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## British perceptions on Brexit: findings from fieldwork in April 2019

*Percepções britânicas sobre o Brexit:  
resultados do trabalho de campo em  
abril de 2019*

*Percepciones británicas sobre el Brexit:  
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### Abstract

This paper identifies some of the long—, medium—, and short-term Brexit factors by presenting the results of fieldwork held in London in April 2019. This research aimed to locally monitor the reaction of the population during the deadlock of the Brexit process since the original UK exit deadline was the month before. The observation *in loco* of street manifestations, and the analysis of the British newspapers' headlines provide the context in which the fieldwork was undertaken. The interviews carried out with experts and politicians lead to conclusions about the British perceptions of Brexit which are cross-checked with the literature review.

**Keywords:** Brexit, United Kingdom; European Union; British Perceptions.

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## Resumo

Este artigo identifica alguns dos fatores de longo, médio e curto prazo do Brexit, apresentando os resultados de um trabalho de campo realizado em Londres em abril de 2019. Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo monitorar localmente a reação da população durante o impasse do processo Brexit, visto que o prazo original de saída do Reino Unido era no mês anterior. A observação *in loco* das manifestações de rua e a análise das manchetes dos jornais britânicos fornecem o contexto em que o trabalho de campo foi conduzido. As entrevistas realizadas com especialistas e políticos levam a conclusões sobre as percepções britânicas em relação ao Brexit, as quais são confrontadas com a revisão da literatura.

**Palavras-chave:** Brexit, Reino Unido, União Europeia; Percepções Britânicas.

## Resumen

Este documento identifica algunos de los factores a largo, medio y corto plazo del Brexit al presentar los resultados del trabajo de campo realizado en Londres en abril de 2019. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo monitorear localmente la reacción de la población durante el estancamiento del proceso Brexit, ya que la fecha límite original de salida del Reino Unido fue el mes anterior. La observación *in loco* de las manifestaciones callejeras y el análisis de los titulares de los periódicos británicos proporcionan el contexto en el que se llevó a cabo el trabajo de campo. Las entrevistas realizadas con expertos y políticos llevan a conclusiones sobre las percepciones británicas acerca del Brexit que se cotejan con la revisión de la literatura.

**Palabras llave:** Brexit, Reino Unido, Unión Europea; Percepciones Británicas.

## Introduction

On 23 June 2016, British citizens went to the polls, and 51.9% of the voters opted to leave the European Union (The Electoral Commission 2016). The outcome of the referendum has raised further questions about the future of the regional bloc, given that it was the first time that a Member State decided to leave the integration process<sup>1</sup>. The referendum revealed several disparities within

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1 So far, only three territories of Member States have left the bloc: Algeria, when it gained independence from France in 1962; and Greenland and St. Bartholomew, which became overseas territories of the European Union respectively in 1985 and 2012.





the United Kingdom, considering that most of the population of Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the regional integration process, whereas England and Wales predominantly opted for withdrawing from it (The Electoral Commission 2016). Moreover, in terms of age group and educational level, the younger and more educated voted to continue in the EU, as opposed to the older and less educated population (The UK in a Changing Europe 2018). Statistical data on the referendum reveals huge fragmentation within the country, which may further exacerbate over the years.

This article is part of a broader research effort to analyze the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union within the context of the regional integration process in order to understand the factors that contributed to the outcome of the British referendum. In this sense, a field research trip<sup>2</sup> was held during April 2019 aiming to bring light to the main research questions as well as to monitor locally the British perceptions regarding the withdrawal process after the first official deadline.

According to the European Union exit procedure established on Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty<sup>3</sup>, the parties have up to two years from the official departure communication to negotiate a withdrawal agreement and set the basis for a future relationship. Thus, since the UK letter communicating the withdrawal decision was sent to the European Council on 29 March 2017, the Brexit term would officially end on 29 March 2019. However, three extensions were granted to the United Kingdom in 2019 following the Article 50 procedure that requires unanimity among all EU Member States. The UK officially withdrew from the European Union on 1 February 2020.

The main question that instigated this field research was: “Which are the British perceptions on Brexit?” The interviews carried out with scholars,

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2 Funded by a UACES (The Academic Association for Contemporary European Studies) scholarship.

3 “1. Any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union following its constitutional requirements. 2. A Member State which decides to withdraw shall notify the European Council of its intention. In the light of the guidelines provided by the European Council, the Union shall negotiate and conclude an agreement with that State, setting out the arrangements for its withdrawal, taking account of the framework for its future relationship with the Union. That agreement shall be negotiated in accordance with Article 218(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. It shall be concluded on behalf of the Union by the Council, acting by a qualified majority, after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. 3. The Treaties shall cease to apply to the State in question from the date of entry into force of the withdrawal agreement or, failing that, two years after the notification referred to in paragraph 2, unless the European Council, in agreement with the Member State concerned, unanimously decides to extend this period.” (Treaty of Lisbon 2009)





politicians, and experts on the subject — both British and Europeans-, as well as the observation *in loco* of street manifestations and protests, enabled me to trace some conclusions about the general perceptions of the British population on Brexit, particularly regarding some of the factors that contributed to the referendum outcome. This article argues that long—, medium— and short-term factors interacted culminating with the UK decision to leave the EU. This research expects to contribute to the understanding of an unprecedented phenomenon that impacts the whole European integration process.

To present some findings obtained in the research trip, this paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, a context of the Brexit-related events in March and April 2019 will be introduced in order to set the scene of that deadlock moment. Secondly, a brief analysis of the front-page headlines of the main UK's newspapers will be presented, comparing references to the Brexit process during the analyzed period, to illustrate the general context in which the interviews were conducted, as well as to highlight the perspective of the British traditional media on the subject. Then, the structure and the method of the field research will be described, evidencing the choice of the interviewees and the script of the interview. Finally, the main findings of the interviews will be reported showing how the relationship with the European bloc was interpreted by the respondents and the main Brexit factors according to them. Those findings are cross-checked with the literature review that supported the elaboration of the interview script.

## **Brexit fieldwork context**

Two years after the official communication of the UK's intention to leave the EU, Brexit was not sorted out yet. So, the decisions of March 2019 culminated with the first extension of the UK exit deadline. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, the withdrawal agreement negotiated with the European Union by Theresa May was rejected for the second time<sup>4</sup> in the British Parliament by 391 to 242 votes. The next day, parliamentarians also rejected the “no-deal” option by 321 to

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4 The first rejection had taken place on 15 January 2019 by 432 to 202, the greatest historic defeat of a Prime Minister in the British Parliament since the 1920s.





298 votes. However, this last vote had only symbolic political value, since it has no legal effect on European legislation, and the possibility of a crash out continued to apply if no agreement was reached before the exit deadline. In addition, in the same week, on March 14<sup>th</sup>, the British Parliament approved by 412 to 202 votes the request for an extension of the withdrawal deadline (UK Parliament 2019).

