

The post-Brexit EU-UK Agreement: Spelling the end of the United Kingdom as we know it?



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Habemus deal.¹ With two separate Christmas Eve press conferences, marking the end of a drawn-out process of gruelling negotiations, the United Kingdom's (UK) Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the European Union's (EU) President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, together with the EU Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier, respectively unveiled the ['EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement'](#). Already voted into law by the British Parliament on

¹ 'We have a deal', a rewording of the Latin call 'Habemus Papam' announcing the election of a new Pope, head of the Catholic Church, to the worshippers in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, and preceded by a white smoke signal from the chimney on the roof of the Sistine Chapel.

December 30, 2020, it is now provisionally in force, awaiting the EU Parliament's final approval. The Agreement will govern EU-UK relations for the foreseeable future. The affirmative white plumes of smoke rising from London and Brussels have been welcomed with a collective sigh of relief tinged with melancholy across Europe. Nevertheless, despite having averted a potentially catastrophic [‘Hard Brexit’](#), the [‘EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement’](#) could not have come at a worse time for the EU, and, in the eyes of this author, especially for the UK.

Europe is deep in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic and related economic troubles. Chinese and Russian pressures on European democracies are reaching new dangerous heights. The climate crisis is fast unfolding and other global threats abound. This post-Brexit deal – which does not include any mutual cooperation on foreign policy and defence – ushers in a new period of greater geopolitical and economic uncertainty, particularly for London. Brexit² has been hailed by its supporters as the vessel that would forge the UK into a global power once again. Instead, it seems it may likely spell, at the very least in the short-to-medium term, politico-economic woes at home and a loss of status abroad. To the now EU 27, at a time when the dictum ‘united we stand, divided we fall’ has perhaps never been more relevant, the UK appears to be completely out of step. However, the conservative leadership in London holds a different view about the deal's outcome.

According to British PM Boris Johnson: [“We have taken back control of laws and our destiny. We have taken back control of every jot and tittle of our regulation. In a way that is complete and unfettered.”](#) The deal has been trumpeted by British right-wing blogs as a clear win for the home side with an [allegedly official UK government scorecard](#) reporting almost half of the deal's negotiating issues in its favour and a consistent number as non-damaging, status quo-upholding draws. Self-congratulatory government rhetoric notwithstanding, the general public is still split on the issue³ and

² The brainchild of British populist politician Nigel Farage, Brexit was legitimized by conservative PM David Cameron's ill-conceived referendum in 2016, and, after a laborious gestation under his successor Theresa May, has finally been delivered four years, seven months and a couple of weeks later by incumbent conservative PM Boris Johnson.

³ In a number of polls run in the last quarter of 2020, slightly more than half of participants were against leaving the EU and in a new poll just before the deal, [“51% \[of participants\] backed staying out and 49% backed applying to rejoin \[the EU\]”](#) (BBC News, 2020).

not all United Kingdom constituent states are toeing Westminster's line. Scotland voted overwhelmingly in favour of remaining in the EU in the 2016 referendum and is dead-set on launching an independence one, perhaps already in 2021, to become an EU member state. According to the latest polls, current First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) is poised to win an overwhelming majority in May's parliamentary elections, with popular support in favour of the independence referendum at a second all-time high of 58%.⁴ Meanwhile, Wales is biding its time, waiting to see the outcome of the deal on its agricultural and fishery sectors. That leaves Northern Ireland (NI) as a likely key determinant of the UK's integrity in this post-Brexit future.

