arriving in the UK extensively.

⁵⁸ Ben Riley-Smith, "Arguments Made for and against Brexit during the EU Referendum Campaign," *The Telegraph*, August 6, 2018, Accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/0/arguments-made-against-brexit-eu-referendum-campaign/>.

⁵⁹ Daniel Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2019) 188.

⁶⁰ Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 82.

⁶¹ Daniel Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2019) 200.

However, a majority of economists considered immigration to be beneficial for Britain. Even Tony Blair and his Labour government endorsed immigration to solve labour shortages. On the other hand, many people in the country's poorest regions saw immigration as unfavourable. For them, the elite, who hired, for example, au pairs or builders from the EU cheaply, profited the most from immigration.⁶² Following the financial crisis of 2008, many individuals in the UK witnessed their living conditions and levels of public services decline, which many correlated to immigration. The claim that immigration had driven down salaries in many blue-collar occupations while simultaneously exerting undue pressure on underfunded hospitals and schools gained intuitive credibility.⁶³ The large influx of immigrants caused a disconnect, particularly between the elite and the general public, and the decision to leave the EU was a way of addressing the immigration issue.

At the end of 2015, people knew the referendum on whether Britain should remain or leave the EU was imminent. The outcomes of different opinion polls captured the general public mood, and immigration appeared to be the most critical problem among other issues essential to the populace. Among the various issues that were important to the people, immigration was considered the most significant. In a survey conducted by YouGov at the end of 2015, 63 percent of the respondents identified immigration as the top concern, with healthcare and the economy lagging at 39 percent and 33 percent, respectively.⁶⁴

3.3.1 Nigel Farage

Right after the terrorist attack in November 2015 in Paris, UKIP leader Nigel Farage expressed frustration and stated that this attack was utterly and entirely predictable. Farage openly linked terrorist attacks to migration. At that time, Farage encouraged the British nation to admit to themselves that mass immigration and multiculturalism in Europe had failed, creating an anti-European approach to British identity. UKIP asserted that immigration into the UK became enormous and should be restricted as quickly as feasible. The party stated that as long as the UK is a member of the EU, it will never be able to regulate migration; thus, Farage insisted on putting anti-immigration at the centre of UKIP's manifesto. Farage criticized the EU for its failure to control immigration and the elimination

⁶² Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 82.

⁶³ Benjamin Hawkins, *Deconstructing Brexit Discourses: Embedded Euroscepticism, Fantasy Objects and the United Kingdom's Vote to Leave the European Union* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 100-101.

⁶⁴ Harold D. Clarke, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 30.

of the UK's real identity.⁶⁵ During the campaign, Farage singled out immigrants as a threat to the welfare system, national security, and social norms. According to the UKIP's manifesto, immigrants wreak havoc with housing and public facilities such as schools, hospitals, transportation networks, and even power and water supplies. Farage stated that with increasing immigration there would be fewer work opportunities in the country, overcrowded hospitals connected with longer waiting for needed health care, wage cuts, and many more. Therefore, it was critical to keep them under control. Concerning the welfare system, Farage proposed that immigrants be denied all benefits until they had lived in the UK for at least five years.⁶⁶

3.4 2016 Referendum

On June 23, 2016, approximately 35.5 million people participated in the national referendum that once and for all decided the fate of the UK and its membership in the EU. The ballot paper posed a question that evoked strong emotions among the voters: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'⁶⁷ The high turnout of 72,3 percent at the referendum demonstrated the relevance of the European issue for the public, as it reached the highest level of participation in a political election since 1992.

Despite taking a risk by putting the UK's membership in the EU up for a referendum, many anticipated Cameron, with his Stronger In campaign, to emerge victorious because the voters were expected to side with the status quo and take the least hazardous option, to leave the EU ultimately. However, the experts erroneously predicted the outcome, and Cameron lost his bet. Because as Cameron and his team dealt with disloyalty and deception from politicians and especially the media, the situation grew increasingly challenging. The influential newspapers were adamant about backing the Leave campaign, while those backing the Remain campaign often held left-leaning opinions and were unenthusiastic about supporting Cameron.⁶⁸

On the night of the referendum, the tallied votes showed that 51,9 percent of the electorate supported the UK's exit from the EU, and only 48.1 percent favoured remaining

⁶⁵ Deniz Eroğlu, Nergiz Özkural Köroğlu, "Anti-Immigration vs Anti-EU: Political Discourse Analysis of Brexit Decision of the UK," *Journal of Divinity Faculty of Hitit University* 19, vol. 1 (June 2020): 15-20.

⁶⁶ Daniel Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2019) 198.

⁶⁷ Harold D. Clarke, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20.

⁶⁸ Craig Oliver, *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 17.

in the EU. According to Hobolt's analysis, various factors influenced the Brexit vote. But generally speaking, young and highly-educated citizens in metropolitan centres were opened in terms of immigration and international cooperation and voted for Britain to remain in the EU. In contrast to the less educated, the working class and older citizens who were not opened to these issues voted for Britain to leave the EU.⁶⁹ Moreover, people with strong British or English national identity predominantly voted to leave, and people with European identity voted to remain.

The outcome shocked people all across the world. Despite being given ominous prophecies about the repercussions of Brexit from Prime Minister Cameron, the vast majority of members of parliament and the Cabinet, a large number of corporations or even international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, the majority still voted to not further continue in the European membership.⁷⁰

The rise of mistrust and scepticism towards the EU in the UK and many European countries have been primarily due to the eurozone and migrant crisis. Although the British have always seen themselves as 'the others' from the rest of the European countries, similar tendencies in other pro-integration European countries have impacted the UK's emergence of Euroscepticism. Brexit became largely possible due to the crisis that evolved within the EU, creating a favourable backdrop for Brexit. But if these crises hadn't occurred, there would probably be little possibility that the Brexit referendum would succeed and that in the end the Britons would be notorious for their weak European identity.

⁶⁹ Sara B. Hobolt, "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent," *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 9 (2016): 1267-70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785>

⁷⁰ Harold D. Clarke, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23.

CONCLUSION

Britain experienced ups and downs throughout its time in the European Union. Several politicians took turns governing under the Conservative and Labour parties. Some believed in and supported European integration, and others openly despised the European project. Despite being labelled as an awkward partner, Britain has contributed to many things that have given development to the EU. Ironically, predominantly during the Margaret Thatcher's Eurosceptic government, which was responsible for signing the Single European Act and encouraged the enlargement of the EU member states.

On June 23, 2016, the UK's citizens had the opportunity to decide on the future of their country, specifically whether to remain in or leave the EU. On one side, there were Remainers who endorsed remaining in the EU and, on the other, Leavers who advocated leaving the EU with the straightforward narrative that the EU threatens British sovereignty and immigration poses a danger to British society and British national identity. The massive turnout for the referendum indicated that the public was not indifferent to the European issue. By a margin of 51.9% to 48.1%, it was determined that the UK would definitively withdraw from the EU.

So, what does Brexit say about British European Identity? Even though Brexit emerged as a shock, not only on the national level but also for the rest of the world, it confirmed that, generally, Britons have always had a weak European identity. Although, some perceived their national and European identities as interconnected and defined themselves as Europeans. However, the fault seems to lie not with the general public but with the political elites who failed to create a pro-EU environment, that would convince the citizens to believe in the European project and to resonate with the European identity.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNP	British National Party
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EMS	European Monetary System
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SEA	Single European Act
UK	United Kingdom