The then-British Prime Minister Theresa May intended to hold a third vote on the deal negotiated with the European Union before the meeting with the European Council scheduled for 21-22 March. Nevertheless, her request was denied by House Speaker John Bercow on the grounds that a new vote could only be taken if the agreement had changed “substantially”. Therefore, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, Theresa May sent a letter to the European Council requesting an extension to June 30<sup>th</sup>, before the inauguration of the new European Parliament, scheduled for July 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK Government 2019a). The European Council, for its part, deliberated and presented a counter-proposal considering the approach of the European parliamentary elections between 23-26 May. If the British Parliament had approved the agreement by the end of March, an extension would be granted until May 22<sup>nd</sup>; otherwise, the new deadline for the UK to decide which way to proceed would be April 12<sup>th</sup> (European Council 2019a). After that date, the United Kingdom should prepare to hold elections for the European Parliament.

Then, on the one hand, the British Parliament held a series of indicative votes to try to find an alternative Brexit option, but it was unable to reach a consensus on any of them<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, Theresa May submitted the negotiated deal with the European Union to the vote on March 29<sup>th</sup>, being defeated again. Although the Brexit deal was rejected three times by the British Parliament, the difference between opposing and favorable votes decreased considerably at each new consultation: 1st ballot on 15 January: 432 to 202 (rejected by 230 votes); 2nd ballot on 12 March: 391 to 242 (rejected by 149 votes); 3rd ballot on 29 March: 344-286 (rejected by 58 votes) (UK Parliament 2019). Given the renewed rejection, the UK withdrawal deadline from the European Union was set

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<sup>5</sup> The 16 proposals submitted by the parliamentarians were reformulated in 8 alternatives, all rejected in a vote on March 27<sup>th</sup>. The results were: 1. Customs Union: 271 to 265; 2. Confirmatory public vote (second referendum): 295-268; 3. Labour’s alternative plan: 307 to 237; 4. Common Market 2.0 (Norway Plus): 283 to 189; 5. Revocation (article 50) to avoid no-deal: 293 to 184; 6. No deal: 400 to 160; 7. Contingent preferential arrangements: 422 to 139; 8. EFTA and EEA: 377 to 64 (UK Parliament 2019).







at 12 April 2019, as agreed by the European Council, and the British Parliament conducted a new round of indicative votes on April 1<sup>st</sup> intending to come up with other Brexit paths to follow<sup>6</sup>.

Those discussions in the British Parliament further intensified divisions between and within the parties. Theresa May displeased her own cabinet and most of the conservatives by offering the possibility of dialogue with the opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Faced with these enormous impasses, on April 5<sup>th</sup>, the British prime minister sent a new request for a deadline extension, until June 30<sup>th</sup>, to the European Council. According to Theresa May's letter, the UK would prepare for the European Parliament elections, but if the agreement were approved before May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the extension would be suspended as well as the participation in the elections (UK Government 2019b). May's request was discussed at an extraordinary European Council meeting on April 10<sup>th</sup>. The decision of the European Council was a further extension until 31 October 2019 (European Council 2019b).

Then, the British Parliament took an Easter recess from 12 to 23 April. During the previous voting sessions, "the House of Commons has sat later than 10.30 p.m. 14 times" (Politico 2019a) in weeks of intensive Brexit discussions. Finally, on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the UK held elections for the European Parliament. Due to the huge hurdles, Theresa May announced, the day after, her resignation on June 7<sup>th</sup> (UK Government 2019c). She would continue to serve as Prime Minister until the process to choose her successor has been concluded.

All those subsequent events in March and April reshaped the fieldwork and influenced the immediate perceptions regarding the Brexit deadlock process in the UK. Never before had the discussions on Brexit's directions been so ubiquitous on the news, on the streets of London, and even in the British Parliament. The arrival of the first official deadline for the exit of the UK from the EU has brought up somewhat several debates on possible alternative paths and future scenarios. The cleavages of the referendum between Leavers and Remainers have been in the spotlight and, in many cases, have replaced the traditional political ones. Indeed, Brexit has brought important consequences not only for European integration but also for British domestic policy.

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6 The results again demonstrate the inability to reach a consensus: 1. Customs Union: 276 (noes) to 273(ayes); 2. Confirmatory public vote (second referendum): 292 to 280; 3. Common Market 2.0 (Norway Plus): 282 to 261; 4. Parliamentary supremacy: 292 to 191 (UK Parliament 2019).





## Media perceptions in April 2019

As mentioned above, never before the British media gave so much attention to Brexit. Indeed, Brexit dominated the news in March 2019 and during the first two weeks of April when striking events took place, before the second extension and the parliamentary recess. Then, other topics gained ground as the Brexit deadline had been postponed.

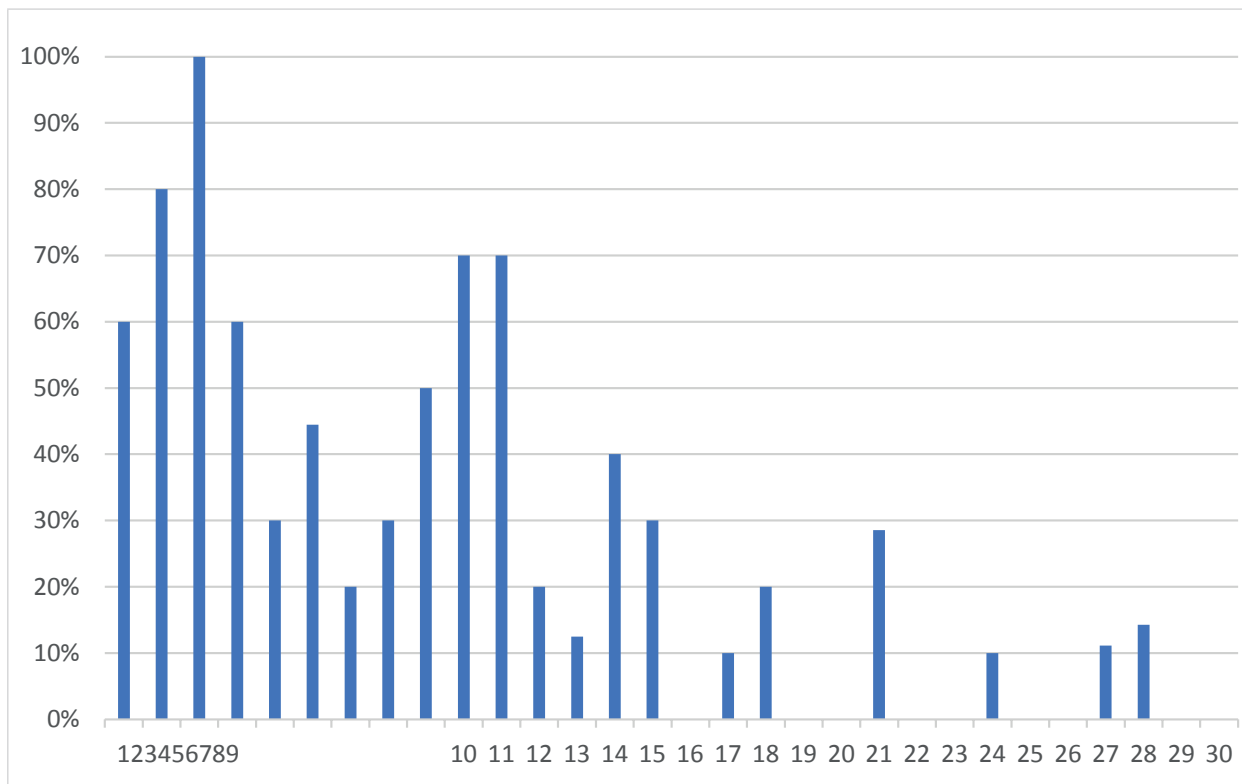
To some extent, comparing front-page headlines of the main British newspapers is one way to assess media perspectives regarding the Brexit process at that moment and its repercussions daily. Although it does not encompass the whole coverage of Brexit events, this investigation can point out reported trends in the mass media. Also, despite the big decline in newspaper readership observed in the past few decades (NatCen 2018), editors' choice to highlight a story on the front page reflects a perception of which should be the most important news of the day considering their target audience. In sum, it helps to understand in which stories the average British population is interested and how they absorb Brexit news. Even those who are not regular newspaper readers usually take a glance at the major headlines once in a while.