Many would recall how the controversy of solving the border issue between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (IR), the so-called 'Northern Ireland backstop', bogged down Brexit withdrawal negotiations until the end of 2019 when an agreement on the matter between the EU and the UK was reached. The backstop problem was centred on preventing the reinstatement of a hard border with customs checkpoints and physical barriers between the two Irelands.⁵ This led to many deal proposals being rejected by both sides and, ultimately, cost former UK PM Theresa May her job. In brief, the UK was firmly opposed to the EU's idea of keeping Northern Ireland in the EU's customs union and single market whilst having to shoulder regulatory checks on goods between Great Britain (GB) and Northern Ireland. After a lengthy back and forth between Brussels and London and a change at the helm of 10 Downing Street⁶, in October 2019, an agreement was finally signed, the '[Protocol on Northern Ireland/Ireland](#)'. The latter looks very similar to the abovementioned initial EU solution. A key addendum is the provision granting the Northern Irish Assembly the right to evaluate, and potentially exit the Protocol, every four years. The Protocol now sees Ireland continuing to be part of the EU's single market as well as being simultaneously within both the EU and the UK's customs unions. This allows for

⁴ Matchet, C. (2020), '[Poll shows Scottish independence support surging to joint record levels as SNP set for majority](#)', *The Scotsman*, 17 December.

⁵ Border checkpoints between NI and IR had been removed as part of 'The Good Friday Agreement', signed in 1998 by the UK and the Republic of Ireland to end the conflict in Northern Ireland between unionist and nationalists; having such barriers reinstated could have inflamed simmering tensions once again.

⁶ Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May as British PM in July 2019.

Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland trade to flow unrestricted across the shared border and for Northern Irish goods to be included as part of any free trade agreement the UK signs with a third country.⁷

The downside for the UK is that goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will have to undergo customs inspections. Customs officers will need to check the products' origin and nature. Certain goods are prohibited to enter the EU single market – e.g., chilled meats and seed potatoes – and, although permitted GB goods are exempt from tariffs under the EU-UK trade deal, those that hail from third countries and “at risk” of being moved from GB to the EU via Northern Ireland will still be liable for duties. In practice, this will likely lead to an increase of red-tape and bureaucracy at the NI-GB border that could prompt Northern Irish businesses to scale down their contracts with GB suppliers and instead increase their reliance and exchanges with Irish and mainland European ones. Northern Ireland, together with Scotland, voted against leaving the EU and its special status under the new accord could further the reunification agenda with the neighbouring Republic of Ireland. The latter's [public announcement](#), pledging to pay for Northern Irish tertiary students' continued participation in the EU's student exchange flagship scheme, the Erasmus+ program, after the UK withdrew from it, speaks volumes about the potential for a more deeply intertwined IR-NI cooperation post-Brexit.

In a famous Brexit quote, Boris Johnson said [“My policy on cake is pro having it and pro eating it”](#). He meant he was confident the UK would get everything it wanted out of a deal with the EU. With the ‘EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement’, it appears he has not managed to eat the whole cake and the alleged benefits of the slice he has secured will take some time to manifest, if ever. As things stand, the UK cannot benefit from the EU's Covid-19 Economic Recovery Plan and cannot rely upon the EU 27's mutual support in the fight against Covid-19⁸. Also, London missed being included in the recently signed [‘EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment’](#) – whether sagely or not only time will tell. The UK now faces the gargantuan task of implementing

⁷ For more information, see Stojanovic, A. (2020), [‘Brexit deal: the Northern Ireland protocol’](#), Explainers, Institute for Government.

⁸ To the UK's credit, it ranks fourth globally in relation to ‘Covid-19 vaccination doses administered per 100 persons’ according to the [Our World Data website](#) – a joint partnership between the University of Oxford and the not-for-profit Global Change Data Lab.

the trade deal's fine print on a wide range of issues – e.g., immigration, travel, regulatory alignment, etc. – a potential source of additional domestic political and social strife. Seemingly isolated in Europe and with what appears to be a diminished footprint on the global stage, the UK has to come to terms with growing disunity at home. The likelihood of Britain's breakup is at this moment a more concrete prospect than the previously feared EU one with Brexit. If this scenario should indeed come to pass, there could be destabilizing repercussions throughout Europe, with the simmering demands for independence of other separatist movements active in the Old Continent – e.g. in Catalonia (Spain) or in Flanders (Belgium) – strongly coming to the fore once again. If anything, Brexit proves how in a deeply interconnected Europe (and world), the ramifications of a “simple” political decision and popular choice can be far-reaching. Habemus deal. We have a deal. Will it spell the end of the United Kingdom as we know it?

**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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