In this sense, a brief analysis of main front-page headlines from British newspapers during April 2019 was conducted aiming to highlight the major trends reported and set the context in which the fieldwork interviews were conducted. Ten newspapers were chosen among the twelve with the highest circulation in the United Kingdom (Statista 2019) due to their ease of online access. In alphabetical order: Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Financial Times, Metro, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, The Sun, The Times, and their Sunday sister papers. For this investigation, only the main front-page headlines were taken into account dismissing minor entries. All of them were reviewed to check any mention related to the Brexit process, including British parties' arrangements that could have implications on the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Besides, results were balanced on a proportional scale to avoid distortions on the weekends or holidays when some newspapers do not circulate. The vertical axis shows the percentage of these ten selected newspapers reporting a front-page headline related to the Brexit process in April.





**Figure 1 — Main front-page headlines related to Brexit in April 2019 per day in ten selected British newspapers**



Source: elaborated by the author, 2019.

As explained in the previous section, the first days of April were characterized by a huge uncertainty regarding the foreseeable Brexit future. On account of the third deal rejection on March 29<sup>th</sup>, the Brexit deadline had been delayed only to two weeks later on April 12<sup>th</sup>. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, all ten reviewed newspapers had front-page headlines reporting Theresa May’s proposal of Brexit cross-party talks with the opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn. As figure 1 shows, during the first fortnight of April, Brexit was every day on at least one front-page headline. This rate drastically decreased in the second fortnight after a new Brexit extension to 31 October 2019. By Politico (2019b) London Playbook statement on April 17<sup>th</sup>: “Britain is a Brexit-free zone this morning (...) The word which has hunted every waking hour for months on end appears just once across all 10 national newspaper front pages today”.

In effect, newspapers are usually concerned to report significant very short-term subjects and, since Brexit was deferred for more than six months, other relevant facts get into the newspapers. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, for example, whereas only two front-page headlines were still talking about Brexit postponement, six in ten reported Julian Assange’s arrest at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.







Then, on April 16<sup>th</sup>, Notre Dame fire images and headlines took almost all front pages. During the Easter holiday (19-22 April), not only news about the Extinction Rebellion movement and their climate change protests spread all over the UK, but also their public outcries replaced Brexit manifestations in front of Westminster for days.

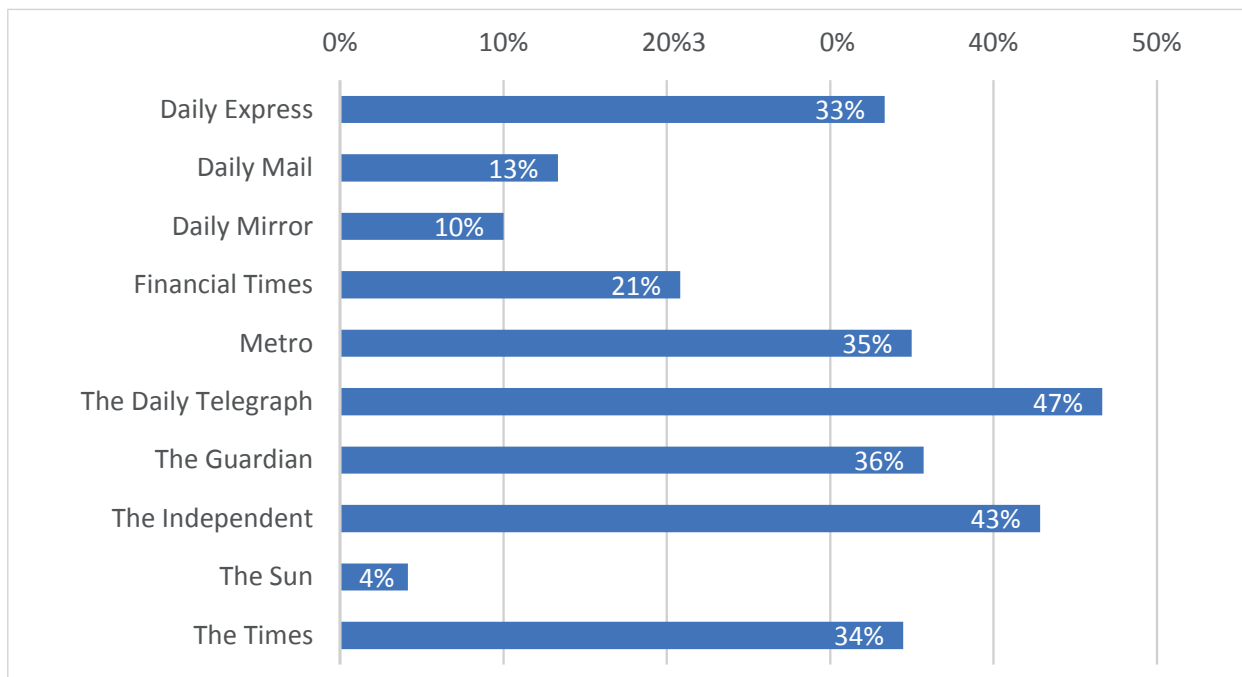
On April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday massacre, most news reported the bomb attacks in three churches in Sri Lanka that injured British citizens. At the end of April, Brexit references were linked to party arrangements for the European parliamentary elections and the fear that Nigel Farage's Brexit Party could take the lead. In sum, since the UK withdrawal was not looming on the short-term horizon, a decline in the front-page headlines was expected. It does not necessarily mean that the topic fell into oblivion, but it would no longer be in the spotlight for a while.

Another interesting aspect to consider about the media is how often Brexit-related front-page main headlines were published in each of the ten reviewed newspapers (Figure 2). While The Daily Telegraph reached almost 50%, releasing 14 Brexit front pages — all of them in the first fortnight of April —, The Sun, a well-known tabloid focused on celebrities, gossip, and sports news, had only one single mention in the whole month. Also, Daily Mail and Daily Mirror, other British tabloids, had just four and three Brexit front pages, respectively, in this period. Other newspapers such as The Daily Express, Metro, The Guardian, The Independent, and The Times presented an average of more than a third of Brexit-related news in April. Financial Times, in turn, which traditionally gives preference to economic and financial news, had a fifth of Brexit front pages' main headlines.





**Figure 2 — Main front-page headlines related to Brexit in April per newspaper**



Source: elaborated by the author, 2019.

Each newspaper targets its average audience in the headlines. According to Heinz Brandenburg (2019), readers usually shift their allegiance and almost a third of them no longer read the same paper they have listed in previous surveys in 2017, for example. Moreover, although tabloids still have the highest circulation, they are suffering net losses of readers, while newspapers such as The Times and The Guardian have been increasing their readership. Among the listed newspapers in his analysis, two of them have unambiguously Brexit preferences which are also reflected in their publishing line, as demonstrated below.

On the one hand, readers of The Guardian are almost unanimously Remainers. Considering three possible Brexit paths — remain, government deal, or no-deal —, over 90% would choose to remain instead of other options (Brandenburg 2019). On the other hand, readers of The Daily Telegraph are predominantly Leavers and increasingly in favor of a no-deal. Around 60% would choose a crash-out over a government deal and over 70% would prefer a no-deal against remaining (Brandenburg 2019). The comparison between their front-page headlines on April 3<sup>rd</sup> to report May’s proposal of cross-party talks illustrates those preferences. For pro-Remain The Guardian (2019): “May calls for talks with Corbyn in bid to save Brexit”, whereas for pro-Leave The Daily Telegraph (2019): “Cabinet backs no-deal Brexit — but May turns to Corbyn instead”. According to the first editorial line, cross-party talks were a movement to rescue Brexit, while for the





latter May's proposal means turning her back to the Conservative cabinet who supported a no-deal.

To some extent, the appearance of the Brexit topic on the front-page headlines helps to shape the British population's perceptions regarding this process. If before the referendum news about the European Union were not a real topic for discussion, since June 2016 and, particularly, in the first two weeks of April after a short withdrawal deadline extension, Brexit news reached people's lives almost on a daily basis. The salience of this issue at that moment, for example, was reflected in the increase of street manifestations in front of the British Parliament, as observed *in loco*. However, the brief analysis in this section does not aim to discuss in deep how the media can shape British perceptions of Brexit, but instead to provide the context in which fieldwork interviews were conducted.

## Field research framework

As mentioned above, the scholarship enabled me to conduct one month of fieldwork in London between April 1<sup>st</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> for the purpose of my Ph.D. thesis focused on the background of the British relationship with the European Union and the paths that led to the Brexit process. In this sense, in a broader research effort, the British government's historical positions regarding regional integration, the opt-outs to community legislation, and the aspects highlighted by the Remain and Leave campaigns were studied more comprehensively, as well as the British perceptions regarding the process to leave the bloc. The main purpose of the thesis research was to investigate the constraints of this unprecedented process — the first case of a Member State's decision to exit the European Union — by identifying long-, medium-, and short-term factors that contributed to the June 2016 referendum calling and its outcome.

When the research trip was planned, it was supposed that the UK would already have left the EU, since Article 50's original deadline was on 29 March 2019. However, as exposed above, unfolding striking events in March and April 2019 changed the Brexit path. The field research profited from a unique experience in London while Parliament was taking indicative votes about how to proceed with Brexit and the tough negotiation process for another extension was ongoing. Although the doctoral thesis focuses mainly on the 2016 referendum antecedents, it was an exciting opportunity to witness live Brexit events.





Prior to arrival in London, the fieldwork framework began to be designed. Specific groups were targeted, such as scholars' experts in British or European politics or who have recently published on Brexit on "The UK in a Changing Europe" website or at LSE Brexit blog; Members of the Parliament (MPs) from the Exiting the EU Committee and their staff; analysts from the EU Select Committee at the House of Lords; representatives from the British Academy, and the Konrad Adenauer office; diplomats; party offices; social movements; and media representatives. Since January 2019, more than a hundred contacts were made by email to set up an agenda and fix appointments with the interviewees. Unfortunately, no response was obtained from civil society groups, such as People's Vote, or party offices, and only a few MPs were available for interviews. In general, scholars were more willing to contribute to the research. Then, while in London, new appointments were arranged according to interviewees' recommendations, via snowball sampling.

This method, also known as chain-referral sampling, is a non-probability tool used when potential participants are rare or difficult to find. In this case, as the target group was experts in British and European politics that usually are in contact with other potential data sources, it would be easier to get in touch and recruit new participants via their references. Thus, the snowball sampling method is based on referrals from the initial interviewees to generate new potential sources.

The field research focused on the comprehension of the British perceptions concerning the Brexit process and, particularly, the short-term impressions in April 2019. Forty semi-structured interviews were carried out with British and European scholars, international analysts, diplomats, media representatives, policy-makers, and parliament staff in order to assess their insights on a turning point in the UK-EU relationship. The semi-structured design was chosen to explore the expertise of each respondent allowing more flexibility for deeper incursions on specific topics. Seven comprehensive questions were elaborated, based on the recent Brexit literature already available at that moment, to conduct the interview focusing on the main subjects of the researcher's interest. Find below the interview script:

1. How do you describe the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union?
2. How do you understand British resistance to deepening integration regarding the opt-outs, especially the European Monetary Union and the





Schengen Area? (But also, the Area of Freedom, Liberty and Justice, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU?)

3. Which conditions do you believe led the Conservative Party's decision to call a referendum on the EU?
4. Which factors do you believe contributed to the referendum results?
5. According to Eurobarometer, the UK usually presents the highest rates of identification as “only national” instead of “national and European” or “European and national”. How do you believe that the lack of Europeanness contributed to Brexit?
6. Which elements characterize British Euroscepticism? Is it different from Eurosceptic approaches in the other EU Member States?
7. Do you believe that other EU countries could follow the British decision to leave the Community? Why?

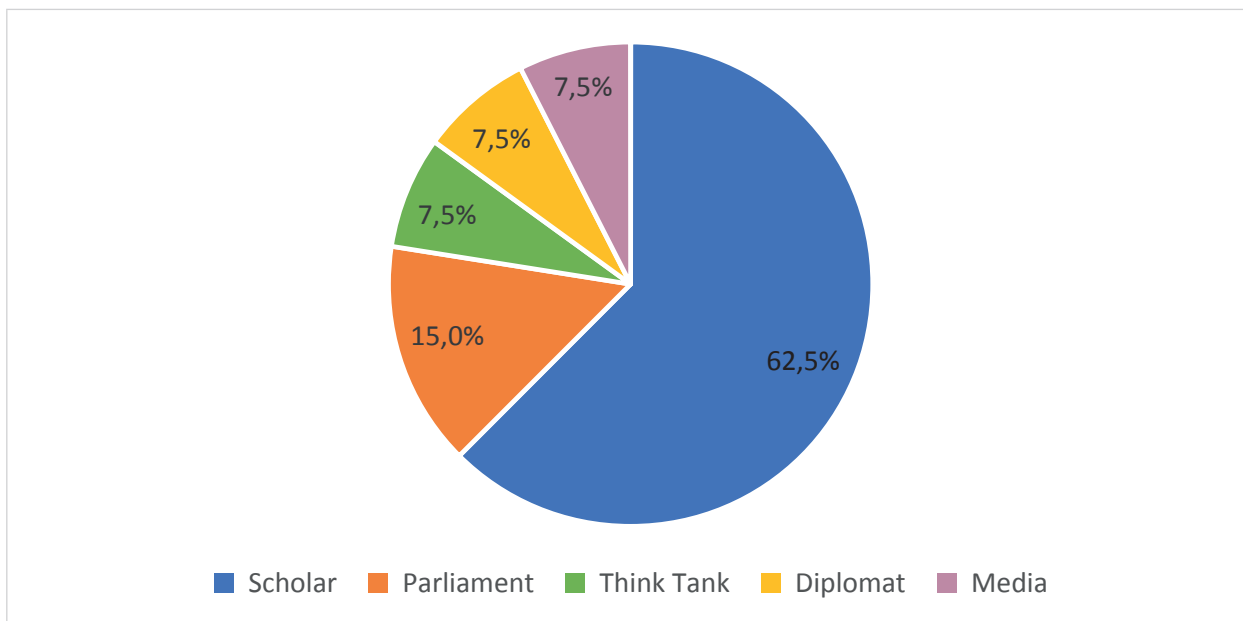
For this field research, interviewees were divided into five categories: 1. Scholars; 2. British Parliament staff; 3. Think tanks; 4. Diplomats; and 5. Media. Among the scholars, most of them are based at the London School of Economics and the King's College London, including some linked to the “LSE Brexit Blog” and “The UK in a Changing Europe”, a think tank created to promote research about the ever-changing UK-EU relationship. Concerning the British Parliament, unfortunately, due to the busy parliamentary schedule in the first two weeks of April and the recession after the second Brexit extension and the Easter holiday, I had access only to two MPs — one from the Conservative Party and the other from the Plaid Cymru -; one MP assistant from the Liberal Democrats; one political analyst and the clerk from the EU Select Committee; and the clerk from the Exiting the EU Committee. Moreover, three interviews were conducted with Brazilian diplomats working at the Embassy of Brazil in London, as well as three interviews with experts working for think tanks such as the British Academy and the Konrad Adenauer office. Regarding the media, three interviews were held with representatives from Politico.eu, Reuters, and the Head of Media at the House of Lords. Figure 3 shows the interviewees' distribution into the categories.







**Figure 3: Categories of interviewees**



Source: elaborated by the author, 2019.

Most interviews were digitally recorded, except for four people that demanded to be off-the-records; in addition, notes were taken. Interviews were preferably conducted face-to-face, with some exceptions depending on the interviewees’ agenda and location. In total, 31 interviews were held face-to-face, 8 via Skype meetings, and 1 via telephone. Moreover, *in loco* reaction of the British population, such as street manifestations, were observed, and informal conversations were held with representatives from both “Vote Leave” (pro-Leave) and “People’s Vote” (pro-Remain) movements in front of the Parliament aiming to complement the fieldwork. The next section sums up the main findings and highlights interesting comments from the interviews cross-checking them with the literature review and other statistical data.

### Fieldwork findings

The United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union is a complex social-political phenomenon that encompasses a tangle of multiple conditioning factors (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017) which interacted in a “perfect storm”. A “perfect storm” means a rare or unusual combination of factors that produce unexpected outcomes. Although it is not possible to point out exactly which was the most decisive factor for the 2016 British referendum outcome, an





in-depth investigation allows us to list a slew of relevant variables to comprehend this event. In this sense, the fieldwork enabled the identification of major trends regarding the UK-EU relationship and the Brexit process.

First of all, concerning the first question of the interview script, almost half of the interviewees described Britain's relationship with the European Union as an instrumental or utilitarian one, in which the United Kingdom is more interested in the economic relation and market opening than in the political union aspect. Indeed, the word most used to portray the British relationship with the EU was "transactional" — mentioned by seven interviewees. However, some respondents highlighted that the UK was not exactly an exception or a unique case in the EU and recalled that Scandinavian countries also embrace a similar attitude — Denmark, for example, has three opt-outs and Sweden did not join the Euro yet.

The second most frequent group of synonyms to depict this relationship was difficult/complicated/uneasy/awkward as also pointed out by the traditional literature on the UK-EU relationship (George 1998; Gowland 2017; Schnapper 2000; Wall 2008; Young 1998). Then, some respondents described it as a different, distant or semi-detached relationship to explain that the UK was not fully integrated into the EU. Others called it an ambivalent relation with mixed feelings because the UK was an enthusiast of some regional projects, such as the single market, but resistant to supranational integration policies. Most of the interviewees made several references to the historical UK-EU relation, including its accession process and opt-outs, to support their responses. To cut a long story short, a key expression, used by one of the interviewees, to sum up, the British relationship with the European Union was "interested, but not engaged", which resonates with Winston Churchill's (1930) famous quote "We are with Europe, but not of it".

Usually, answers to the second script question were linked to explanations already mentioned in the previous one. Some interviewees added issues of parliamentary sovereignty, Commonwealth relationship, and identity to account for British resistance to deeper integration. Again, those findings were in line with the reviewed literature used to draft this question (Diamond, Nedergaard and Rosamond 2018; Evans and Menon 2017; Perisic 2010; Sanders 1989). The interviewees also reinforced the British preference for a more intergovernmental than a supranational project for Europe.

Concerning the third question from the semi-structured script, most of the interviewees considered that both internal and external pressures were fundamental for the referendum calling. Even though the then-prime minister





David Cameron was not personally in favor to leave the European Union, at that moment, it seemed to be no other way to deal with the internal demands from the Eurosceptic wing of his party and the threat that UKIP posed to enlist votes from a portion of the traditionally Conservative electorate, then proportionally strengthening the opposition. Several respondents perceived the referendum pledge as an attempt to unite the Conservative party and win the next general elections.

Moreover, many interviewees claimed that an in/out referendum promise was a gamble from Cameron, who, in fact, did not believe he could win a parliamentary majority in the 2015 elections. Thus, according to them, the referendum was only a campaign pledge that he could not accomplish in another coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. The fact that the outcome of the election was not a hung parliament was seen as Cameron's miscalculation by them. However, few respondents disagreed with this interpretation and reiterated that the real purpose of offering an in/out referendum was precisely to win the absolute majority instead of a bluff.

Some interviewees also described Cameron as a weak figure that failed when he called the referendum, when he negotiated with the European Union, and, then, when he campaigned for Remain. His negotiations for a special status inside the EU were not enough to convince his backbenchers to support remaining in the Community. Respondents also highlighted that although Cameron felt confident and unstoppable after his victories in the 2015 UK general elections and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, he behaved arrogantly and ignorantly and he was unable to understand the mood of the moment inside his party and among the British population. According to Andrew Glencross (2016), the UK vote for Brexit was Cameron's great miscalculation which culminated with his resignation after the referendum.

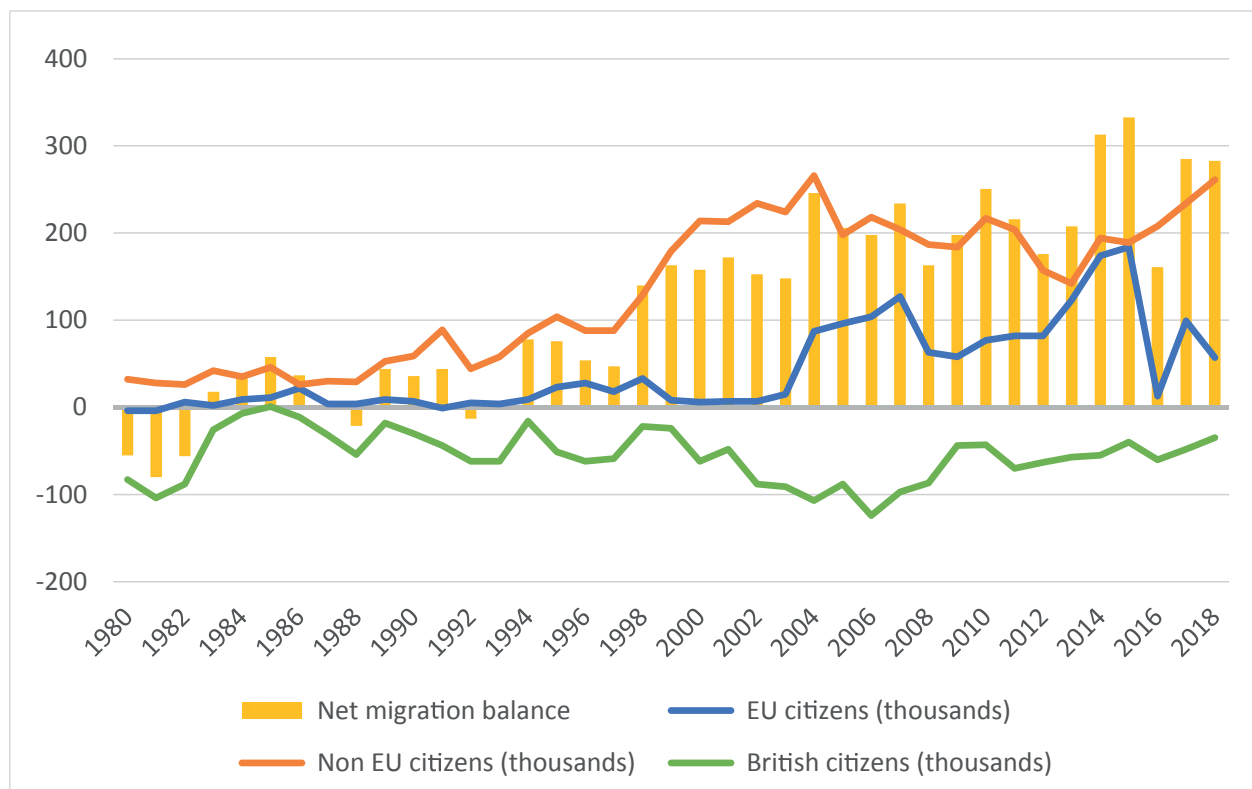
The fourth question of the interview script refers to the core of the doctoral thesis, which sought to understand the determining factors of the referendum outcome. In this sense, the field research contributed not only to a deeper investigation of the conditions already identified in the literature (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017; Curtice 2017; MacShane 2016; Swales 2016) but also to the inclusion of new variables that had not been broadly explored until then. In short, the main referendum constraints mentioned by the interviewees were migration, media, and economy, in this order, and all of them are also directly linked to one another.



Migration was mentioned by almost a third of the interviewees as one of the main factors that influenced referendum results, particularly in the way it was portrayed by the Leave campaign — for example, the reference to Turkey’s possible accession to the EU and its population of 76 million. Some respondents recalled that non-EU migration was higher than EU migration to the UK since 1980, as figure 4 shows. In addition, according to data from the Office of National Statistics (2019), EU migration began to increase after the 2004 enlargement and new Labour’s migration policy, which established few restrictions to immigration flow into the UK. Between 2008 and 2012, EU migration slightly decreased due to the financial crisis’s effects, retaking its expanding route after this recession period.

The 2010 and 2015 Conservative Party manifestos pledged to cut net migration below 100,000 per year. However, this balance between immigration and emigration was never reached during its governments and the impacts of an increasing net migration started to be felt, considerably in the countryside. Eastern EU migrants were targeted as scapegoats by the Leave campaign, which was able to mobilize strong resentment feelings against them (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017).

**Figure 4 — Long-term international net migration into the UK by citizenship, 1980–2018 (in thousands of people)**



Source: elaborated by the author using data from the Office of National Statistics 2019.



Additionally, at least a quarter of the interviewees suggested that the media played a significant role in the referendum outcome. In accordance with many respondents, traditional media, notably newspapers, was mostly Eurosceptic from the 1980s on. The EU was portrayed as “the other” in a superficial and caricatural illustration of regional integration. The appointment of Boris Johnson in 1989 as a correspondent from The Daily Telegraph in Brussels to report on the European Commission contributed to a growing Eurosceptic feeling among the British population as pointed out by some interviewees, notably media representatives.

The influence of the media in building the British mindset has a long-term effect. Fake or misconceived news about the EU has been disseminated decades ahead of the referendum. Most of the interviewees also reiterated that social media had a decisive impact in amplifying this phenomenon in the short term immediately before the referendum. Another media factor mentioned by four respondents was the BBC’s misconception of impartiality and neutrality during the campaign period. According to them, while the Remain side brought respected figures and economists to defend their arguments in the debates, the Leave campaign was based on populists’ politicians and controversial data.

The third major constraint mentioned by around a quarter of respondents was the UK’s economic background. Unpopular austerity measures were implemented by the Conservative government to deal with the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Fetzer 2019). Those policies increased the poverty and inequality in different areas inside the UK. By many respondents, a general perception of social and economic exclusion spread across the country raising grievances against the financial city of London and its elites. Thus, the Leave vote could also be a reaction against this mainstream economic system.

Also linked to the economic variable, some respondents mentioned the mistakes of the Remain campaign, which focused on a rational economic approach to point out the negative impacts of leaving the EU, dubbed “project fear” by the Leave side. Three interviewees reported the same situation that occurred during a Remain campaign in which economists tried to explain to people from Northern England those economic negative impacts on UK GDP and, then, a person from the audience raised his hand and said: “It is your GDP, not mine!”. This event illustrates how Remain’s campaign discourse was disconnected from Britain’s daily life needs. Moreover, as the Remain official campaign was tied to n.10, it hampered a more active engagement from other political parties (Schnapper 2017).







Besides those three central variables — migration, media, and economy —, other ancillary conditioning factors were listed by the interviewees, such as distrust in politicians; an anti-globalization mood from the left-behind; the UK's nostalgic imperial memory of greatness; and the British binary political tradition of confrontation that led UK to deal with the EU in a more combative than consensual way. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents highlighted the effectiveness of the Leave campaign in using all the aforementioned elements to convey the British population to vote to Leave in the referendum. Additionally, leavers had the benefit of two campaigns: an official (Vote Leave), led by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove; and a non-official (Leave.EU), under Nigel Farage's radical leadership. The official slogan "take back control" appealed to an emotional message of regaining national power in a world full of uncertainties. In this vein, a chauvinist national identity was mobilized in the UK. All those conditioning factors interacted to create a Brexit "perfect storm".

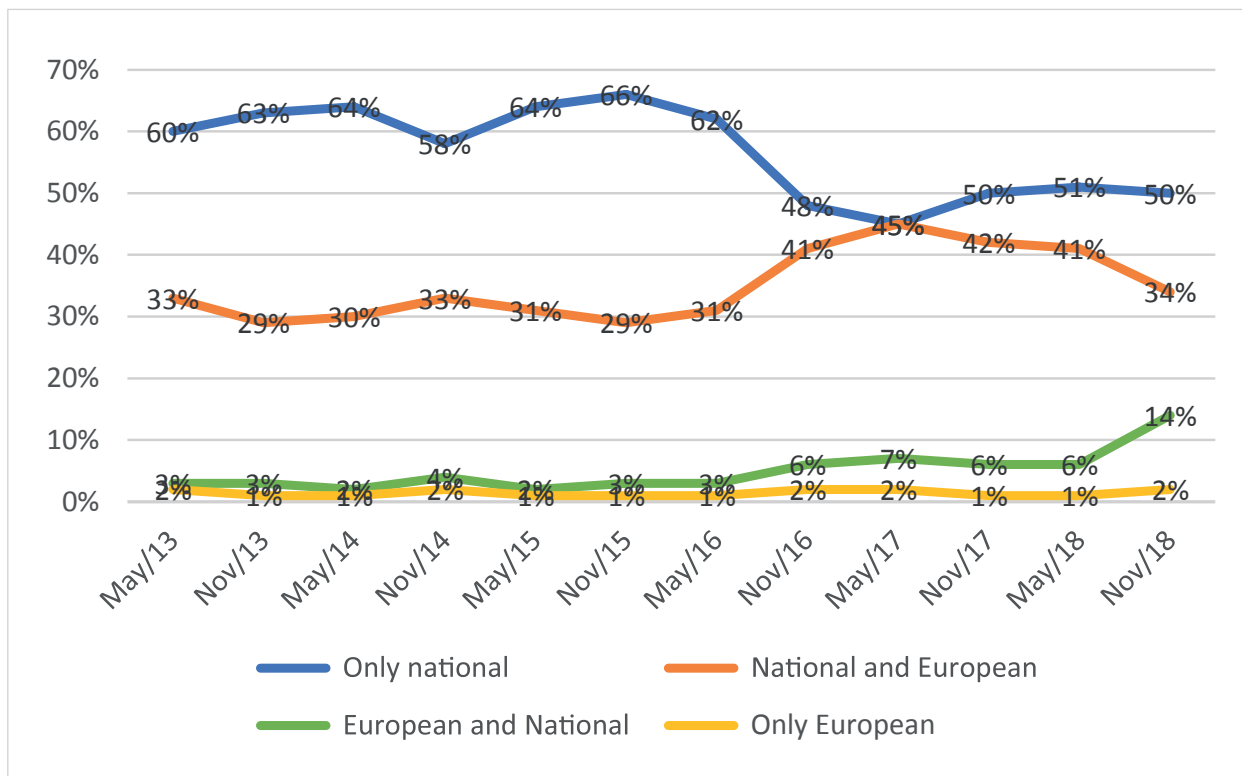
The fifth question of the interview script was related to UK identity perceptions and its lack of Europeanness. This question was elaborated based on the literature investigating the relationship between British national identity, Englishness, and Brexit (Henderson et al. 2016, 2017; Evans, Carl and Dennison 2019), as well as on the results of Eurobarometer public opinion polls. Traditionally, per Eurobarometer data, the UK presents the lowest rates of identification as European and the highest as "only national". Many respondents reiterated that the national identity in the UK is not so clear, because it could have different meanings, such as British, English, Scottish, North Irish, and/or Welsh. Also, they stated that identity perception has a long-term effect in shaping the population mindset. Some interviewees also mentioned that a pro-European movement gained ground in Britain since the referendum. Remainers began to express their Europeanness in a more explicit way by holding EU flags and claiming their rights as European citizens after the Leave victory (Brändle, Galpin and Trenz 2018).

As shown in figure 5, the referendum boosted European identification within the British population. According to Eurobarometer, from the first to the second half of 2016, there was a drop of fourteen percentage points in the "only national" option: from 62% in May — a month before the referendum — to 48% in November. In the same period, the "national and European" option increased by 10 percentage points, from 31% to 41%, and the "European and national" option by three percentage points, from 3% to 6% (European Commission 2016, 36).





**Figure 5 — UK identity perceptions, 2013-2018**



Source: elaborated by the author using data from the Standard Eurobarometer 79-90.

In less than six months, 14% of the British population, which had previously affirmed to identify itself as “only national”, began to identify itself also as European, filling into other categories that combine national and European identities, for example. Besides the slight increase in the national identity rate after November 2017 — when the withdrawal negotiations with the EU had already started-, it still did not reach the same levels of years before the referendum.

Concerning the sixth question of the interview script, respondents highlighted that Euroscepticism in the UK and also across the EU does not follow a clear political division, in accordance with the specialized literature (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008; Usherwood and Startin 2013). In both cases, there are Eurosceptic approaches from the right and left sides of the political spectrum. Usually, whereas the Eurosceptic right-wing fears a supranational political union that could undermine national sovereignty; the left-wing perceives the EU as a liberal capitalist club.

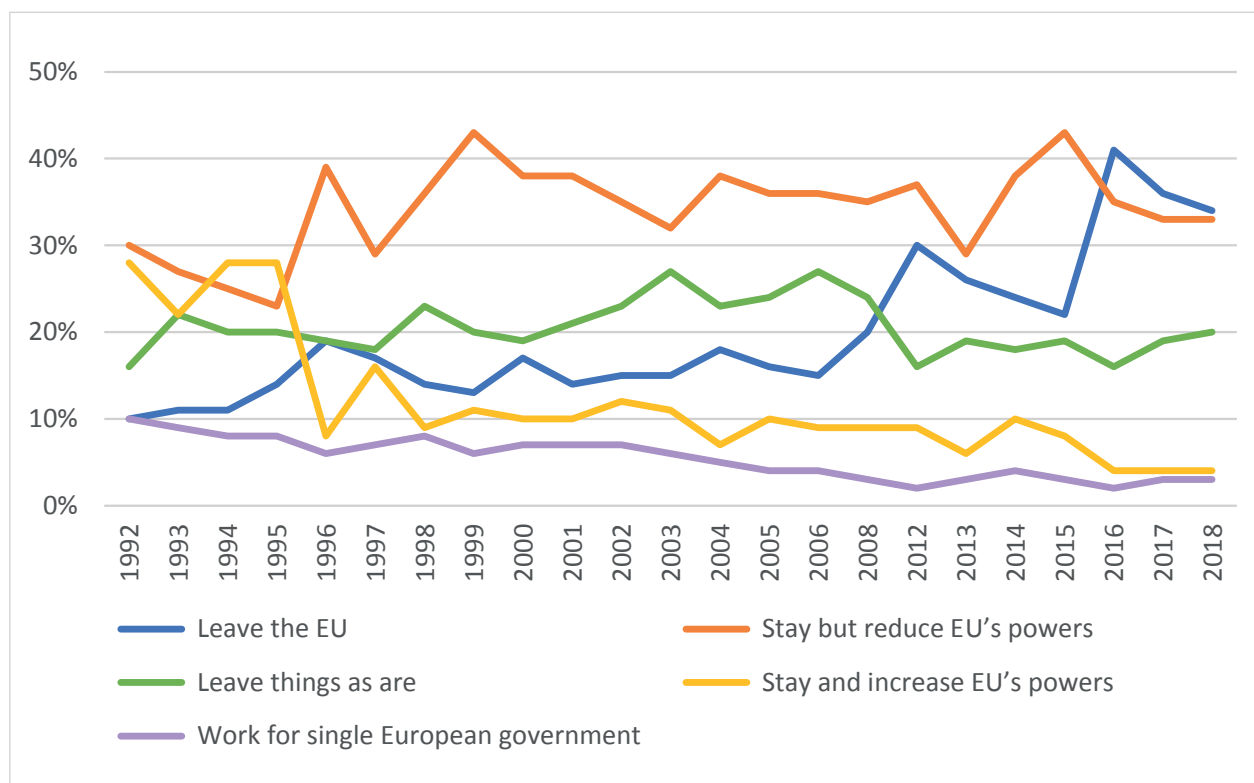
The major difference pointed out by the interviewees is that Euroscepticism in the UK is more of a political mainstream than in the other EU Member States, where Eurosceptic groups are usually linked to minor parties. Additionally, many respondents said that British Euroscepticism is a long-term tradition linked with



issues of identity and historical imperial memory, as well as parliamentary sovereignty; whilst, in other EU countries, Eurosceptic movements are a more recent phenomenon pushed by the economic and migration crises combined with elements of hardline nationalist uprisings.

As mentioned by the respondents, Euroscepticism has been increasing in the United Kingdom since the Treaty of Maastricht. Indeed, the British Social Attitudes report, which ascertained attitudes towards Britain's relationship with the EU regularly since 1992, shows Euroscepticism development over time that proves interviewees statements (NatCen 2019). As the "stay but reduce EU's powers" option in figure 6 shows, over the years, the British population presented significant rates of dissatisfaction with the European Union; however, the "leave the EU" option started to increase sharply in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis with a tiny reduction from 2013 to 2015. Then, in 2016, the UK presented the highest rates in this time series for the "leave the EU" option (41 %) confirming the effective success of the Leave campaign.

**Figure 6 — Attitudes towards Britain's relationship with the EU, 1992-2018**



Source: elaborated by the author using data from the British Social Attitudes 36, 2019.

Finally, the last question of the interview script concerns forecasts for European integration. The vast majority of respondents stated that, despite the



rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic groups across the continent, other EU Member States will not follow the UK's decision to withdraw from the Community in the short term. The tough negotiations proved how hard is to leave the EU and how each country is tangled in the integration process. Indeed, since 2016, the EU27 managed to stay together during the negotiations with the UK and no Member State presented a similar trend to leave the EU in the next years. Some interviewees affirmed that, among all EU countries, the UK would be the one that could do better outside the Community due to its economic structure based more on services than any other Member State. According to them, Britain's economy will take time to adapt, but if it does well, it may lead other EU countries to follow its path in the medium term. However, it will be hard to assess the economic impact of Brexit due to its overlap with the current pandemic crisis. Many respondents also pointed out that, regardless of UK withdrawal, the EU has to tackle future challenges in a more flexible way recognizing that its integration model needs to be revisited.

## Conclusion

Brexit is portrayed as one of the major crises faced by the European integration project along with the economic downturn and its impacts on the Eurozone, the increasing immigration flows to the continent, and the uprising of nationalist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic movements. However, according to interviewees' statements, it seems that both the referendum calling and its outcome tell more about British than European politics in the UK. Indeed, the referendum bespoke a fragmented society and increased political division between and inside traditional parties, mainly in the Conservative Party, which led both Remain and Leave campaigns. As mentioned by many respondents, Brexit adverse impacts not only on the economy but also on the British political system will be perceived for decades. One immediate consequence was the foundation of two new political groups: the Brexit Party (now Reform UK), under the Eurosceptic leadership of Nigel Farage; and the Change UK — The Independent Group, a pro-European party founded by politicians, who defected from the two major parties — Conservatives and Labours.

Also, the outcome of the referendum and, particularly, the events of March and April 2019, which culminated with the first two Brexit deadline extensions,





contributed to a broader debate about the UK-EU relationship at that moment. Most interviewees said that, never before, the EU was so much in the British spotlight than in these months. At that time, the looming withdrawal brought discussions about Brexit that filled up the newspapers' front pages, and popular manifestations took the streets in front of the British Parliament during the first fortnight of April. Nonetheless, after the second extension to 31 October 2019, the topic has lost momentum. Nowadays, even after the UK's official departure from the EU, Brexit is still not sorted out, negotiations between the two sides continue and its effects will be experienced for decades.

The fieldwork enabled me to take a close look at the phenomenon via qualified interviews with target groups and help me to comprehend a little bit of the British mindset via this immersion process. Besides some conditioning factors previously identified by the researcher in the literature review, such as immigration flow, economic crisis, and nationalist rise, the fieldwork proved that many other elements interacted to create the Brexit "perfect storm". Some of them were long-term conditions, such as an overwhelmingly Eurosceptic media; the British imperial memory of greatness and its nationalist identity; and the UK political binary system and its lack of tradition in referendums. Others were medium-term constraints, such as the consequences of the new Labour migration policy after the 2004 EU enlargement and Conservative promises to cut net migration; the economic impacts of the 2008 financial crisis and Conservative austerity policies; the increasing distrust in politicians; and an expanding anti-globalization mood. Last but not least, short-term conditions also had a significant contribution to the referendum results, such as the misplaced promise of an in/out referendum by David Cameron; the option for a simple majority referendum; and the mistakes of the Remain campaign and the successes of the Leave side.

Many of the British perceptions apprehended by the interviews were validated in the recent literature published on Brexit, and others may need further investigation. The length of this article is not enough to explore all those aforementioned conditioning factors. However, the fieldwork was fundamental to identify the constraints to the referendum outcome, cross-check them with the Brexit literature, and enable an in-depth analysis of British perceptions concerning this phenomenon during the troubled month of April 2019. The results of this fieldwork can be broader investigated in future research.







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